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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio Project

Theater Experience

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BENTLEY LENHOFF

Interviewed

by

Carol Mills

on

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B E N T L E Y L E N H O F F

Bentley Lenhoff was born in Detroit, Michigan on May 22, 1930. He is the Executive Director of the Youngstown Playhouse and has held that position since 1965. Mr. Lenhoff resides in Boardman, Ohio with his wife, Nancy, and their two daughters, Lyndean and Alyssa who are now attending college.

Mr Lenhoff's family was involved in a variety of businesses in his youth, many of which he helped with in his later adolescence, as he was ill with an assortment of ailments in his early childhood, which situation caused him to live with his grandmother while his parents were busy with their business ventures. Bentley's illnesses caused him to spend a great deal of time isolated in his room with his radio as a constant companion, which he says began his interest in theatre.

Bentley's maternal relatives came here through Ellis Island from Russia. His European forbearers were associated with the Moscow Art Theatre.

Bentley's family moved to Petoskey, Michigan when he was 15 years of age. Bentley had been to drama school and piano school throughout childhood. He attended Albion College and Michigan State and did some summer stock in the summer of

1953. At this time he became certified as an English teacher. His early childhood diseases made him exempt from the service during the Korean War.

After some time in Florida with his parents working in their fruit business, Bentley began his own summer stock theatre in Petoskey, Michigan. This venture was very successful and to this day, two of the young men who worked with Bentley in the Petoskey days now work with him at the Youngstown Playhouse as full-time employees in the front office and also as director and actor on the stage.

Bentley's association with the Youngstown Playhouse for the last 16 years has resulted in the Playhouse becoming the largest and most successful playhouse in community theatre East of the Mississippi River and one of the three most successful in the nation. The Playhouse is involved in many community activities besides strictly plays. It has grown financially and in service capacity under Mr. Lenhoff's guidance. There being such additional responsibility involved in the complexity of the business activity at the Playhouse, Mr. Lenhoff has eased away from directing shows. This is considered to be a loss to the artistic fount at the theatre. Mr. Lenhoff is known for his biting wit, his relentless punning, his financial wizardry and his astute ability to assess both people and situations.

Although Bentley prefers to be known as a curmudgeon, he is actually a quiet, behind-the-scenes benefactor to many people. He would never publicly admit to being the sensitive, generous gentleman that he actually is, preferring to allow the many to think of him as being as flinty as a sea-captain. In deference to his imposing theatre talents, many of us pretend to go along with this crusty performance, although dozens and dozens of those who have gotten to know him through the last 16 years know better.

Carol Shaffer Mills

December, 1981

This is an interview with Mr. Bentley Lenhoff, executive director of the Youngstown Playhouse. The interview is being done on South Avenue in Youngstown, Ohio. It is December 12, 1981. This project is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, and the interviewer is Carol Shaffer Mills.

MILLS: I want to start when you were a child.

LENHOFF: I had a miserable childhood.

M: I want to talk about what influenced you when you were small and your parents.

L: The thing about my parents was that they divorced each other twice and married each other three times, counting the first one. In between those times, and when I wasn't in the hospital, I lived with an aunt and a grandmother. I was a fat little kid who, when he was home, used to push his fat little nose against the pane of the window and watch the other kids outside playing. I was always too sick to be let out.

M: What were you sick with?

L: I had a series of childhood illnesses that extended for about a five year period. When I was living with my folks, I was living by myself inside the house, while they were out busy making a living.

M: What did they do that they were both gone?

L: My father had a gas station. It wasn't a good enough living to suit my mother, so she went into the restaurant business for herself.

I had fun indoors. I had a radio, and things came alive on the radio. It was my constant companion. In fact, if you were to ask me, as you probably may sometime in this interview, how I got involved and interested in this business, I suppose it was that radio.

M: You are right. That was what I was going to ask you

L: And being alone . . . that solitary thing . . . so that you invent your own companion.

M: What part of Michigan did you grow up in?

L: I grew up in Detroit until I was fifteen, sixteen. Then we moved to Northern Michigan to a small town named Petoskey.

M: Why that part of Michigan?

L: They used me as an excuse because of my asthma and hay fever and moved there. It was nice for them to own a hotel where the boy wouldn't suffer from hay fever and asthma in the summer and where the air is clean and the living is easy.

M: Were you in a regular school now?

L: I'm in a regular school. I'm in a high school.

M: What school?

L: Petoskey High School.

M: How big was this town?

L: About 6,000 in the winter. In the summer it was about 60,000. I did fairly well in school. I liked plays at that point. Even though my folks were divorced and I wasn't living with them in earlier years. In those earlier years they sent me to the typical Saturday morning drama lessons and piano lessons.

M: Oh, they did?

L: The whole bit, sure.

M: Who were those typical for?

L: Those were very typical for a lot of little Jewish kids of upperly-mobile people who were concerned about their kids.

M: Did you have elocution or actual acting lessons?

L: They were acting lessons. I used to do monologues and readings. I would memorize them and come in the next week and do them. I stayed usually with the same monologue published by Edna Means - - - one with a blue wrapper around it in legal sized paper and a backing piece of blue paper. Edna Means Drama Service used to publish these little readings and monologues. In addition to your fee, whatever it was, there was another charge every time you got a new reading. It was maybe \$1 or something like that.

I used to take the bus down there, toward downtown Detroit. Next door was WXYZ. It was the Detroit Conservatory of Music. A woman named Gregg was the teacher. She was terrific. I was very fond of her. She taught there. We had recitals. She asked me to do other things like being the

master of ceremonies at her recitals. She would get me on radio shows on occasion.

M: How old were you when you started all of this?

L: Ten to fourteen - five years in there. I was a little hotshot around Detroit. I got money on occasion for going to clubs and organizations. It would get me a little more than carfare. It was terrific. I went to speaking contests and won.

M: Did you like the praise?

L. Oh, sure. This was recognition and this led to playwriting too when I was in middle school. I used to have a class called "Auditorium" in middle school where you had to make a contract to perform. You had to agree to do a certain number of things like four things for each semester or four things for X number of times. I had a bunch of buddies who looked upon this as a bunch of shit, and they needed an out. They looked to me to get them the out; So I wrote plays. They were funny because I wanted to be popular. We would break the place up.

M: What was the typical subject matter?

L: I had a series one year: "Hashell Damnit and His Adventures." This was written when I was a seventh grader. I put them in rhymes sometimes. One of the guys who was in these contracts was very good. He played leads. I never acted. I just wrote. In fact, he was the second Cato on the "Green Hornet" in Detroit that came out of WXYZ.

M: What is his name?

L Mickey Tuchow, who went on to become Michael Tolan. He's got Broadway credits, including Romanoff in "Romanoff and Juliet." He played roles in the "Green Hornet" and the "Lone Ranger" and the "Hermit's Cave," all of which emanated from the flagship of ABC which was WXYZ in Detroit in those days. At the age of twelve he was taking home \$250 to \$275 a week. He was my best friend. We used to bum streetcar rides together.

M: Did your mother own the theater in Petoskey?

L: No, she didn't own the theater. She put up money .

M: Bob Gray and Ron Prather always referred to it as Sylvia's. They don't mention Charlie.

L: That's right. My poor father never got mentioned. As a means of holding onto me when I was twenty-four and as a condition of my servitude. . . the carrot that was being held up for the servitude . . . was that they would help me open the summer theater of my dreams.

M: When did you get this dream? When this dream start?

L: When did I get the dream? That's a good question. I played stock in Grand Haven, Michigan in 1951, just out of college. That was a nice summer. It didn't last more than three or four weeks. I got drafted. Anyway, I was in this stock company. I ended up directing the first two shows for the producer. I was supposedly his assistant, but he was either so damned drunk, or so damn tired, or making out with one of the broads, that he couldn't cut it during the day. He dumped a

couple of shows on me. I had a feel for it and thought it was fun.

Meanwhile, I had started to be a theater major on a Master's at Michigan State University. I dropped it when the instructor told me on the first show that I directed for the course that it was always easy to do two character shows, especially serious ones, and especially Tennessee Williams' serious ones.

M: He said that?

L: Yes, John Jennings said that. Jennings wrote a musical that got some action a number of years back, called "River Wind." I've lost track of him since.

M: When did Albion College fit in here?

L: I went through Albion College in three years to save my folks money.

M: That was after Michigan State, too?

L: That was before Michigan State. I wasn't a theater major at Albion.

M: What did you do at Albion?

L: I was an English major.

M: A useful profession.

L: Right. I had a teaching degree to back me up. Going back to Grand Haven . . . Well, let's clear up times here. I got a Masters' at Michigan State, and at the same time taught full time in a high school. Then I went to stock in Grand Haven. I had to leave stock because I was drafted.

