

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Acting and Directing Experience

O. H. 356

AUSTIN PENDLETON

Interviewed

by

Carol Mills

on

October 27, 1981

AUSTIN PENDLETON

Austin Pendleton is a gentleman who has been involved in community, regional, and professional theater for most of his life. At the present time, he is involved directing a production of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," which will be presented at The Whole Theater Company in Montclair, New Jersey, in December. He recently directed a hugely successful production of "The Little Foxes" in New York, starring Elizabeth Taylor in her Broadway debut.

Mr. Pendleton was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and grew up in Warren, Ohio, in a family heavily involved in theater activities in the Warren, Ohio area. As a youngster, Mr. Pendleton displayed a pronounced interest in acting and directing, which his family encouraged. He formed a group called The Child Players and this earnest young group mounted many excellent productions at an early age.

Mr. Pendleton attended Yale after graduation from high school, and was active at Yale in the theater projects. Immediately after entering Yale he also was accepted as a theater apprentice at the prestigious Williamstown Playhouse in Massachusetts. Upon graduation, he moved to New York, whereupon he was cast in the lead role of a new play called "Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Momma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling so Bad." He became an instant "star."

From that young age until now, at age 41, Austin Pendleton is widely recognized as a superior presence in American theater. His classical background is superb as well. He also began to appear in movies in the late sixties

and has established himself as a solid personality in a dozen or more top-flight films. Mr. Pendleton continues to remain as unassuming and reachable as he was while in Warren, Ohio. He accepts each new theatrical challenge with talent, vigor, and enthusiasm. He imparts a fresh, unique touch to each production he participates in, whether in New York, Ohio, or California. He is a true theater "whole person" and will undoubtedly contribute to the profession he graces with his presence for years to come. Mr. Pendleton resides in New York City with his actress wife, Katina, and their small daughter, Audrey.

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INTERVIEWEE: AUSTIN PENDLETON

INTERVIEWER: Carol Mills

SUBJECT: Theater, Acting, Plays, Broadway Shows, Actors

DATE: October 27, 1981

M: I'm sitting here today in New York City on October 27, 1981. This is Carol Mills, who is the interviewer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Theater People from Ohio. I'm talking to Austin Pendleton who is a native of Warren, Ohio. He is going to start telling us some things about the theater. He has worked in it since he was a child and his family has been very involved in it. He left an Ohio background, went on to school, and studied drama. He is now a very well-known director. He has done a lot of theater work and movie work.

Mr. Pendleton is going to start with the day that he was born.

P: Okay, that was March 27, 1940. I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, to parents who lived in Warren, Ohio. When I was six I recall that my mother helped to found a community theater group in Warren, Ohio, with Dorothy Gamuse, who had come over from England after the war with an American GI whom she had met there. They began the Trumbull New Theater, naming it that because Trumbull is the county that Warren is in. The first two plays were done in our living room. My mother had been a professional actress and director before she married my father. Then she gave it up when she married my father and came to Warren. Then after a few years she got involved with this community. As I said, the first plays were done in our living room. I believe I was smitten then. It all seemed very magical to me, the way it transformed the house, the way they would hang up curtains in the middle of the living room and behind it prepare to do this play. The first few plays were things like "Hay Fever" by Noel Coward, an Agatha Christie play called "Love from a Stranger", and

a play called "Hotel Universe." I think I was bitten then. I don't think I told anybody for fear that I would be told it was foolish, but I think I was bitten then by the idea of being an actor and a director.

Soon after that, I and some like-minded people I knew in school, close friends, decided to form a theater of our own called The Child Players. We were all, obviously, quite young. We were in the fourth grade by now. Then when we thought we were no longer children, we began to be called The Atlantic Players.

M: Excuse me, when did you decide that you were no longer children?

P: When we were still children we decided that. We decided to change the name to The Atlantic Players because that was the name of the street that my family lived on. We performed our plays in a room in the basement, and we did like three or four a year. We did things like "Our Town," and "The Glass Menagerie," and "You Can't Take it With You," which my mother directed. That was the only outside director we ever permitted. We did "Angle Street." We knew no fear. I'm sure we would have done the late plays of Ibsen if it would have occurred to us.

M: Did you share all the duties that the other people had?

P: Oh yes, we all filled the sets; we all sold the tickets; we all played parts; we did everything--the sound, the lights.

M: The reason I ask is that my son has a similar thing, but he was everything. He only gave people very minor things to do. I just wondered if you did that.

P: No, it wasn't so much that I was magnanimous; it was that we had all started it together. It wasn't like I started it, if I remember right. We all started it together, so there wasn't, from the beginning, any one person who was the guiding spirit behind it. That was what made it kind of nice actually. We often admitted new people into it. We were fairly democratic about that, I think. We were probably impossibly snooty and I didn't know it, but it seemed to me like we were very democratic about that.

This continued right up through our high school years. We put a lot of passion into it and we were very devoted to our plays and our work. It kept us, as they say, off the streets, which was probably its chief function. It confirmed the belief that I had that I wanted to spend my life this way, although it didn't affect the others this way. From that point on I don't think I ever entertained anything else at all seriously.

M: Could you tell a little bit about your mother's very strong influence on the community as far as the theater?