M: What year is this?

L: Korean War. 1953. I had a doctor fill out a form attesting to my having had ashtma and I didn't have to go.

I went to Florida with my father, getting back into servitude and captivity.

M: How old were you then?

L: Twenty three. I did that for two or three years with them. At that point I was still going to be a captive in the Fall. They expected me down there for the Winter season. They needed help. Even though, I had a teaching job that I could have returned to, they needed help.

M: Teaching English?

L: Yes, and doing plays.

M: Where?

L: In a little town called Haslett outside of East Lansing. I had a hell of a time getting the job. I got it because I was Jewish, not because I had a good academic record or anything else. The Supt's. name was Pat Murphy. He looked at the credentials and said, "Good, I've never had one of those. I'm going to hire me one."

M: Did he say it verbal like that?

L: Yes. I needed a job so badly that I didn't tell him to go to hell. Yes, he said it. I took the job. It was great experience. It was a great year.

M: You went down with your dad.

L: Yes. I went back down to Sarasota, where I sold fruit and talked to John MacDonald three mornings a week - - -Monday, Wednesday and Friday. John D. MacDonald is the mystery story writer.

M: Oh, him.

L: With the colors.

M: Sure, he writes all of his stories with a color in the title, Blue is My Love.

L: Right. He lived behind us. MacDonald was a friend to me in a lot of ways. He urged me to get involved in a theatre group down there, the Palm Tree Playhouse, which was an Equity company in Sarasota run by a nephew of John Ringling North's, who took me on as a local jobber after I had auditioned for him. As a local jobber, he did not have to pay me or he paid me little. It was both. I got my Equity card through him in the second season after I had done four shows with the company.

M: Macdonald encouraged you to take the venture.

L: Yes.

M: You said that he wanted you to take a shot at this.

L: Yes, or get away from "This" by doing "That."

M: I was always willing to take a shot at theater once I was able. How did you get people to let you take a shot? You run a theater and you have bossed this theater around for sixteen years now. Is it sixteen?

L: Sixteen. How do you get people to listen to you, to pay attention so that they will hire you?

M: How do you get hired?

L: I'm not exactly the person to ask about that. The reason for my wanting to start, and the reason I did start my own theater when I did, was because I couldn't get anybody to

hire me as a director. That was the primary reason. I never made the New York Scene, for example, because I didn't have a thick skin and a great enough of a mania to make the rounds to get somebody to hire me. I am only in Youngstown because I didn't really want the job here and didn't pursue it too aggressively, as strange as that may sound

M: I'm convinced that is the only way that works.

L: That's right. My attitude for this particular place was: Who in the hell wants to get involved in a community theater and a bunch of silly people whose objectives are social rather than professional?

M: You are definitely an oddball in this, even though you have been in this for this many years.

L: Yes.

M: You don't fit in with these people.

L: Thank, God.

M: I mean, you don't have to work at it.

L: That's right.

M: It come easy.

L. Very easily.

M: It comes very easy for me, too. In a strange way, although their feet are cold, they are conformists, You are not at all a conformist.

L: I think you're right.

M: Many of these people in community theaters . . . It is just another silly social form. That is too bad that that happens.

L: That's right. It sure is as far as I'm concerned.

M: A lot of wasted time and heartache goes into this stuff and these people don't care. It is a social game. You can live behind it and learn not to care yourself. You see the rituals they are engaging in are much more important in the theater. I still think that if you are good somehow, something is going to happen.

L: That is what keeps you going. That is fine. I wish I had it.

M: I never was able to participate in those social games necessary to maintain a position in a community theater. I'm talking about where it becomes the driving force.

L: Getting back to Sarasota. I walked up to Stu Lancaster and said that I was offering some talent for nothing. It was a free offer. I didn't want a salary.

M: Who isn't for free?

L: This wasn't New York. There weren't that many people for free except the little girls whose mothers and fathers were paying the bills for them. Lancaster latched on to me. I was playing character leads for him and everything else with a strong Equity company that he was paying money to. He got a free ride and I got away from the fruit selling thing plus a little more experience.

M: I've been told by Bob Gray that you are a good actor.

L: I was a lousy actor. Phony bologna. I was a lousy actor probably for the same reason I am a good director. That is because I am outside of things all the time.

M: He said you are very sensitive.

L: I don't know about that. I can't check my brains when I play a show. I can't check my vision of what is going on with other people on the stage and listening to myself and all that nonsense. If your technique is very good, you can be an Olivier, for example, and play it on technique. My technique was never that good. Therefore, I couldn't rely on feelings. I didn't have any toward the thing. I was constantly outside of it, constantly mentally criticizing other people.

M: Therefore, your proclivities were better suited toward people.

L: Oh, sure. I recognized that early. Plus, with this voice, I had given up radio years before in that small town of Petoskey where I had been a disc jockey.

M: What do you mean with this voice?

L: Bad voice for radio. Bad voice for an actor. It is too high pitched and limited in range. I was physically wrong. I looked like an old man, but was young. I realized there was no future for me there in that regard. Not in terms of the Big Apple

M: Of the few people whom I do respect in their opinions of theater in this area and who aren't professional per se all the way, all say Bentley in New York would have been a very famous director.

L: Maybe, I don't know.

M: It is repeated by some of your peers.

L: That is a road not taken, in any case. Simply, it

was this way because I was hung up with mother and a financial obligation. I always felt I owed them for college and I couldn't leave them.

M: A couple of years back, I asked you what you would think of directing a show that I wanted to be in. You had it so well-planned that you had this already to come out in two days. I was amazed, and I knew it would work the way you planned it.

L: Maybe, maybe not.

M: Of course, the thing that happened was the backer of this little venture . . . There were strings, so I didn't want to get involved in it.

L: Sure.

M: Those kind of strings you don't need in the theater. They never really lead anywhere.

L: Right.

M: I want to talk about that part of the theater. In what you called the Big Apple. I found them to be grossly unprofessional in many aspects. The Youngstown Playhouse has an edge on many, many, many productions that I have been involved with in one way or another in New York City outside of Broadway. Right on Broadway there are some very inept things going on.

L: Sure. All over.

M: Do you really think that it is possible to make it in the theater without having a connection if you are good enough, without any connections at all?

L: Yes, but it is more than being good enough. In addition to being good enough - - - and I assume you are talking talent - - - you need that drive, that hustle, that monomania, that thick skin. You need a fearlessness or a . . . If you don't have the fearlessness, you have to be utterly stupid. Streisand is one of my favorite stories. I'm the guy who . . .

M: Would you please tell us that story?

L: I'm probably the only guy who could have hired Barbra Streisand into an Equity company at \$50 a week in 1960.

M: This is your own theater in Petoskey?

L: Yes, this is the Petoskey Playhouse. I had the auditions at the Algonquin Hotel in March of 1960 for the summer of 1960. It might have been 1959. I'm not certain.

M: You had the auditions at the Algonquin?

L: I had a 'cattle call' that was to start at one in the afternoon and end about 5:30 p.m. I put an open call in "Showbiz" or "Backstage"

M: Yes, those rags.

L: I had money to start the first season that I had saved from my first year of teaching. Mother kicked in money the second and third years, even though I was in servitude. She was there in case I needed it.

M: Backup.

L: Backup. I only needed it because I lost a garage I had rented for \$600 from a Nash Agency. Nash had gone out of

business. I took a Nash Agency with a lot of good, clever people working for no money and converted it into . . .

Anyway, back to New York and Streisand.

M: I would like you to get into the starting of a summer theatre a little more after you are done with Streisand. You just kind of passed by opening up your own theater. It was a great success. Wasn't it?

L: In a way. In some ways. In a lot of ways. Anyways, Streisand and the Algonquin Hotel . . . We came back from shopping looking for bargains. There were like 100 people out in the hall. We had one hotel room. When we walked in the room there was a message to call the downstairs desk. They said that they had a lot of messages for us. They told us that they wanted those people out of the hall. There was only one elevator operating at the time and they were bitching about that, too. They couldn't do anything about that. They accepted that. But they said that we had to rent another room. So, we rented another room to get the people out of the hall. The first one in on the call was Streisand. I remember it well.

M: What did she look like? What was her general appearance?

L: A mess. Physically, dressed like a mess: Dirty, brash, relentless. She auditioned. I don't remember what the musical selections were. Obviously, it was without accompaniment. She said, "I know you have a lot of people to see. This is going to be short and brief. I'm just going to

sing something for you. If you want me to do something else, you tell me." She sang. I said, "Great. One trouble. I'm not doing musicals. It's a straight season." She said, "Fine. I want a job. Let me do something else for you." She read something for me. I don't remember what. She said, "You have my resume. It's up-to-date. I'm good and I'm going to make it in this business." They were words to that effect. She said, "I want to do something more for you. Let me know when you can work me in again this afternoon. I'm not leaving. If I have to wait until the end, I'll wait until the end. This wasn't enough, but I want to be fair to others."

M: How old was she then? Eighteen?

L: Seventeen, eighteen, something like that, yes. She popped in there like every hour. "Can you spare a minute now?" I was seeing people like every three, four, five minutes. She was the last one there. She came in and read something else. She said, "I'm good." I said, "Look, I have to be honest with you. I don't think so. And I'm not going to play games with you. I don't think so and I'll tell you why. I can get you for nothing." She said, "What do you mean you can get me for nothing?" I said, "I have all kinds of ugly Jewish broads."

M: Oh, Bentley.

L: Well, I told you that I was going to be up front with her. I said, "I have all kinds of ugly Jewish broads who may not have your talent. I will give you this: You are talented."

M: You said she was ugly.

L: Who had time for tact? This has nothing to do with prejudice. I said, "I can get all kinds of ugly Jewish broads for nothing. In fact, if I want to go the route of letting them pay me, as a lot of stock companies do - and I don't go that route - I could get money for taking apprentices on. That is why there is no spot for you here. You will find a spot."

She left and I didn't see her again. I never associated her with the name that became famous. It meant nothing to me until somebody in my company years later, said, "My God, what is this resume doing in your files?" On the back of the resume was a comment I had written: "Talented. But who needs another ugly Jewish broad?"

M: You have that picture hanging in your office now, don't you at the Youngstown Playhouse?

L: Yes.

M: You are humble and you admit your mistakes.

L: It wasn't a mistake.

M: She is relentless, isn't she?

L: But it wasn't a mistake. For me, I would have been throwing money away.

M: It would have been foolish then?

L: I wasn't doing anything that she was right for that summer. I wasn't doing anything but shows with cutesy-girl-next-door-type ingenue roles.

M: I want to ask you about her because it can apply to everybody. You said that you had to have all of those things, thick skin, pushing yourself . . .

L: And still knowing how not to be so overpowering.

M: She really went too far.

L: No.

M: How many people come back five or six times? I don't know many that do who can get the nerve to keep saying, "I'm going to come in again and again and again."

L: That's the problem. That's why most of them don't make it.

M: Exactly. Even at that tender age, she knew how to do it, instead of being a pain-in-the-ass. She took the time.

M: "Whenever you get a minute?"

L: That type of thing, exactly. Smart, even at that age. You could see it. At least, I could, even though I wasn't that much older than she was.

M: She didn't have this glamorous distinctive flare that she developed?

L: No, nothing. Talent, yes.

M: Her style was different.

L: You could tell talent right away, the minute she opened her mouth. In terms of an interview situation, all she had going for her was that persistence, as well as not being a pain-in-the-ass. Sure, she was persistent. Talent is common. What isn't common, though, is persistence, as well as talent, as well as intelligence. That, and I guess, the other ingredient, type. The macho guys have it made. This is not to take anything away from some local people, like Ed (O'Neil). He has a lot of things going for him beside type.

M: I would say that.

L: Sure. Sure.

M: Right now I think they are giving more freedom to characters.

L: Yes, I'm sure.

M: And character actors.

L: Yes.

M: They have a better shot than they ever had.

L: They have a better shot for a number of reasons. Commercials for one. A couple can keep themselves going because of commercials. For example, Paul Stolarsky, who is doing all kinds of commercials today was a stock actor for me. He came out of college and was, to put it bluntly, a lousy actor. He went to Berghoff and came back much improved. He worked with me in an Equity company situation. He did good character types. Television has provided a livelihood for him for years and he's now making big bucks.

M: He was in "Nuts" a couple of seasons back.

L: Yes, he was.

M: When you said there are more opportunities, I know. I see that there are more ways to push yourself. Unfortunately, for people who want to be in the business, there are more people doing it, more people striving.

L: Maybe, I'm not sure.

M: When I was there, I felt like I was earning a living.

L: I think it has always been crowded. It has always been that way. I don't think it's any more crowded now than before. Actually, I don't know.

M: When I went up, I heard they had a great need for forty year-old character actresses. In fact, the casting director of NBC came and made a broadcast on television about this saying that they had a dearth of forty upwards character actresses and there was a great void to be filled because they couldn't use the big ones. They wanted too much money. That said that if there was any role that was open, it was for them. I went running right up: I couldn't get anybody to talk to me to see if I was good. No one let you in the door to talk. The only time I did get to talk to someone I got called back. But I never could get in very often.

L: You may be right. When I was hiring in Equity years, paying, what was for me, big money, I couldn't find character types in any great abundance. Of course, this was summer stock and this was in the boondocks. They weren't likely to be seen or discovered by anyone. I had great troubles finding character people. I would have to hire on the basis of seeing only four or five people.

M: Let's just lump this all together, which I generally don't do: Television, film, theater, all together.

L: Plus regional theater is bigger than that.

M: It seems like there are Lee Grants everywhere. Are there Lee Grant clones?

L: Sure.

M: There are like five women actresses in their forty's

. . . .

L: Sandy Dennis clones, too.

M: I know. That is the part that really disturbs me. At least Dewhurst and a few have talent. They get all the roles, though, like Stapleton. Stapleton is everywhere.

L: Right.

M: I don't see how that leaves an open field for people.

L: It isn't open. It has never been open.

M: The men have more of it open to them now.

L: Yes.

M: Those women have a lock on that age bracket.

L: They seem to.

M: And they work all the time. I over-dosed on Lee Grant: She was everywhere. She has been durable. She has been around since the late 1940's, and she still looks really good. She has got to be fifty-five or fifty-six years old.

L: That would be my guess.

M: She looks about thirty-five, unless you are really close. She works in all kinds of capacities. What do you think gets her that opportunity? She is a good actress, but she is not . . .

L: Well, she is fairly versatile.

M: She is not gifted, like I would say Dewhurst.

L: No. She is safe. Let's put it that way.

M: What is, "safe."

L: People don't want to gamble on an unknown without a name. Grant won't give you a bad performance. She may not give you a great one. You might be able to get a great one

from somebody else, but you are going to have to "roll the dice" when you cast somebody else. So most people play safely, as they have to, considering the size of their investments. Therefore, they go with the established people who may not be the greatest in the world. They are safe. And they are sellable to backers.

M: I want this from you because of your assessment capabilities. How do you tell a young person who wants to go into theater. . . And people keep wanting to go into it. So there is no sense in telling them not to go into it because they are going to keep going.

L: Assuming we are past that hurdle?

M: Yes. What do you say to them about . . . What is the most you can do to make yourself available, if the chance comes? What can you do to really hone yourself?

L: This is advice that I used to give, that I don't give now. In fact, I make it a point to speak against it. Don't prepare yourself for the second career. Don't provide yourself with the "out." Don't get the teaching certificate on which you can fall back. In other words, if you want to be in the business, you cannot tie yourself down to safety, security, mediocrity and settle for anything less than what you really want. You must just go where the "action is" and keep yourself eating by doing anything you can on a temporary - - - or what, you hope, will be a temporary - - - basis.

M: Do you think that only young people can do it because it is going to take that long to get there?

L: No, no.

M: I never had any security. So it was very easy for me to get over that hurdle. I just went into my forty's.

L: If you ask me, I think it is easier for older people to do it, despite the conventional wisdom. If you can forget other people, and aren't tied to other people, like children, and if you don't have an obligation to someone, such as a wife who won't endure it, or a husband who won't endure it, it is easier for an older person to make it in the business later on in later years. You are a little smarter. You know how to survive. You didn't as a younger person. And, as a younger person, you had those obligations, or you thought you had them.

To make it in this business, you just have to concentrate on this business. The mistake that people make when they are young is that they go to New York and end up in offices, because they thought they were going to be there temporarily. They don't make rounds. They don't see shows. They think because they are in New York, somebody is going to find them.

M: You do know what to tell people about this.

L: About how to break into the theater?

M: Yes.

L: I can't say I know that much about it.

M: You pick winners. You know who the good ones are. You have an eye.

L: Yes, but that doesn't translate to knowing how to break into the theater.

M: I want to say this at this time. When Mr. Lenhoff holds auditions, I don't know that he was always ruthless. With utter honesty after you read for him, he takes a great deal of time reading people for his plays when he used to direct more than he does now. He went through the stage where he was polite with the "Thanks, but no thanks." Then, finally, he started - - - and I don't know what caused him to tell the total truth to people.