P: If it wasn't for my mother there would be no community theater... That's a rather large statement to make. I mean the theater has been on there for 35 years and who knows what can happen in 35 years. It wouldn't have taken the form. That theater is quite respected. They often win a prize in a statewide competition. There has been a pretty high level maintained at that theater, and there are a whole lot of people who have been working with T. N. T., Trumbull New Theatre, all through their lives, and have just learned a lot about the theater and have been able to stretch themselves and so forth because of her input, and also the input of three or four of the early founders of it. They just set up a certain . . . she, particularly, was able to set up and maintain a high standard because she had been professionally trained in the theater and had done professional work, so she knew all about that. She knew Stanislavsky's ideas about acting.

M: What about your dad? Was he always in business?

P: Yes. He has always been fascinated with the theater as an avocation. In fact, I believe that the first time he ever saw my mother was when she was acting in a play. He has always been fascinated with the theater. He still comes to everything I do and, of course, he goes to every one she does. He has acted over the years in a number of her productions, and, in fact, she probably told you about this, but in 1975 she directed "The Seagull" there by Chekhov. I was in it and my wife was in it. My father played, by far, the largest role he has ever played. In effect, it was his stage debut. Over the years he would occasionally play something like the butler, which I always thought he did with great wit and understatement and freshness. In fact, I said to my mother when she wanted me to come out and be in "The Seagull," because by this point I was a big time actor, as it were, I said, "I'll play if dad plays Shamraev, the estate manager. I resorted to bribery, I remember, but she gave him the part. He was marvelous. I've been in other productions of "The Seagull" and been around a number of them, and it was the first time I've ever known Shamraev to get exit applause. He is a wonderful actor, I think. But it has always been avocation to him. When he made, what in effect was his debut at that time, his state debut, he was 68. When I mean his stage debut, of course, I'm not counting all those little parts. I always knew from those little parts that there was something there. Katina was in it; Katina is my wife. She played Nina and I played Constantine.

M: Didn't you meet your wife at . . .

P: At the Williamstown Theater.

M: And you did "The Seagull". I think your mother said you were working on the Chekhovian thing.

P: No, no, not exactly. I played in "The Seagull" before at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, and I hadn't been able to get a hold of it properly. I had always wanted to play it again. In fact, for years I had been beseeching directors who were friends of mine whenever they were doing productions of it to please let me play it, and they never would. When this opportunity arose--I'd always wanted to go back to T. N. T. and act to begin with--it happened to be a time when I wasn't really doing anything professionally, and then the fact that it was that role, and I was going to have another crack at it before I got too old for it, which I am now. Katina was going to be fun to act with too. Katina and I had met as apprentices in 1958 at the summer theater in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and we were in our late adolescence. In fact, that was sort of the first thing I did after the break up of The Atlantic Players when we all went to college. I began to be an apprentice at Williamstown in the early years of its time. The first two years that they had apprentices I was an apprentice there, and the second of those two years Katina was there. That's how we met. Then for years after that we hardly saw each other. Then we began to see each other in the late 1960's, and then we got married in 1970.

M: You have a daughter named Audrey, don't you?

P: Yes, she's two. She is just almost exactly two years old. She was born in October 1979.

To get back to the chronology, I went to Williamstown and that, just like everything else, served to confirm that I wanted to go in to the theater. I was, for the first time, surrounded by professional actors and so on. Then I was at Yale as an undergraduate at the time; I didn't ever go to graduate school at Yale. I wasn't even a drama major as an undergraduate, but I was an English major. I was in, extracurricularly, almost every play I could be in while I was there. I wrote a couple of them. I was hardly into directing at all then. I didn't ever think that was a serious alternative for me. Then I came to New York, and the first job I got was "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama Has Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feeling So Sad," which was being done for the first time that year, 1962.

M: Could you tell a little bit about how you got the job?

- P: It's very weird. It was unusual at the time. It was a play that had been published before it was produced in New York. It had been done at Harvard. The author was an undergraduate, Arthur Kopit, at Harvard when it was first produced. It attracted a lot of attention. It was written up in the paper; it wasn't reviewed or anything, but it was written up that there had been this highly successful play. I remember it stuck in my mind because of the title, which even still is an unusual title. In those days it was unheard of.
- M: It created an outrage. I remember that.
- P: I remember one day when I was in New York and was going back to Yale, in my senior year, I saw a paperback of the play and decided to read it just out of curiosity. I read it and I said, "Oh my God, I can play this part probably far better than anyone else." And I've never really reacted to a part like that. It wasn't even that I wanted to play it because it would be a difficult part to play, and it had all kinds of things in it I didn't want to do on the stage.
- M: What were some of the things?
- P: He had a speech defect which I had. I had gone into acting in order to just escape from it, and I didn't want to play a part that had that. He stuttered and I stuttered. I certainly didn't want to make my debut in New York that way.
- M: And then get typecast?
- P: Yes. I didn't want to play it. I sensed, correctly as it turned out, that if I did play it I wouldn't always have control over that aspect of it. Also, I just found the character a little neurotic.
- M: I keep thinking it was Jonathan.
- P: It's Jonathan, yes. But I also saw it was a great part and a very good play. I knew that I could play it. This was my senior year at Yale, and I resolved that if it was being done the next fall in New York, as there was talk it was to be done, that I would audition for it. So I came and it proved very difficult to get an audition. A whole lot of people I knew who were actors in the business set up interviews with their agents for me to try to get a reading and the agents would say, "We can't submit you to read for the production of this magnitude." Jerome Robbins was directing it. "We don't know your work at all. You've only worked in college. What if you're no good? That reflects on us." They were right. It was before the days when you would audition for an

agent. At least they never asked me to. I kept saying, "But I'm right for this." Finally, a good friend of mine, Nancy Donahue, an actress who later played the lead on a Broadway show I directed called "The Runner Stumbles," sent me to her agent whose name was Deborah Coleman. Deborah said, "I have a hunch about this, I'm going to submit you to the casting director, Terry Fay." I went for an interview with Terry Fay and she said, "I have a hunch about this, I'm going to see that you get a reading with Mr. Robbins." This was on Friday afternoon and my audition was for Tuesday afternoon.