L: You mean, if you are an ugly Jewish broad, I will tell you, "You are an ugly Jewish broad.?"

M: Yes, and he told fat people they were too fat. Untalented people they were too untalented. It got out that, if you wanted to come down and read for Bentley, you better be prepared to have an assessment.

L: Yes. If somebody is good, you tell them they are good and why they are good, or if they are right for a role.

M: Right.

L: I guess, basically, one reason is that I think people have a right to know how they, as elephants, look to "other elephants" - borrowing from Sandburg. One of the bad parts of being an actor, was that I could never stand, and I don't know how people who make it a career can stand it, is that uncertainty about themselves in terms of how other people see and think of them for roles. When you don't get cast in a show, you don't know why.

Many times, a director may not have a good reason why. In other words, "I don't know. Maybe, somebody just appealed to me more." This is usually a pretty lousy director, if he doesn't know why some people aren't right for a show. If, as a director, you know this, I think you have an obligation to tell an auditioner and not always in the nicest of ways. Niceness gets in the way of honesty. The actor walks away with the nice impression and not with the truth.

M: And that actor can really sort of distort that one nice phrase with the ten bad ones and hang onto them like candy.

L: That is right. There is a further obligation to the theater. Whether it be this place or any other place. If you believe in the theatre, and if you spend your life in it, to get the "no-talents" out of it. You don't do that by being a nice guy. In the long run, you are being a nice guy to somebody by discouraging him, if you, in your opinion, think that he shouldn't be encouraged. Granted, that is one man's opinion. Everyone should know that up front. The thing you didn't mention, Carol, was that, I always preface, in the strongest possible way, that anything I might say of a derogatory nature to people, is only one person's opinion and only that. And that I am the guy who didn't cast Streisand.

If you believe in yourself, you can forget it. If you don't have that kind of a belief, perhaps distorted and perhaps too strong, that belief in yourself, then you don't

belong in this business, in any case. So, no matter what any one person might say to you, though it might sting and hurt at the time, if you are going to make it in this field, it should roll off of you pretty easily. If you are not going to make it in this field, it hurts, sure. If you are not going to make it, it should hurt. If the hurt becomes so bad that you can't stand it, then get out of the business.

M: I'm reminded of the time you held readings five years ago for "Look Homeward, Angel." This is a typical thing you do now. You had a large turnout for this. There was another lady named Carol there who was a rather large blond lady. She read. I don't know even what she read for. They were long readings. They went on for four hours or so. I had read. Then you said, "Carol, you can just go home. I have nothing for you in this."

L: That Carol or you?

No, I being supersensitive me, immediately got up and went home. I thought you were talking to me. You, in the meantime, had cast me in the play in the main female role.

L: Right, but you didn't know it.

M: So sure was I that you were talking to me that I just got up and left and went out of town.

L: I don't want to talk about you right now. But that happens to be one of your hang ups. If you are to make it in the business, that should have meant a million other Carols.

M: I never thought of that. I can see what you mean. You mean you have to grow skin over that kind of . . .

L: Yes, and you have to think you are better than you are. That is one of the reasons I never went to New York. I never had any illusions about myself. Let's put it this way. I knew where the warts were and I knew how big they were, and I knew everyone could see them. Whether they were there or not, I thought they were. You don't make it in this field with that kind of an attitude. One thing that the people who make it have in common is usually a misconception of themselves. They always higher-rate themselves than other people do, and the humility is phony-bologna when they seem to have it. That is a suit. I don't know if it is universally true, but by God, it is true most of the time with most of the people I know. In fact, I don't like them for it. The fraternity I don't particularly like because of that. There are exceptions.

M: When people do go away to New York and really try to break in - - I'm saying New York because that is where most people go, right?

L: Yes.

M: To break into theatre. All the regional theaters are bigger and better every year. It is hard. If you are able to be objective about other things, one has to assess. . . I can tell which plays are going to be good and which ones are going to run and which ones aren't going to run and who is bad in the play and who is going to be replaced. I have an innate sense of knowing that. I do know not what to read for. I certainly don't go and read for little blonde tap dancers.

Yet, I know people who read for everything and just by sheer numbers, sometimes, they get them.

L: That's right because they are not low-rating themselves in any department. They are right for . . .

M: Is that low-rating to know what you are right for?

L: They are not correctly rating themselves, let's put it that way . I think you have to be incorrect about your own judgement of yourself. I think you have to rate yourself in higher esteem than perhaps you might deserve. The point I'm trying to make, in an obtuse way, is that, when you are young, I think this is what it takes to make it. When you are old, I think you better know yourself, your limitations, and what you are right for. The people who made it in this field, I guess, have in common is that inability to correctly rate themselves. They always give themselves higher marks than they probably deserve. Like that old line about why theater people so seldom go to see theater. They are afraid they might see a good show and ruin their whole evening.

M: I never heard that before. Is that an old line?

L? That is an old line, yes. I don't want to go to the theater tonight. I might see something good. It will ruin my night. That is like Carlisle's "Sartor Resartus." The "everlasting 'no'." That negative phase that nothing is good and no one is as good as I am and no one can do anything as well as I can. Hopefully, you'll get to what Carlisle calls "the everlasting 'yes'." I doubt I'll ever get there. It is better to be at his second stage, the "center of indifference."

M: I used to have some experience with children in coaching them and teaching them. When I really would try to be helpful and tell people that is a hard thing to have to do and say, "Johnny, don't bother staying after school because you are not ever going to be an actor." I'm reminded of a young, very nice person, kind-hearted guy who comes to this theater. He is big and good-looking, and he is never going to be an actor. He has come repeatedly. He doesn't have that thing. What is that thing?

L: Who knows what that thing is?

M: I can always tell when it is missing

L. Sure. You know it and you know it when it's there. That is indefinable as far as I'm concerned.

In the long run you are being kind to somebody. Why encourage somebody that, in your opinion, even though it is just your opinion, to pursue something he is never going to make it in? I don't share that same enthrallment, awe, and wonderment toward theatre that you do. I can be cynical because I think it's a hard life. I think it's an affliction.

M: I call it a terminal illness.

L: I'm afraid so. I hope I survive it. At least, I'm not going to recognize that I have it, although I do have it, especially, when I get on the artistic end. On the business end, it is really easy for me to look at it all very cynically. One of the reasons that I don't direct too many shows is that I don't want to fall in love with this business again, because this is like the woman who won't let you have

sex. All she wants to do is taunt you, tease you, and never please you.

M: You mean you made a conscious decision a couple of years ago to cut down on directing?

L: Yes, conscious. Well, I have other reasons for that besides.

M: Your shows were always the ones that garnered all of the praise.

L: I don't need it, anymore. At least, I don't need it in Youngstown. If I were in another setting and I had something to prove . . .

M: The setting . . . The town needs you?

L: It could be the same size, it could be a smaller town. Does the town need me? No.

M: The actors, then.

L: People are doing very well with other directors. Others are doing decent jobs on shows. People are learning from other directors. I could take a group of people in directing seminars. I did for the past couple of months and tried to get into their heads some of the things that are in my head and succeeded to some degree and found a great . . . In fact, I had more satisfaction in that, than I get from preparing another product for an audience that doesn't know its prompter's box from its playbill. I'm disillusioned with audiences. I'm not disillusioned with theatre. Unfortunately, audiences are a great part of theatre.

I'm to blame for much that's wrong with local

audiences. I've catered to lowest common denominator taste. More often than I had to, I considered the necessity of paying bills. We do commercial crap. I can't get excited about most of the stuff we do. I'm craftsman enough to be able to do the schlock, do the Simon, or whatever, and still do it fairly well. But the kick is gone, frankly. It is gone. Why is it gone? It is gone because, I suppose, the challenge isn't there as much anymore. If I had to move on, if a board of directors said, "Get out of here, Lenhoff," I would get out of here. If they would just look cross-eyed at me one day, I would be glad to pick up my marbles. I guess, I have a secret death wish, as far as termination of employment here is concerned, because I would like to go someplace else. It could be another Youngstown in another location and start all over again.

M: Would you tell about how you were contacted to come here? You took this place and turned it into . . . Isn't this the nation's number one community theatre?

L: A monster.

M: Yes.

L: I created a monster.

M: Yes, King Kong East of the Mississippi.

L: I promulgated a myth, probably. It may have turned into a truth over the years here. I decided that, if you are going to tell a lie, make it a big one. I said this was America's number one community theatre. I based that assertion, exaggeration, on a couple of surveys that had been

conducted about theatres in the United States in terms of size of audiences and so on. When I came here, according to one survey, a survey conducted because a guy had a job comparable to mine out in Omaha and wasn't being well-paid. His theatre ranked as number one at that time and he was being paid twentieth on a list of some fifty theatres he surveyed. I put us where we were - 46th. I factored in inflation, after I had been here three years. I said that the others could not have experienced the growth we had. I came up with America's number one community theatre. When you tell a lie long enough and loud enough and repeatedly enough, people start believing it. The truth of the matter is that right now we are probably one of four or five of the biggies in the United States in terms of size of audience, number of season ticket holders, amount of money I get, number of people on staff . . .

M: Shows per season, too. Right?

L: Yes, performances, shows, services outside of shows to the community, etc.

M: Bentley, when you came here, they wanted a person who could direct shows. They kind of asked you to be Henry II and Becket at the same time.

L. Actually, no. They had had a bad experiences with combination men who could do one thing well and couldn't do the other. There was a clear understanding that I was not to direct.

M: That is exactly what you would need in a community director.

L: Right. I had to take it downstairs. "Virginia Wolfe" had to go downstairs.

M: You had to prove yourself. But you did it in one show.

L: Yes, I did it in one show. I went downstairs with it. It was no kick for me at that time, just running a business. First of all, when I ran my own stock company, I dumped the business side on my mother. I was an artist. I was in the theatre because I wanted to direct, not because I wanted to pay bills or balance ledgers. I didn't know anything about the business side. I couldn't go out and sell advertising. I couldn't pick up a telephone and sell tickets. I still don't do it very well. I hate to do it. I do it because I'm forced to do it. I'm not a salesman. I'm not a businessman. If I possess some abilities along those lines, it's simply because I've had to do those things over the years. I had to develop them and work at them simply because if you want to stay in theatre, you had to.

M: From having your own theatre.

L: My own theatre I used to dump on my mother. I used to dump it on my wife. Nancy would go out and sell advertising. I didn't even have the desire to go and ask people if we could put posters up in their places. I would take apprentices on poster runs. Nancy, my wife, would take a car and go South. I would take a car and go North. I would get somebody in the apprentice company to go East. We couldn't go West because Lake Michigan was West. I would send

the kids in. I would sit in the car with the motor running, when they would say, "Sir, may we please put up our weekly poster? May we please for the Petoskey Playhouse?"

M: You didn't come looking for this Playhouse. They came looking for you, right?

L: Well, they ran an ad in The New York Times looking for an executive director. I was in St. Paul, Minnesota and very unhappy. I had finished, three years prior, all course work on a Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota. It was slave labor. I was a half-time instructor. I did everything for the Ph.D. except pick a dissertation topic and write it. The second baby came along and I was still working for \$2,389 a year. I was promised, for good service during three years of ghost directing shows for staff members and all kinds of stuff, a scholarship. In fact, the staff at Minnesota were theatrical eunuchs. They could talk theatre. But they couldn't actually produce it with the sole exception of Doc Whiting. This was a staff with a high reputation. In any case, for having been good, I was promised an All University Scholarship which would have paid something like \$8,000, a lordly sum in 1962, to just write a dissertation. There were only eight All University Scholarships. There were some twenty departments vying for them. The Theatre Dept. had had one the prior year and I knew it wasn't their turn. So I couldn't count on it. They still said I could count on it. They said that I was "their candidate" and that their candidate was going to get one that year. Well, it didn't

come to pass. I cut out on them and didn't write the dissertation. I was angry and simply because they were kidding me. They could have been deluding themselves, as well. In any case, I went back to public school teaching in St. Paul, Minnesota. I got a job teaching college-bound twelfth graders.

M: How does it happen to be that Nancy Lenhoff . . . I don't care what anybody else says about a show, except what Nancy says. Nancy picks out winners.

L: Yes.

M: She has an eye to see what is no good.

L: Yes, she does.

M: Did she always have that ability?

L: No. I suppose that was from the many winter nights reading scripts. I would read scripts and she would read scripts to save me time. I would have her tell me if it was a "no-no" or "lousy" or whatever.

M: She does that well.

L: Yes. In fact, I used to put everybody to work on that. I got an education in a very short period of time for my own stock company in terms of scripts. I had a lot of catching up to do. I must have read fifty years of American playwrights in three or four years.

M: What year did you form your first company?

L: The first year was 1954. I was twenty-four with that company. That was fun that summer. I formed that company with \$2,000 that I had saved out of a salary of \$4,000

from teaching school and driving a bus and coaching football and doing plays. That summer my folks had a resort hotel. Business was bad and its third floor was vacant. I was able to make the rounds of Michigan colleges, see students and hustle them into the company that first summer for room and board and a few bucks, or just room and board because we had that whole third floor vacant. There was a big commercial kitchen and dining room off of the lobby. That first summer, I guess, I offered a couple of the girls in the apprentice company a few additional bucks a week to do the cooking for everybody.

My friend, Marv, was going to co-direct the first season. I wasn't stupid enough to think I could handle ten plays in ten weeks. We argued and he cut out. I ended up handling eight of the ten shows. I found two other people in the company. We did good shows, even though we were all green.

It was a fun summer.

M: Was Bob Gray with you that first year?

L: Bob was in the company. I knew Bob from Albion days. Bob was playing comedy leads in college and I felt he was right for the company. He was a young character actor, the young comedy type.

We had a ball. We did all kinds of things that since I've become timid about doing. It was genuinely good stuff. "Male Animal" was the first season. Molnar's "Good Fairy" was on the schedule. We did an original from a

television script. It was a heck of a season. We didn't lose money. We made it. It was my money. We popularized the location. Its owner said, "Bentley, if you want to buy the building, you have first option." He was asking \$20,000. I was going from \$600 rent to . . . I didn't have \$20,000.

M: Was it because he saw this was a money-maker?

L: He probably figured we were going to stay put and that we could pay the price. We were only a block away from the heart of the business district of this little town which was busier than hell in the summer with 60,000 people in it. It was a very small town. It was right on the curve of the highway. If you went through the town, you had to slow up and go around our location. We were self-advertising to a great extent.

It was kinky. Here was a commercial garage without a post in it. Wide open. 100 feet by 160 feet. It was the spring of 1954. I cam up from servitude early. I was on my hands and knees with a putty knife, day after day after day on that garage floor scraping grease off. It was post World War II and there were still army surplus parachutes available. My day would come up later. We found used lumber and we built the stage. We used the parachute for a teaser curtain. We played "platform." It wasn't yet in vogue to do thrust staging. Yet, we had a thrust stage. We did it simply because we were too poor to put up a curtain, its rigging, and tracking. The actors had to go downstairs in this garage to this little room that had been a storage room for their

dressing room. It was damper than hell. I remember buying a bag of absorbant salts and putting it down there and telling them to shut up about the dampness. Naturally, the apprentice girls quit - the ones who were cooking - because nobody could stomach their cooking.

We made a lobby area out of bamboo curtains that we hung and furnished with a grass rug and rattan-like setees and chairs. All things brought up from Sarasota and the business there. I remember coming up from Sarasota with an old piano board which must have weighed two tons on a trailer that I had bought for less than \$100. The board came from a community theatre in Sarasota and it served me well for twelve years with some repairs.

M: It did.

L: Yes. It was a kick. In fact, I brought a couple of kids up from Florida who joined me later on. It was a fun summer because we learned and we learned a lot. It didn't cost us anything in money. Boy, were the days long. You finished playing a show and you went into rehearsal for another show. It is always hard to get actors up in the morning. We had 9 o'clock calls. By God, they made them. We would go up and down the streets with this trailer on which I had put an old player piano and parade and carry on.

M: I think Bob Gray talked about that riding down the middle of the streets.

L: Yes, the main streets. The seats for the theatre were borrowed from one of the local funeral parlors. Every

time they had a funeral, we had to untie the seats. They were folding chairs. At first, we had put them up without tying them. But the fire marshall made us tie them. We had 500 seats. We never had more than 200 in an audience.

M: What was the price of a ticket that first season?

L: I don't remember.

M. Roughly.

L: Maybe \$2 or \$1.75, something cheap. I didn't have much taste. Hemingway's family had a summer home up there from the time that Ernest was a boy. His sister, Marceline, was still there and she not only fancied herself a literary critic, but she used to make a living going around to womens' clubs in Detroit talking about her brother. She also fancied herself a theatre critic. She adopted us and took us under her wing, whether we wanted to be taken or not. I had to bite my tongue to not tell her to get out. She sat in on dress rehearsals. She would come over and interrupt me. I, finally did tell her to get out after the third show's dress rehearsal. But she happened to be right about a number of things that I didn't have much taste about at the time. For example, this one original that we did had two bathrooms as part of the set, a men's and a women's restroom. I had signs that said "Pointers" and "Setters" on the doors that I thought were funny. She didn't. She was right. She would also carp about costuming and externals. They were things for which I did not have money. One of the reasons I still am weak on technical aspects such as costuming is that I am paying the

bills. I intentionally overlook a lot of things. No matter how clever you can be in not spending money for costumes and sets, I don't like to risk spending it.