I did something I've done frequently since I've been able to get a reading for a play: I learned the part and rehearsed it all weekend as if I were going to do a performance of it. I learned every line, and I got an actress I knew and I just worked all weekend on the scenes between Jonathan and the girl. I came in that Tuesday afternoon--I'll never forget this--my audition was at 3:40 and I sat there and they just forgot about me. People went in and in and in. Finally, it was like quarter to six and everyone was gone and the assistant director, Bill Daniels, came out on his way out with his overcoat on and said, "Who are you?" I said in a very timid way, "I had an audition at 3:40." He said, "Right, well come in. I think everyone is gone, but come on in."

M: What time was this, evening?

P: A little before six. It was a winter night. I went in and Arthur Kopit had gone and others had gone, but happily, Jerry Robbins was still there. He was putting on his coat and Bill Daniels said, "Here's someone we forgot." It very clearly had the atmosphere, "Okay, we'll give him about five minutes."

M: Poor wretch.

P: Yes. They were terribly friendly and very apologetic. Since I've begun to direct, I know what that is. After a day of auditions and you haven't seen what you want and then somebody comes in that you've never heard of who did a few plays in college and you've heard the scene read so many times, you think, get them out of the way.

It was a great event. I started to read and after about a page I dropped the pretense that I was holding the book and I just put the book down. I read opposite Bill Daniels, who read the part of the girl, which was terrific because often you have to read opposite a stage manager. Bill is an actor, and even though he was playing the part of a girl, he knew how to talk and listen and respond

to what you were doing. They let me read the entire scene, which was twenty minutes long.

M: But then you weren't reading.

P: They let me act it for them, and I got about a third of the way through it. I knew they were going to let me go to the end of it. I just took off, I really played it very well. I thought they were going to leap on the stage after this and offer me the part. Well, they did leap on the stage and he said it was a fantastic audition and asked me a lot about myself, but I ended up having to read for it six times because Arthur Kopit did not like me for the part.

M: What did he object to?

P: He thought I was too much the part. I was too frail and too neurotic and all those things. He thought that would be uninteresting, that the kid should seem to be stronger, but his circumstances or whatever . . .

M: Made him appear frail?

P: Made him this. Apparently, Jerry kept saying to him, "Yes, yes, you're right, but still, it works this way." To make a long story short, I read about six times over a period of a few weeks, and finally I was home in Warren for Christmas vacation and the agency called and said, "Would you come back and read one more time?" That time was with Barbara Harris. We both got the part that day because they had read her a number of times too and couldn't decide whether to cast her or not. When they read the two of us opposite each other, they decided that would work. So we got the parts. Barbara almost immediately became a major star. A week after we opened Alan Jay Lerner and Richard Rodgers, who were going to write a musical together, came to see it. They announced they were going to write their musical for her. She became a major star, and I did not.

M: What did you do? I remember a flurry about you getting that.

P: It didn't, in itself, lead to anything. What it did do was to make a lot of professional people aware of me, but they didn't know what to do with me. In fact, one person was unkind enough to say, right in front of me, "T. when this run is over you should take this young man and put him in cement and drop him in the East River because he is never going to be good for anything else." She said this to the producer, T. Edward Hambleton, backstage after one of the performances. Around that time, I auditioned for the thing called "The Lincoln Center,"

by Robert Whitehead and Elia Kazan.

M: Was everybody very excited about that at the time?

P: It was hard to overstate how excited everybody was.

M: It was an event.

P: It was going to be nirvana; it was going to be this. The year before the actual performances started they had a training program in which they went all over and auditioned every young actor, every promising graduate of every drama school, and all this sort of thing. From it they were going to select thirty people to be in the training program which would go for eight months for five hours a day for five days a week. Then at the end of the eight months they would select fifteen of us, half of us, fifteen of the thirty to be in the company, to be the junior half of the company the next year. I was selected along with Faye Dunaway and John Philip Law and Barry Primus and Frank Langella, a whole lot of gifted people, Mariclare Costello, Alexander Berlin, and whole lot of very talented people, and a lot of whom have since become very well-known.

M: Is Mariclare Costello related to Dolores Costello?

P: No.

M: I just wondered.

P: She was my girlfriend as a result of that year, for a while. We still see her and her husband a lot; she's a wonderful actress. Anyway, we had this training program for . . .

M: What year was this?

P: It was 1962, 1963. For the first half of it I was still doing "Oh Dad" at night. I was exhausted. We had acting training every day with Bobby Lewis and then we had a speech teacher, Arthur Lessac, and a movement teacher, Anna Sokolov, the choreographer. Everyone else was terribly nervous and tense because they wanted to be accepted at the end of the year in the company. It was called an eight month audition. I can honestly say I wasn't tense because I didn't expect to be accepted in the company, and also I really had never been formally trained. It was like eight months of free training, five days a week, eight hours a day, with some of the best people in the business. I saw Bobby Lewis and Anna Sokolov for free for eight months, five days a week. Also, there was so much excitement about the idea of the repertory company. I had a good time; I made a lot of

good friends who are still my friends and I acquired a girlfriend, for a while anyway. I learned a lot about acting and speech and movement and at the same time I was able to act every night in "Oh Dad, Poor Dad" for the first half of that year, then it closed.