M: You seem to be disdainful of musicals from what I think you developed in the Petoskey seasons.

L: In part. In large part, sure, because they cost so much. I didn't do them because they are so costly. Also, because of a lack of exposure in my formative years to almost everything musical. I lived in houses, that not only didn't have anything to read in them unless I brought them in, but .

M: You must have brought a lot in.

L: I did a lot of catching up in college because I knew it was a weakness. I didn't catch up in all areas. I have no taste for classical music simply because I never caught up there. There was no music in the home, classical or otherwise. If I dug pop music, it was simply because I got a job as a DJ and had to learn it and learn it fast and listened and listened and listened.

I was twenty-nine or thirty years old when I played the Bert Lahr role in Walter Kerr's adaptation of "The Birds" at the University of Minnesota. I only got the role because I could adlib, not because I could act. The director wanted to approach it on an adlibed basis. That was a kick, by the way. No two rehearsals were to be the same, and no two rehearsals were the same. We were to make use of everything and anything we could: Audience, other people in the cast, distractions, abstractions, you name it.

M: Play off of . . .

L: Oh, yes.

M: That would be like it happening as they start following each other.

L: That's right. Other people had to go with me. My obligation in that role was that I was the head tramp. John Lewin, now a playwright, was in it. He did a Broadway show called "Blood of an Englishman." John was in that show and he was a student of mine at Minnesota at that time in one of those slave-labor classes that I had to teach for \$2,389 a year.

Now, we are back to this place, Youngstown. I answered an ad and sent a real, "I-don't-give-a damn-about-your-job-but-I'm-applying-anyway-type of letter. I was very unhappy just teaching school, although I loved the kids and I was good at it. The kids loved me and so on. It wasn't the money, because I took a cut in pay to come here. I was close to the top of the salary schedule making \$10,000 a year in St. Paul, as I recall. They had an ad in The New York Time. I answered the ad with a letterhead of mine from up North with a colored picture of the theatre on it, stating that I was the owner-operator of this theatre who could offer them x number of years of experience and asking them what they had to offer. Surprisingly, they answered and said that if I was interested in the job, they wanted me to tell them what I would do if I got it.

I thought that was a sensible approach. From after

school one Friday to the following Monday, when I had to go to school, I wrote thirty pages or more of an outline with some detail of the things I would do if I got the job.

Here is a good example of being young and stupid. I was being very presumptuous. I didn't know their limitations. I was the expert. I was going to tell them exactly what they should do. Probably, they had done these things already. Probably, some of them had been very successful and some had bombed out for them. They knew their own situation, their own community, the taste of the community, etc. far better than I did. I still have that outline around someplace. It is kind of a kick to look at it. There's some valid stuff in it. In other words, out of those thirty pages, maybe half of the pages were of programs and plans and ideas that have since been implemented and most of which were implemented in my first year.

M: You turned this place around.

L: I had a plan. I did have a plan. And they were smart asking for a plan. I submitted that thing. It couldn't have been anything else but that, because the interview which followed, which they paid for, in which they offered to . .

M: Fly you down here?

L: Yes, and which they offered to two other candidates. They not only flew me down, but they flew Nancy down. It was two separate trips.

M: To see if she liked the area?

L: First me and then her. No, to see if they liked

her, probably. They couldn't care less whether she liked it, only to the extent that maybe it would make me unhappy if she didn't like it.

M: It is kind of like screening a preacher and his wife.

L: Yes, same bit. It couldn't have been the interview because I was pretty honest with them. I wasn't trying to win points. I was really straight out with them in telling them that I didn't like the social scene. I didn't drink. I hated parties. I didn't socialize. I was misanthropic. The key point was that I didn't like community theater. I didn't like sewing circles. I didn't like people who played at it, instead of worked at it. That must have been the thing that some of them wanted to hear.

M: Yes.

L: Not all of them, but the key ones wanted to hear that sort of thing.

M: Who were they?

L: Do you want names?

M: No, that key group, the "they" who put in the ad. What kind of people were they from this community? Who were they?

L: Dilettantes to some extent, serious-minded to a small extent. People who had been dissatisfied with the way things were going and were looking for . . .

M: What were they doing? Previously importing directors per show?

L: They had resident people who were hired to do the combination job and they had a guy they loved, for example, who shall remain nameless. He was directing shows and he was a lousy director, according to them. Because he was doing the directing, they couldn't bring in new people. All you have to do is be new to be good, before they know you have warts and see them, etc. He was a guy they liked very much and he was all right on the business end. But he was terrible as a director. They had, according to them, a terribly obnoxious guy directing too, either post-this-one-man or pre-this-one. I lose track of the chronology. They had some people who would come in because they could only commit themselves for a show or two a year, people who used to yell; who loved bright colors like red; who made big splashes that impressed them.

M: These people came from New York?

L: Yes.

M: They imported them.

L: Yes, but nobody gave them the continuity on the business end and nobody gave them a continuity on the artistic end. Nobody was making use of a facility that they had built and didn't know how to fill or occupy or make use of. They moved into this building in 1959 and here, in 1965, they were looking for someone to fill all this space because they didn't know what they were going to do with it.

M: What did you think of this place when you first saw it?

L: I saw that it had a lot of potential that wasn't

being utilized, the very thing to sell me. I was impressed. I had come from "two boards and a passion" and, still having the passion, thought that there was a lot more than two boards here.

M: You were here a couple of months and then you turned them around by directing a production in your first season.

L: That, in part, and also in part by changing schedule.

M: I want to talk about this production, "Virginia Wolfe" at the time. Remember, that it was a shocker?

L: Yes. They were shaking in their boots.

M: That play knocked the whole theatre world apart with its impact.

L: Yes. It was a landmark.

M: It is amazing.

L: People in the theatre will realize the importance of that show in turning peoples' attitudes around toward what the theatre can and should do in terms of theme and language once they get a little distance from it. It was a landmark show. No doubt about it. I'm not just talking Youngstown Playhouse. I'm talking theatre.

M: In theatre, in the whole world of theatre.

L: That's correct.

M: You come in. This new director who is going to shape up the theatre. He has all of these plans.

L: Yes.

M: Then you also just rip off the astonishing production of "Virginia Wolfe."

L: It came off.

M: It toured. It was so successful. You took it on a tour, didn't you?

L: I can't remember a tour. Maybe. We did something.

M: So then you became the "wonder."

L: Not really.

M: Some people started to resent you for it.

L: Oh, sure. Not a wonder. Just a "write off." "He had good people." Or, "That was a fluke." You never prove yourself, except to yourself.

M: There are some people who wanted you to do something like this, and then, when you did, they were mad because you really did it.

L: Oh, sure. That was probably a show in its own way. Other people did things like the "Caretaker" and "Cherry Orchard and on and on and on. Frankly, we used to do more artistically worthwhile shows than we do currently and for good reasons.

M: And that is for money reasons.

L: Yes.

M: We are going to go right on with our friend Sam Johnson.

L: Better known as Samuel Johnson. As he once said, as a copout, unless he really believed it. I say "probably" because it is a copout: "The drama's laws, the drama's patrons give. And we who live to please, must please to live."

M: I remember reading it, but I didn't know Samuel Johnson said that.

L: Yes, I believe he said that. I don't know who else would have said it except Johnson.

M: The people who come here fill the seats all the time. You know how I don't like the shows that they like. You could do "Oklahoma" every year, couldn't you? And they would come, wouldn't they?

L: Yes, they would.

M: That scares me.

L: And they would bring their little ones the second time around. Their little ones will bring their little ones.

M: That "Oklahoma" if I remember, that also was a landmark in the theatre.

L: A musical comedy landmark, absolutely.

M: The "Sound of Music" is my special unfavorite one.

L: And I think we are probably going to repeat it in a year or two because we only did it two or three years ago. Maybe we can repeat "Fiddler on the Roof" also.

M: We have done "Fiddler on the Roof" twice here.

L: Those were "dollar signs that were his eyes."

M: I don't put "Fiddler" with other shows.

L: It has some value to it, some artistic merit. Not much, but some.

M: I shouldn't have said, "Oklahoma."

L: No, that's a bad example. But I know what you're saying: Musical comedy schlock.

M: Yes, there have been some musicals written in the last twenty years and no regional theatres tend to do them very often.

L: That is right because it costs as much money to mount them as it does to do a commercially successful show. Who wants to see walkouts or empty seats when you spend a lot of money, or who can afford it? That's the trouble: We are in a trap. I have to keep making my own salary. My salary has gone up. I have to make the salary for the other people here and there are more of those around here, too. You get trapped.

M: Some of the plays that you did that . . . You quit directing. I keep hoping it is temporary.

L: I'm going to direct next year.

M: Are you really?

L: Yes, I'm going to do a big production at Youngstown State University of either "Streetcar" or "Of Mice and Men." We are going to produce it on both stages. They want me to use Eddie O'Neil. I said that was a possibility. They're going to have money for him or somebody else if we have to job.

Ed didn't have anything to do with arranging this. The University is celebrating its seventy-fifth and this was my proposal to them to help them celebrate it.

M: I'm glad to see there is going to be some cooperation between the two.

L: Absolutely. That is a new audience, you see. This

is a new challenge. So I can get a little excited about it, even though it's an old show.

M: Your production each year, whether you did one or two or three, and I think you did three a couple of times . .

L: Oh, yes. I've done three a few times here.

M: Yes. That was always like the standout. Like the shows that people who came to see great theatre.

L: I missed, too, Carol. I've had bombs.

M: I know that.

L: "Lysistrata" was a bomb.

M: Even the bombs had certain meritorious parts. I know a show that you did, "Man in the Moon Marigolds."

L: Yes, another one of your shows.

M: This was another one of those walkout shows.

L: It was a great production and you were terrific in it.

M: They were going to walkout.

L: Yes. And many did.

M: I said, "Bentley says that they are gong to walk out. It means this is going to be a good show." I was proud to be in those. The more people I saw getting up and walking out, the more I thought this was really good.

L: We were 'getting to them.' We were moving them - - -right out.

M: That show had an old lady in a walker for people who are not conversant with this show. We had some people who had brought their aged parents and their walkers to see this show.

This is heaped upon this lady on the stage in the walker. The actors looked down and saw not only people walking out on their feet, but going out on their walkers making clanking sounds. We thought this was a huge success. That was how I felt.

L: Sure. Right.

M: I took all that negativism very happily because that meant it was a hell of a show.

L: That's right.

M: Unfortunately, most people don't feel that way. They don't derive comfort from that.

L: A couple of musicals paid the bills for that show and a couple of others that season.

M: After that, I did a few musicals here, too, Bentley. One time I said something. I said, "Bentley, are you aware of all the lunatics there are out there backstage in those musicals? I mean there are all kinds of crazy people and nuts and people who don't know what they are doing." You said, "Why do you think I have nothing to do with musicals?"

L: Sure. You become crazy yourself.

M: I have heard all of these stories about theatres being Sodom and Gomorahs when I was younger. I never really found even one-half decent orgy ever taking place at this theatre in all the time I came here. Did you ever notice? You heard a lot of gossip about them.

L: I'm the last to know. I keep my distance.

M: There was a house that this very noble-minded member

of this theatre purchased to use as a rehearsal hall. A few Youngstown State University people under the guise of working on shows took it over, literally.

L: Yes. They "came" and went.

M: It really was a hot little house there on the corner. I remember being appalled. They were using it to smoke dope, to run girls and boys in and out indiscriminately. Anything you think of was. . . Bentley, up until that time, that was the first time I had seen any of that behavior going on even near the theatre. It was YSU people. But the Playhouse was taking the rap.

L: Why do you think I closed the house up and had it demolished later to make way for a boulevard entrance into the theatre?

M: Where does that rumor come from that all of these wild and crazy hot kinds go on in theatres?

L: It comes from ancient Rome, if you really want to know where it comes from. It comes from the medieval church. It comes from the typical thinking about actors and the theatre.

M: How did that start?

L: Vagabonds traveling here and there without a home base. They would sing for their supper. They weren't part of an establishment.

M: I always heard of sexual references, too. And I never had any kind of happening like that. I never had any sort of endeavors in my life like that.

L: There was more extracurricular sex going on in school teaching than in theatre, to tell you the truth.

M: Yet, you have to suffer that slander. It used to bother me, for the theatre that is.

L: It is a black eye undeserved, really, as far as I can tell.

M: Also, for the main part, a lot of people come to the theatre looking to make their husbands jealous or getting petty, but there are some people who come and work really hard to do a show.

L: Sure. In the public's mind you become and are the role. In other words, if you are playing a harlot, you are a harlot. They don't disassociate that. I understand why there are some professional people in this town, who in their youth and early on in their professions, didn't have sense enough to stay away from the theatre and did shows here. Now that they are "on the make" commercially, and successful professionally, stay away from here. We have lost some talent for that very reason. There is a leading industrialist-lawyer in this town who can sing "up a storm" and who used to do shows here, but who won't anymore because he's worried about his image in the community.

M: Right. I know what you mean. Yes. That's true.

L: In fact, we have a young banker-to-be. He is beyond the teller's stage and probably almost a vice-president now at one of the local banks. He's shying away from playing roles in shows now.

M: He was really enthusiastic a couple of years ago.

L: That was a couple of years ago.

M: I do think that theatre gets an awfully bad name when it doesn't deserve it. It is all over.

L: Sure.

M: I don't like it to be treated that way anywhere, and I think it is a really serious business that a lot of people who scoff at it don't have any idea of the complexity of just this part - the office we are sitting in - let alone back over there at the stage. There is no time to mess around if you are going to do it right.

L: There usually isn't. I haven't found any of it.

M: I know you ran your rehearsals at 7:30. If the people weren't there by 7:35, they had better have a really good reason.

L: Right.

M: If you would call in, that was all right.

L: Once or twice, yes.

M: How did it ever get to be that people think theatre people are irresponsible because most of the ones who I have worked with were not?

L: Look at their roles. They are playing carefree people most of the time. Having fun. Smiling. Selling in terms of popular shows. It looks that way. Look, how much fun it is. Look, how easy it is. Again, it is something that everyone thinks they can do. And they can't.

M: Why does everyone think they can do it? Why do the taxi drivers in New York and the bus drivers and the man who makes your pizza, all say they are actors?

L: Because they haven't done it, or haven't tried to do it for money. A lot of people do it for free. They think they can do it for money. A lot of people did it in very, very amateur situations - - - kid recitals, school productions, etc. All the way on up through those formative years. They got applause. Everyone told them they were terrific. It's easy to believe you're good. If you haven't had it disproven to you, you're going to think you're good and that acting is easy.

M: You have two daughters and neither of them have participated actively . . .

L: Thank, God.

M: Has that been your doing?

L: Yes, to a great extent. They were welcome to stick their toes in. But they had better not go over their head in it. The older girl did something with Children's Theatre. One exposure was enough for her.

M: They both have common sense and they both have well-developed characters, as far as I can tell.

L: I hope so. I'm the worst person to tell.

M: You certainly didn't make it easy for them.

L: I didn't encourage it. I didn't say, "I have a role for you in a show." Or, "I'm going to see that you are cast in this." I have done that for other people. There was a girl in town, who, when younger, looked just like my older girl. She is older than my older girl. She went crying out of an audition for a musical many years ago. She had never

been in a show at the Playhouse. She was about thirteen or fourteen at the time. I went over. Told her to dry her tears and that I would see if I could talk to the director about getting her a part in the chorus. She got it. She's been playing leads here recently. She even played Tillie in "Gamma Rays" recently, the role you played.

M: Beatrice.

L: I mean Beatrice. I might encourage other kids, if they are in love with it. My kids didn't know whether . . . they were in love with it or in love with the idea of it. The older one found out that she wasn't. The younger one tried very hard to get into shows here. In fact, she wouldn't put her real name down on an audition card. She was very young at the time. She would write down, Alyssa Cushwa for her name and Bentley Cushwa for her father's name. That's a true story.

M: How old was she?

L: She must have been ten or eleven when she did that. She was trying out for a Children's Theatre production. I wouldn't go to bat for her and say, "Please use my kid." If she got it on her own, fine. Whoever it was at that time either thought she didn't have the talent, or felt that he didn't want one of my kids in his cast because stories would get back to me about what they were doing with Children's Theatre.

M: That is a separate box there.

L: Yes, it sure is. It is a separate organization.

M: Would you hallucinate about that?

L: I don't have any hallucinations. It was a totally different organization with its own board of directors, its own staff and its own budget. That is an unfortunate circumstance, as far as I'm concerned. We may cash in on their existence on occasion when we go to the community for capital funds. But, by and large, they are detrimental to the theatre.