M: While you're on that subject, do you think that's how people learn best to act, by acting?

P: Oh sure. But I also think you can learn a lot of good stuff in the classroom. I think the ideal situation is exactly what it worked out that I had that year, which is the balance.

You weren't allowed, when you were in the training program, to audition for a play. But if you were already in one you didn't have to leave it because the schedule I had was not a Broadway schedule. It was evenings and weekends, the off-Broadway schedule. It did not interfere, but I never had a day off. But they said, "If you can stand it, we're not going to advise you to leave it." It was a good production company. Finally, I got exhausted and I left "Oh Dad" about a month before it did close. I played it for a year.

You learned a lot about acting, particularly if you were blessed with the opportunities I have had. I have been in long runs three times in my life.

Then, at the end of the eight months, I was accepted in the company to my surprise. I went away for the summer to Williamstown, and then I got back that fall, 1963, and was told that they really didn't have any parts for me. The first year they were opening with "After the Fall," Arthur Miller's play. They didn't have any parts of any size for me, but I could be an ASM, assistant stage manager, because they said, "We sort of deduced from your work that you weren't that interested in acting anyway," which took me aback. I said, "Okay, fine," because it was obviously going to be such an exciting kind of adventure that I thought sure. Just around that time I got a call from Jerry Robbins to come and audition for "Fiddler on the Roof," and I did and I got the part of the tailor. I went to them in Lincoln Center and I said, "I've got a part in a Broadway show." They were a little offended, and they said I was walking out for sheer commerce. I was walking out on this artistic venture. As it turned out, I think "Fiddler on the Roof" was considerably more artistic than anything they did there.

M: It wasn't a sure thing at the time was it, that "Fiddler" was going to become what it became?

P: It wasn't sure that it was going to become what it became, but it was a musical being directed by Jerome Robbins on a very important theme.

M: And you were considering mercenary and . . .

P: I read the script and heard the score and it was clearly a beautiful work. It was obviously very serious; I just wasn't going to be in some trashy Broadway musical. Who knew whether it was going to run or not? It was something to be taken very seriously. Also, I owed my career to Jerry Robbins. He didn't have to cast me in the part, but after all, I would have never been at Lincoln Center if it hadn't been for Jerry Robbins casting me in "Oh Dad" when I was completely unknown. He was taking a chance, because it's very easy for someone to come in out of college and audition well for a show, but you have no idea about their ability to develop a role. And he cast me in one of the leading roles in the play.

M: Didn't he know that you had also done musicals . . .

P: Also, a very interesting thing, soon after I opened in "Oh Dad" I went to audition for some musical and I told my agent I could sing and it was a disaster. I couldn't sing a note. My agent had found out from the producers that I sung very badly and she said, "Austin, you've got to learn how to sing." She sent me to a lady, whom I'm still with, named Ora Witte. This was in 1962.

M: Is she related to Dae Mae Whittey?

P: No, it's spelled like the guy in Russia; it's spelled like Count Witte. She's a lady from San Antonio, Texas. She is 81 years old and still teaching brilliantly.

M: And you're still studying voice with her?

P: Yes. She took me on and started me and within a year and a half I was able to audition respectably for "Fiddler," and I got the part. Then they postponed "Fiddler" for a year because they wanted to wait till the availability of Zero Mostel. I had that empty year that I could have been in the first year of Lincoln Center.

M: You didn't particularly want to go back with your hat in your hand and say . . .

P: No, I couldn't do that. I hung around a lot; I saw a lot of previews.

M: Lurking in corners?

P: Yes. They gave one of the leads in "After the Fall" to

Mariclare, whom I was involved with at the time, so I hung around a lot for that reason as well as just my involvement with the company.

I spent that year working on my voice, both my speaking and singing voice, and I did "Fiddler," which I was very nervous about because it was a part where I wasn't supposed to have the speech impediment, and I'd never played a part like that in professional theater. I've done a lot of it in college, but I suddenly thought, my God. We did "Fiddler" and it was very hard for me because it was a character like I had never played before. He was supposed to be strong. He was frail, but strong. You had to convince the audience that he would get the girl and be able to win the approval of her father, who was against it and all of that. It was hard. There were times when we were out on the road with the show trying out, and Jerry Robbins would say to me, "You're not making it. I don't believe that he would allow this girl to marry you because your character is poor, but you just also don't seem strong enough. That's the reason he gives his consent, even though there is a man after her hand who is very wealthy. He figures that even though you are poor, which is a disadvantage, you have the strength of character, and I don't see it." He would put it in terms somewhat harsher than that. Finally, I got it together and it was all right and it was a good year. I was in it for a year.

M: This would be 1964 or 1965?

P: We opened on Broadway in September 1964 and I left in August of 1965. That was the second of the three long runs that I did. Then I left it because I was asked to go to Ohio to direct T.N.T. "The Glass Menagerie," starring my mother. That was such a wild idea. I had never directed a play as an adult before. I directed a lot of The Child Players, but perhaps . . .

M: That was the very first time that you actually took on that whole directing chore?

P: Yes, and I still wasn't thinking of myself as a director, but I thought that would be an interesting trip, to be a director.

M: You could have a little leeway to fail too.

P: Yes. And it would be fun. Who doesn't love "The Glass Menagerie" and all that? I left "Fiddler". Hal Prince, the producer of "Fiddler" called me and said, "After you get back from Ohio would you like to go back in the show?" I said, "That's too perfect for words." He said, "The only thing is that if you do come back you

have to sign for another year." I thought about it and I was so secure in "Fiddler". I remember I felt this is going to run forever, and it was a lovely play and a good part for me. The cast was very easy to be with and I thought . . . He said, "You'll have to let me know within a few days." So I really pondered and finally I went and slipped a note under his office door over the weekend and said, "Hal, I think I'm going to leave it for good. I think I'm going to see what else I can get after I get back from Ohio." It was a huge kind of leap for me. I've never kind of leapt into the void like that.

So I went to Ohio and I directed "Glass Menagerie," which I enjoyed, and it was a great success, but it didn't even make me think I would direct professionally. I came back and, of course, did not get any work for seven months, at all. I hardly got any auditions.

M: What did you do in between when you weren't doing . . . You had done a large amount of work.

P: I saved some money from doing "Fiddler" so I had the money. I didn't have to take another job. I read and I went to auditions and I took a lot more singing lessons and speech lessons. I was still working on my voice; I still am. I read. I was sort of hermit like. I actually remember it rather fondly. I went to auditions. I remember going to auditions for a movie with Elliott Silverstein, who had a huge success directing the movie "Cat Ballou" that year. He was going to direct his next film called "The Happening," and I had an appointment with him the first Monday in January. I remember it was during the transit strike and I walked across the park in the snow. It was 1966 and I remember thinking I'm going to get this part. I'm going to succeed in 1966. I went in and I was treated very badly by the casting director, some lady whose name truly does escape me, who said things like, "All right, what have you done?" I said, "Well, I was in "Oh Dad, Poor Dad". "Where?" "At the Phoenix Theater." "Who did you play?" "I played Jonathan, the son." "You mean to tell me you played Jonathan, the son, in the original production of "Oh Dad? Are you trying to tell me that?" I said, "Yes." She then called down to Elliott Silverstein and said, "I have an actor here who claims . . ." Then I went down to see him and by this point I was so . . . I was speaking very low and he said, "I can't hear you." It was going horribly.

M: You mean that intimidated you rather than made you angry?

P: It made me angry, but I didn't know how to express my anger. I've gotten much better at that since then. In the middle of it somebody opened the door and said there

was another actor and his face instantly lit up and just kind of ushered me out of the room. I remember thinking my career is over. This went on for a couple of months.

Then one day there was the American Conservatory Theater, ACT, Bill Ball's theater now in San Francisco, which was started in Pittsburgh the year before.

M: You know Feebee, Feebee Alexander, don't you?

P: Yes.

M: I remember when she went. Charlene Miller and everybody.

P: Yes, In ACT the year before, when they were in Pittsburgh, I had some good friends. When I was out in Ohio directing "The Glass Menagerie", I would occasionally drive over to Pittsburgh and see them all. One day they had left Pittsburgh and they were now just on a tour. They were homeless. One day they called me up and said there were all these supporting parts that suddenly had fallen empty and they needed someone to come down right away. They were all what are called utility parts. There were really not spectacular parts in there. I said, "When do you want me to start?" They said, "Tomorrow." I said, "You're on." Again, it was a conservatory which appealed to me. You had to take classes. I come into the professional theater and had played one leading role and one very important role, the tailer in "Fiddler," each for a year, and that was my entire professional acting experience.

M: That is bizarre.

P: It was bizarre, and I obviously learned a lot, but it was also very limiting. I had never had that experience that a young actor often has that you kick around in star companies and you play all these parts. It's very valuable. I thought that was great. Also, they're going to be on tour and I'll be kind of anonymous. So I went out with Bernard in "Death of a Salesman." I played a bunch of things in "Beyond the Fringe." I played Charlie in "Charlie's Aunt," which is not the leading role; it's just one of the undergraduates who sets up the jokes. I played Damis in "Tartuffe".

M: Did you work then with some of the people of the Warren-Youngstown area a lot then, that were in the company at the time then?

P: They weren't anymore.

M: They had left?

P: Yes, or they hadn't come yet; it was between that.

M: I'm thinking of Charlene Miller and . . .

P: No, no, I wasn't there then. I know who they are and that they were there, but it wasn't at the same time. We went to Westport, Connecticut, and then we went to Palo Alto, California, East Haddam, Connecticut, and to Ravinia Park, outside Chicago, looking for a home, and San Francisco picked us up and said, "You can come next year." Then we had three months layoff between the end of our tour in Chicago and when we would become a home in San Francisco.

During that three months I did a play on Broadway that Alan Arkin directed called "Hail Scrawdyke". It was a play that had been in England by the name "Little Malcolm and His Struggle Against the Eunuchs". Alan Arkin, who I knew because he had been going with Barbara Harris when we were doing "Oh Dad," called me up and offered me the part to my surprise. I did it, and it was the first piece of really, really good professional acting that I ever did, I mean really good, where I really knew what I was doing.

M: What year was this done?

P: The ACT year was 1966, and then at the end of 1966 was "Hail Scrawdyke," which opened and closed in a week, whereupon I got a chance to go back to San Francisco and rejoin ACT, where I spent a great deal of 1967.

M: It's incredible how everything dovetailed, don't you think?

P: Yes, it did.

M: That is not usual.

P: No, it is very good.

M: Throughout it almost seems fated.

P: Then, of course, it works the other way, against you.

M: I know.

P: That year was very good for that. That was with ACT for the first eight months in San Francisco. I played all the parts I played on tour, plus a couple of new ones, somewhat larger ones. That was the first time I played Constantine in "Seagull," which was very unsuccessful. The first time I really ever got bad reviews was then.

M: It was in the "Seagull"?

P: At ACT, I was shattered. I was just going to withdraw from acting and do very melodramatic things.

M: You could jump off the San Francisco Bridge.

P: I never got quite that far.

M: Did you feel you were bad?

P: No, I thought I was brilliant. I don't think I was as bad as some of them said, but I wasn't very good.

M: When HBO came to Youngstown I didn't get it right away, but last year when I was sick and at home "Starting Over" was being shown on the cable. My favorite person in it was you, not just because you are sitting here. I kept forcing all my friends to let me come over to their house and watch that. I was hoping today that in a secret, crazy way that you would come in and exterminate that. I loved that part so much.

P: I loved it.

M: That part really appealed to me, but I was thinking you got some flak when you did "The Office Murders," didn't you?

P: Flak? (Laughter) That isn't the word for it.

M: I remember I came backstage to talk to you and there was a lunatic lady that day claiming that she had broken her leg and she kept screaming for the producer, and we had to keep leaping into corners to continue our conversation because she was holding her leg and screaming that she was going to sue the theater. It was a very crazy conversation. You were telling me at the time that they didn't like it, and I really, really thought that it was wonderful.

P: I feel downright perverse about it. I've said to the director and the author, "If you want to get another production of it somewhere in a theater like that in New York, I'll do it again." They said, "You would?" The reviews were bad for the play, for the direction, for all of us.

M: We were talking about "The Office Murders" and that's where I want you to resume.

P: I'll get to "The Office Murders" in a while.

M: I thought we could lump all bad reviews together.

P: No, there is stuff that leads up to that. Anyway, they

were asking me if I would stay on for a second year at ACT, a second San Francisco year. I was torn about it because I thought, to put it in a very precious way, I felt I was being appreciated in San Francisco. It sounds very self-important and it was. I also thought I was developing a certain way of acting and manner of acting which I was going to lose if I stayed there, because it was not what anybody wanted here. I didn't know if I would be that effective or good at the kind of thing they wanted.

M: You mean out there or here?

P: Out there in San Francisco. I was sort of at a crossroad. I was willing to stay and then I got a call to come and be in Mike Nichols production of "The Little Foxes" in New York. It was a part for which I was spectacularly miscast. I went and read the play to make sure. I thought if he wants it I'm not going to question.

M: Was that your first brush with "Little Foxes"?

P: And with Mike Nichols, yes. I knew "The Little Foxes" very vaguely. I've seen it once on television.

So I left ACT and I was in that with Anne Bancroft, and George C. Scott, and E. G. Marshall, and Margaret Leighton, and Maria Tucci, and Richard A. Dussard, who had been at ACT.

M: It just seems that every time you're at sort of a crossroad someone calls you on the phone.

P: Yes. But there were some years where that didn't happen. So I went and I did it, and again, I almost got fired from it because Mike had sort of cast me capriciously, and he didn't really know me at all. He said, "I want an offbeat type for the part," and the producer said, "What about Austin Pendleton?" and he said, "Fine." We got into rehearsal and Mike said, "You're wrong for this." I certainly wasn't going to say that I knew I was, or agree with him. I said, "Oh?" We kept working on it and finally it worked out.

M: Who were you playing, the son?

P: I was playing Leo. It's the only part I could have played at that time. It's the only part I could ever play at any time in that play.

M: I would have been really startled if you had said Regina.

P: Yes. We'll get to that. Then I was in that for a while and then I started making movies. The first one was

Otto Preminger's movie "Skiddoo." It is a little known work.

M: I don't know about that.

P: No, nobody does.

M: Do you want to tell a little bit about it?

P: It's just a bad movie. It's an interesting, bad movie. It actually developed a cult following during the 1970's. It was shown every Friday night at midnight on Berkeley Campus for a while. Strange people would come up to you and say it was a neglected masterpiece, but neither I nor Otto Preminger think that about it. It didn't work. It was a lovely idea.

M: What was the idea?

P: It was a farce about the mafia and hippies getting involved with each other. It was directed with a certain originality that he often brings to his movies. The screenplay was written by a man who had written the screenplay for a movie called "Flying Machine of Brewster McCloud." The script writer had wanted me to play the lead in that. That film wasn't produced so he wrote the screenplay "Skiddoo." He wrote a supporting part for me and then when Otto Preminger picked up the film he introduced me to Preminger. My audition for Preminger consisted of talking politics with him. It was very nice. We were on the way to the location to do a screen test and we were talking politics; it was that momentous spring of 1968 and there was a lot to talk about. We talked about politics all the way out to the location and then we arrived there and he said, "You have the part. I don't need to do a screen test." He said, "I saw you on stage a few weeks ago in "Little Foxes" and you weren't very good, but I think you might show up in the film very well."

We did it, and the next film I did about a year later was a job I got from "Little Foxes." It was Mike Nichols' film "Catch 22." Essentially, at that time I didn't do important theater work, I acted in some workshops in New York. That went on a while.

Then a workshop I acted in turned into "The Last Sweet Days Of Isaac," which is the third and last of the long running shows I did. It was probably the longest show I've ever been in. It was about five hundred performances.

M: Who was that directed by?

P: By Word Baker. It was by Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford.

M: Therein is the "Booth Connection" that I was trying to figure out.

P: Yes, she wrote the lyrics for "Booth."

What I left out is that in the spring of 1968, after "Little Foxes" and "Skiddoo," we did three Monday nights at that theater under the Beaumont. There was a special program for the development of new musicals where they would do three Monday nights of a work, and we did the production of "Booth."

M: What gave you the idea to have it put to music?

P: There was a tradition at Yale, while I was there, an undergraduate tradition of the spring musical. So that dictated that it be a musical. When we opened at Yale, it was three and a half hours long and very heavy. It was not a musical comedy and it still, of course, isn't a musical comedy. I just got obsessed with the subject. When I was a junior at Yale I had written a musical comedy version with some friends of "Tom Jones." This was before the movie came out. It was a big smash. I was up to write the project in the spring of my senior year. I went with a new composer because the "Tom Jones" composer was graduating and I said, "What period would you like to write in?" He said, "19th Century America." Then I said, "What kind of 19th century?" He said, "Well, the whole country." I said, "We have to find a theme then of people who traveled a great deal." I remember when I was quite young having read "The Prince of Players". I said, "I remember Edwin Booth and his father traveled around a great deal. Let me look that up."

M: Is that what it is about?

P: Yes, it's about the father. It ends with the death of the father.

M: I'm just overwhelmed by this because that's what I'm in.

P: Anyone who really gets into the Booth's gets into Junius, the father. That's the great neglected character. Our play isn't at all about John Wilkes. He is referred to a couple of times. Anyway, I read it thinking it would be something that would fit this composer's needs. I got it and reread it and I fell apart. I was so moved by the relationship of this crazy father and quiet son traveling around the country together, and Mary Ann and the mother and all of that, I just fell apart. I had a primal response to the story. I showed it to the composer; he got all excited.

M: Who is he?

P: Arthur Rubenstein is his name. This new movie that is coming out, "Whose Life is it Anyway" with Richard Dreyfuss, he wrote the music for that. He has conducted some Broadway shows and stuff like that.

M: Then you haven't shelved it?

P: No. In fact, it was announced in the Times the other day with Jason Robards.

M: I didn't know it was announced again.

P: It gets announced periodically. I'll show you a script, I'm still not happy with it. I'm not happy with the depiction of the family life yet, which is a comparatively small part of the piece. Almost all of it is on the road with father and son.

M: But it had such an enormous effect.

P: You have to get that in focus to understand all the rest of it.

M: Everybody has to be made to realize just what that caused, right?

P: Yes. Then "Isaac" for a year and a half and then I made some more movies. I made "What's up Doc?" and a thing called "Every Little Crook and Nanny."

M: I remember all these. I started watching you all the time.

P: "The Thief Who Came to Dinner" and "The Front Page." In the meantime, I started directing; I was up at Williams-town one summer in the equity company, where I had been an apprentice all those years before. Niko Psacharopoulos was there and he said to me, "Why don't you direct one of the plays?" He utterly took me by surprise.

M: Your mother considers him a god.

P: She is not far from wrong. He has achieved quietly, year by year up there, what everybody has been screaming about achieving and hasn't achieved, which is an American National Theater. The best theater actors in America who have the biggest range all act up there: Blythe Danner, Frank Langella, Maria Tucci, and Roberta Maxwell. He has achieved what everybody keeps trying to achieve in New York, the American National Theater, and fails because they don't get actors that good.

M: You, of course, know Richard Boyd.

P: He was in "The Glass Menagerie" when I directed it.

- M: I love Richard Boyd. He and I did "Look Homeward Angel" a couple of years ago in Youngstown. Then your mother told me this wonderful story about how he wanted to go up and be an apprentice. I said, "I want to do that too." She said, "I'll tell them that you're nuts and that you're in your forties, but if you want to try that you can ask later for an audition."
- P: They would love it.
- M: I can't get this out of my system. It's like a terminal illness. You don't always succeed at it.
- P: You're right. You can't fight these things. It's stronger than any of us.
- M: I came here finally after the kids all graduated and I said, "I'll give you one year." Then I said, "I can change the rules because I made the rules up." I was getting ready to leave and I said, "Who would know if I changed it." So I changed the rules.
- P: You should follow your heart.
- M: You must have met Katina . . .
- P: In 1958.
- M: You must have been in to real strong courtship about now too.
- P: Yes, the early 1970's. We were married in 1970. Then in the early 1970's I got in to directing a lot around the country and I made that handful of films. After "The Front Page" I didn't get any film work for, essentially speaking, four years.
- M: Was it that long between that and "The Muppet Movie"?
- P: That started a whole new spurt, "The Muppet Movie."
- M: I took my grandfather four times. There is something about your acting that is very appealing to me; I feel like you're not putting on any kind of front. I can't put it in the right words.
- P: I'll take you up to "The Office Murders" right now because this went on for years. I did some classical acting around the country. I stopped making films all through the mid-1970's because I wasn't offered any. I began to direct a lot at regional theaters and so forth, and I was always drawn to classics and to an occasional new play, one of which came in to Broadway. You know "The Runner

Stumbles"? It was at that time that Katina and I went to Warren and did "The Seagull."

Then all of this led to my being at the company at Brooklyn Academy of Music in which the director was Frank Dunlop. The first of the two years I was there I was in "Three Sisters," which was a success. Then I did the season which practically finished me as an actor; I played Marc Anthony in "Julius Caesar." I played the male ingenue in "The Play's the Thing." I played Estragon in "Waiting for Godot." I was a disaster.

M: What year was that?

P: That was 1978, the watershed year of my life. I got some kind of reviews at ACT, but it was nothing like this. I was advised to retire from acting.

M: Do bad reviews hurt your feelings?

P: They don't since then because you get inoculated with so much that you build up an immunity. Then the first time I had the nerve to crawl back into public again in New York acting was "The Office Murders." Once again, I was leveled.

M: I thought that was a damn good show.

P: I did too; I really don't understand why they reacted so bad. I said to the director, "Let's do it every three or four years in some little theater and sooner or later they'll appreciate it." We'll just keep on doing it and one day they'll see it's good. This is ridiculous, everybody liked that play. My friends would say, "Austin, what have you done? You've gotten yourself in this play that everyone hates so much." I'd say, "Well, come see it." They would come and they would say, "Well, it works." It's a fascinating play to do; it's psychological.

M: I liked it because you weren't playing somebody that was being nice to somebody else. You were kind, but you were like the hero, and I like that.

P: I've never played a part like that before. In fact, I got involved with that play through a clerical error. They sent me the wrong letter. They didn't want me for that part; they wanted me for the copyist. I called up and I said, "I'd love to play Jack." There was this long pause and they said, "Fine." Then I found out, because they were happy with what I did, and so they said, "We have to tell you that we never meant for you to play this."

M: Who is the "they" there? I forget.

P: The author and the first producer of it, who was not ultimately involved with it. I liked this play when I read it, but I got involved with it because that part was such an unusual part for me to be offered. As it happened, they never meant to offer it to me.

M: It was just a darn good part, don't you think?

P: It's a wonderful part to play. It's fascinating. He goes through so many changes; it's a fascinating part.

M: If we don't have time to get up to the last few years of your life maybe we can refinish them.

P: You're up to them. Since then I have hardly acted at all. I haven't acted in New York at all.

M: But you have attracted some small amount of attention.

P: I haven't been offered anything so it happened that everything I was doing was directing. I did "John Gabriel Bortman" at Circle in the Square last year with Irene Worth. Then all of a sudden I get this call to direct Elizabeth Taylor in "Little Foxes."

M: Did she reach you?

P: No, the producer called me and said, "You have to have a meeting with Elizabeth." She had no idea who I was.

M: Were you excited?

P: At first I was scared. I've always liked Elizabeth Taylor. I always admired her. Sometimes in the movies I thought she was just awful, and then sometimes I thought she was just really, really brilliant. I thought who is this person. I knew "Little Foxes" very well and I thought that casting was so interesting; it was such an oddball way to cast that part. I thought that might shed some new light on it. I went and had an interview with her to see if she liked me. Then I had an interview with Lillian Helman, whom I already knew, of course, from having been in the play. Then they called up and said, "You got it." Just a few days had elapsed between when they first called me about it and when they offered it to me. It was just out of the blue.

M: This is about five out of the blue phone calls. These make big, sweeping changes in your life.

P: Yes, exactly. I don't know if "Little Foxes" has changed anything in my life, but it certainly was a terrific . . .

- M: This had to make a little change in your life.
- P: A few more people know who I am, essentially. In other towns across the country they don't know the name of the person who directed it. It hasn't led to any other Broadway offers for me at all. So I'm exactly, in career terms, where I was when it started.
- M: I liked the play. I thought she held stage and was directed beautifully.
- P: She's a good actress. That was the great joy of it, it was just like directing a good actress. She never once fooled us of anything of being a star. Let's face it, the entire reason we were all there was that she decided to do a play. The cast was perfectly harmonious and we put a lot of replacements in it and all of them were very harmonious. We were out of town a long time, rehearsed it all that time, and we just all worked together very well. Meanwhile, it was being surrounded by people storming the gates and international press conferences. That seemed so unrelated to the work experience we were having. It was a very concentrated, sympathetic work experience.
- M: When I stood outside that day I joined the throng outside to watch Elizabeth.
- P: I used to do it. I liked her a lot; I like her very much. I think she is a very good actress.
- M: I just found out that you're doing "The Cherry Orchard."
- P: In Monticlair, New Jersey.
- M: Is it the Whole Theater Company?
- P: That's correct, in Montclair. Olympia Dukakos is one of the leads in it. She is playing Ranevskaya.
- M: You are doing that out of love for that work.
- P: For the company, her as an actress. We did a production of the play a year ago this summer in New Hampshire. We liked what we did and wanted to keep on working on it. The majority of the cast in the play is equity, but there were three or four parts for which we could consider nonequity. We just wanted to throw open the net and see what turned up.
- M: That's wonderful because so many people close themselves.
- P: We thought you never know who you're going to turn up. Indeed, we found a couple of people.

M: It took me twenty years to get an equity card.

P: It's not a reliable guide as to who's talented and who's not.

M: Since I got it it has been about as much use to me as my tap dancing lessons were that my mother gave me when I was five, which is totally nothing. I did much more things without one because you can go to auditions. You don't get to audition when you have an equity card. I was very fascinated that you were over there doing that. I thought it has to be some people that are involved with it or something like that that you would take the time. Although I know you like Chekhov, at least that is the rumor.

P: Yes, you can say that. I'm hoping to get some acting work soon.

M: Do you have anything on the horizon?

P: No.

M: You're rehearsing the play in New York City some days, or all the time?

P: It will be rehearsed in New York. I'll be flying back and forth because I have to put Sada Thompson in "Little Foxes," replacing Maureen. Beginning tomorrow I'm insane until December 4th when "Cherry Orchard" opens.

M: Where does it open?

P: In Montclair, New Jersey.

M: At the Whole Theater?

P: It plays the month of December there. Katina is in it too. She plays Varya. It's a great part in it.

END OF INTERVIEW