M: Give me an instance.

L: For the most part, they do junk. An there is no reason to do junk for kids. They don't rehearse their shows very well. They don't end up with productions that will hold kids' attention.

M: Yet, they get to use considerable facilities.

L: They use the facilities. They have a free ride. It is easy to take a ride on somebody else's rear end. In any case, I resent them for that. The resentment has nothing to do with what I think of them in an objective assessment of the facts.

They are getting better lately in terms of what they are doing for kids. Traditionally, around this town, if you poll kids, even in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades about whether they were interested in the show, they would say, "It's kids' stuff."

M: They don't like that. They want to go to the big people's shows.

L: Yes. There is no reason for that. I guess my major objection to Children's Theatre is that they are not doing the

job of training. They are catering to egos and they are developing egos in kids at a young age. That is nonsense. They are developing kids who love themselves in theatre, rather than love theatre. Cliche though that may be, it's still true. "Look, Mom, I'm dancing." Instead of, "This is a great thing to be involved in," or "Look at how those people are acting and what they are learning."

M: What is your general opinion over-all of child actors

L: My general opinion is that child actors are spoiled brats. There are exceptions to that, of course. They are too often pampered and coddled.

M: They are necessary either to that.

L: Yes, but not in the way they are handled and treated in terms of their working in shows. That is the time to develop attitudes, and that is a time to develop a discipline toward them. That is a time to deal with it as something worthwhile and serious and something worth giving 100% to and something that you are just as good playing a bit as you are playing a lead.

M: I had a son who I was happy that he did not behave in an obnoxious manner when he came down to this theatre as a little boy. I brought him down here when he was seven. He was pretty well-behaved. I was proud of him.

L: Your little girl was also good in a show.

M: Yes. She came right off. She just did the one. I have been moved to near murderous impulses by some of the children I have worked with in shows.

L: Sure.

M: One stood under my elbow constantly in the wings. Then when I hit her in the eye with my elbow by mistake, she threw herself on the floor and began to say that I knocked her down and beat her up. She literally stood under my elbow. She was very little. The parents of these people I never fitted in with. They really seem to be a pain and give very little productivity. They would participate in moving scenery, and it got to be a clubby thing. Well, we are all doing this. Let's all run down the Playhouse. It became a meeting place, right?

L: Yes.

M: I just wondered how you tolerated it?

L: You don't tolerate it, that's all. Usually, those kids end up in shows. It is the same brashness, the same perkiness which is wonderful if it can be channeled and disciplined and developed into a team effort on a show. You asked me about Children's Theatre. They are catering to that kind of thing, instead of taking that kind of thing - that kind of kid, that kind of attitude - and changing the attitude, keeping the talent, keeping the interest and making it grow. Then, you get responsible theatre people, instead of performers.

M: They are doing that to the parents of those kids a lot, aren't they? It is almost like the Little League.

L: Yes, exactly. There are exceptions. We are lucky. On the show we are currently doing, "Life with Father," we

have two parents, both a mother and a father, not just the stage mother, who are really solid citizens who have their heads screwed on right and so do their kids. They have one kid in this show who is terrific and not temperamental. The brother is on Broadway, or rather Broadway-bound. Bob had cast him in "Father." But then he got a call.

M: He got called to a major Broadway production?

L: Yes. He has lines. He had never done anything except in school. What a fluke. The parents, however, are terrific. It could mean less to them and that's fine for the kid.

M: Is their name Shaffer?

L: That's it. Shaffer.

M: How old is he?

L: I don't know exactly. Ten or eleven. His parents wanted him to go to a theatre summer camp in the East. They were put on a mailing list because they had asked for information. The kid didn't go as it turned out. Some agent got hold of the list of names from various theatre-type camps as they were on a talent hunt. They sent out a form letter saying that if you were interested in auditioning for . . . come to New York at such and such a time. The kid came to the auditions and got the role. What a fluke. First of all, it was a fluke that they approached it that way with all of the theatre mothers and theatre kids.

M: An agent soliciting. Usually, it is the opposite.

L: Exactly. Can you imagine?

M: Why do agents do that?

L: The opposite?

M: I've been asked about agents and I don't have a sensible answer. Why do agents pursue you in some cases?

L: It may be nothing more than they want you in a file.

M: Prestigious agents.

L: Yes.

M: He signed me and he never sent me on anything.

L: It's the same reason real estate agents get listings because it may, at some time, click. There may be a sale of you or the property.

M: But they aren't going to sell you. I thought that was what an agent was for.

L: Yes. They will if all conditions are right. If you could have sold yourself, then they will sell you. I hate to be that cynical. The bigger your file is, I suppose, the more chances you having of moving the person.

M: I was given to understand then . . . Is this the typical thing? This big agency wants you. You would have three interviews. Now you are supposed to call them up everyday and ask them.

L: And keep after them.

M: See, I can't do that. That doesn't make any sense. I think they should call me. I'm not just saying me. There is some absence of logic there that I cannot participate in.

L: There are two types of agents, obviously. There are the ones who deal with a small number of people in whom they sincerely believe are important and sincerely believe there is

work for and will hustle to get it. Those people will work for those few clients. If the guy's file is too big, if he is representing too many people on the come, on the basis of covering enough numbers, forget him.

M: This is a prestigious agency, one of the big ones in New York.

L: It could have been somebody wanted somebody taken on and then that guy left the agency and you still remained with the agency. If he still remains, then his attitude changed, or he found somebody better. Maybe, at one point you were the right type for something and he was looking for five or six or seven people for the right type or something and sent them out on that. Maybe, if he had enough, maybe one of them would hit. Then he still has you left in the file. Instead of being honest with you and saying that he is taking you on because he has a job right now that you might get, that he might send you out on . . .

M: He didn't send me on anything.

L: Maybe he thought he was going to have something to send you out on.

M: He said that he could use me all the time. He said that he could use me a lot.

L: A lot. Well . . .

M: He came and got me in a little production in Ohio.

L: I have a friend and former employee named Paul Barry. I hired him for stock one season. I had to fire him midway into the season or less. He went on to run his own

stock company further North in Michigan in the Upper Peninsula. He went to New York and got some work as a director and has been running summer stock companies ever since. Most recently Cape May in New Jersey.

M: I know Cape May.

L: Paul has probably got twenty file drawers full of actors' resumes, all updated within a year or two. Why? Is he going to use any of these people? Maybe, on an occasion if he's in a jam. Then he has a file he can look through. But, by and large, he has seen the faces. Why does he do it? For the emergency, for the crisis, whatever. He is not fair to the people, that way. But he gets those resumes every year and he tells people that, if their resume is over two years old to send him a new one. He is constantly advertising that way.

M: I haven't been on to that part. I knew about these agents. But this prestigious agency doing this . . .

L: That is contrary to what most prestigious agencies do. They usually take on people whom they believe in and whom they will go to bat for and really work for.

M: This happened in Ohio which made me laugh all the more. I took it very lightly, Bentley, when this fellow came backstage at the Carousel Dinner Theatre and said, "If you ever come to New York, I want you to call me."

L: Look him up.

M: Do you know how much attention I paid to that? About three seconds.

L: Here is another thing you've got to go if you're going to make it in this business. You had better pay attention to all the garbage and what seems like garbage. Once in a while . . .

M: When I went to New York, I didn't call him. A mutual friend and actor in a production saw him and said that he had been talking to me. He told him that he told me he wanted to hear from me and that he wanted to use me. He wanted to have me call him. At that, I called him. He wanted me to come in right then and there. I knew people who had been trying to see this guy for three months. He wanted me to go in right then. He wanted to see me right then. I thought he was really being sincere.

To wrap this up, if you could really pick what you would like to do in the next ten years with your career, what would you want to be when you grow up?

L: I suppose I would want to be a well-known Broadway director. That would be my first choice.

M: Would you live in New York?

L: Probably. Although I don't know the City that well. My second choice would be to make a great deal of money in some kind of business. I may have to start my own business, because I'm tired of making a lot of money and spending a lot of money, for somebody else. I would just like to make a lot and spend a little for myself.

People always laugh at me and say, "What you do know besides theatre?" They don't realize that if you know

theatre, why, you know a lot about a lot of things and that you can go into a lot of things.

M: I'm glad to hear you say that. It does get cut down a lot. This is not just something you toss off, running a theatre.

L: If you're involved on the administrative end of theatre, you had better know damn well how to do a lot of things if you're going to survive.

M: I can't think of a business that needs more knowledge of how to handle people.

L: That and a whole lot more.

M: Thank you for the interview.

L: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW
