

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Community Theater Project

Theater Experiences

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GERRY SULLIVAN

Interviewed

by

Arlene Hasson

on

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INTERVIEWEE: GERRY SULLIVAN

INTERVIEWER: Arlene Hasson

SUBJECT: funds, season tickets, old musicals, pay, royalties,
institute classes, guild, cast parties

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H: This is an interview with Gerry Sullivan for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Salem Community Theater Project, by Arlene Hasson, on May 29, 1982, at 2:00 p.m.

Gerry, could you tell us a little bit about your background to get started?

S: I'm married to Ed Sullivan, nationally syndicated cartoonist. We have no children. I teach piano and I used to teach kindergarten and first grade before we were married. I've had a lifelong interest in music having taken piano lessons at the age of six for about fifteen years.

I graduated from Kent State University with a bachelor's degree in education. I'm very interested in art, music, and drama.

H: When did you first get involved with the community theater?

S: The year that they organized, I believe that was 1977, we had just moved into this house. It was in August that we moved in and I saw in the paper that this theater was organizing. I saw that they were going to do "Godspell" and I was really interested because I love that musical and I loved the whole idea of the theater organizing in Salem. I remember saying to Ed, "I wish I had the time to get involved in this." It was just unthinkable because we were just sitting on boxes and so forth. Lo and behold, before we had a chance to unpack, Dina Paparotis, who was active with the board then and involved with "Godspell" called to see if I would play piano for them. I said, "Dina, I would really love to, but we just moved. We're sitting on boxes. There's just no way I can do

this." She said, "We're really desperate; we're one week into rehearsals and we have no pianist." I gave her at least eight names of fellow piano players here in Salem. I told her, "Promise, cross your heart and hope to die that you will call all of these people and plead with them. If at the end of all those calls you still haven't found anybody you can call me and I might consider it, but I'm not saying I will do it because we're really knee deep here." Another week went by and she called again and she said, "We're really desperate now. All those people said no and I called a few others that they suggested and they said no." That is how I became involved.

I had been playing the piano, but not a great deal. As much as I had to play, learning all those songs, and it was a whole different style of music, but it was fascinating.

H: You weren't the only music with that?

S: No, I was the rehearsal pianist. I had forgotten what it was like to be part of a group like that. I knew that there would be drums and bass and so forth. In fact, it was up to me to try to find the other musicians. No, it wasn't up to me to find them for that play. Georgia Cleesy played the drums. Kevin MacAlbane played string bass.

H: Greg Smith wasn't involved?

S: Greg was in the play. I remember him very well; he was so friendly. This was all strange to me and I didn't know most of these people. Most of the cast were so terribly young, although I didn't really think about that. I remember Greg was always so friendly when I would come into rehearsal.

Anyway, I got together with the other members of the orchestra only about two times before we opened. I was very nervous about that. It was also very thrilling the first time that we played together and the sounds started to come out because there was so much more rhythm. I also remember as hard as I had been playing you couldn't hear the piano at all. I could feel the vibrations, but with all that amplification I had to play twice as loud. Of course, when we got to the high school then they amplified the piano too.

H: You were not involved other than in the music in that one? You weren't on the board yet or anything like that?

S: No.

H: As time went on you did get more involved?

S: Yes. Following "Godspell" their next production was "Jacques Briel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris." They asked me to play for that and that was another challenge. I did have to find the other musicians for that. I didn't find Brendan Wauw; Judith Wauw was in the cast. Young Brendan was only twelve, but he was one whale of a drummer. He didn't even read music; he just played. Wendy Young played bells and Greg Smith played guitar in that. John Voglio was just learning to play the bass. I loved that show. I think out of all of them that was my favorite. I think it was one of the finest productions we ever did. Unfortunately it was that terrible winter of 1977, 1978. There was a lot of snow.

H: Where was "Godspell"?

S: We rehearsed at the old American Legion Hall. The production was at the high school on the stage. Attendance for "Godspell" was not real great, but it was fair for our first production. "Jacques Briel" we rehearsed at the American Legion Hall and we gave it at the American Legion Hall. I remember we had to paint the whole interior before we opened, but it was a perfect setting for it because it was just like a little, French music hall.

Anyway, it was that terrible winter and Tim Smith had a jeep. When nobody else could get through, Tim would drive in his jeep down to Lisbon to pick up a cast member to make sure that he got up for rehearsal. He would plow out the parking lot when he got there so we could get in the door. We really worked hard. It was a very close cast. The unfortunate thing about it was that it was such a marvelous production and we probably did about six performances. I think the total attendance for those six was not much over 100. I remember one Sunday afternoon there were about a dozen people and a couple of those were husbands or wives of cast members. One was a friend of ours who was there for the second time. I always wished that they would do that again. In fact, when they got their new home at the State Theater I hoped that their first production would be "Jacques Briel". By then they had built up an interest and a following in the community and I knew that people would really love it.

H: Was Cathy full-time director at that point?

S: Yes.

H: Had she been with them from the beginning?

S: Yes. I think they had hired her that first year to be the director. I don't know what they had promised her in the way of money or anything or whether there was even a signed contract, but she was the official director for all those plays.

Following "Jacques Briel" I believe we did "The Boy Friend" in the Spring. That was fun. We did that at the junior high school. There was no orchestra for that; it was just piano I believe. We had some production problems with that. Several members of the cast quit the week that we were to open. It seems to me the reason those people quit was because they had been in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?" which we had done at the YWCA, and they wanted to take that to the OCTA Fest, the state contest. They couldn't get legal permission and they felt that the board should go ahead and do it anyway, which would have been very risky. The board would not do it sensibly and these people in protest walked off the cast of "The Boy Friend". One of them was the male lead. As it all worked out, I think it was probably better. It seemed like God sent us this young man from Youngstown, Rob Phillips, who had played this part in the Playhouse production so he fit it beautifully. Nancy Fediaczko, who has stepped in and done everything possible in the theater, stepped in at the last minute and took the role of the wife or mother.

H: It seems to me that that was in the fall.

S: There was "Godspell", "Jacques Briel", "The Boy Friend", "Promises, Promises", and "Fiddler on the Roof".

H: You still weren't on the board at this time, or had you joined the board?

S: No. Cathy Verhoff mentioned to me that she had suggested me so many different times to be on the board, but for some reason I didn't get on. I didn't particularly care because I really enjoyed playing for the musicals, but I was getting rather exhausted because we still were not unpacked.

H: Do you still do music along with your board position?

S: Yes. After I got on the board we did "Fiddler". After I got on the board we started to grow so fast. Then the State Theater building came up and we got involved in all that. Then it wasn't just a theater anymore, it was cinema and dance classes and all these headaches that the board had on raising funds and selling season tickets and so forth. I remember frequently secretly longing for the early days when it was more romantic and we were scrounging around.

H: It was casual and you were just on a shoestring. If things didn't work out that was okay too.

S: I remember thinking I had more fun just playing. Now, if I played there was so much more responsibility than just learning the music and playing. There were the board activities too. It has been an extremely hardworking board. If you don't work hard on that board and you have any kind of conscience

at all you tend to feel very guilty. Nobody on the board really makes you feel that way because everyone else is working so hard. I had resigned from that board. As a result of playing for all these musicals . . . I had about six piano students when I started and then after the musicals people would come up and say, "Do you teach?" I would say yes and they would say they had a daughter or so-and-so. That mushroomed until I had twenty-five piano students and I have recently taken on five more, so now I have thirty.

I have since played for "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" last Christmas. It seems to me I played for something else too, but I can't remember.

- H: You mentioned the acquisition of the State Theater. They had talked for a while in the minutes about getting the Grand Theater. How did it come about that you acquired the State Theater building?
- S: I'm not totally sure. I know they felt the Grand Theater was not as structurally sound as the State Theater building. They would have had, I believe, a great deal more expense in having to build a stage area off to the side there behind Fitch and Kendall.
- H: They were going to have to expand that whole building?
- S: Yes. They would have had to do a lot more expansion there. The State Theater was just so much more set up for our purpose. The second and third floors of the Grand building were terrific for rehearsal halls.
- H: I know somebody used that for a while; was that community theater that used it?
- S: I don't think we did. Sherry Joseph had had a dance studio up there and her equipment was still stored there.
- H: You were on the board when they did make the big move?
- S: Yes.
- H: What were the advantages of having this theater building available for the group to use?
- S: There were many actually. We never knew where we were going to rehearse or where we were going to be able to give our next production. We did a lot of rehearsing in McKinley School, which had been condemned for children but was apparently safe for adults to be in there. We had rehearsed at the American Legion Hall. We gave productions at the junior high, the senior high, the YMCA, the American Legion Hall. We had props and equipment stored in various places,

people's garages. For a time we rented some place on North Ellsworth in somebody's building. The cost of our productions was tremendous by the time we paid the royalties, which in themselves are quite expensive. The rental of McKinley School all those nights, plus the rental of the high school for six or seven nights for the performances, custodial care and so forth, those things were really cutting a great, big hunk out of our budget. It was exciting to think that at last we had a place of our own where we could store our props and our paints and build our sets. And we had all these rooms for dancing and drama classes.

H: What classes do they offer?

S: A number of dance classes: Tap, ballet, jazzercise or dancercise. I don't know if they have had any gymnastic classes there. I believe they now have one ballroom dancing class. They've had drama classes. I don't know if they had makeup classes.

H: What do you think was the biggest success that you've been involved with in the community theater as far as production is concerned, not acquiring the building or anything?

S: I think certainly from a community standpoint and probably from the theater too, the two most successful productions were "The King and I", which they did an extremely beautiful job on--it was really professional--and "The Red Dragon", which Cathy Verhoff and Greg Smith wrote. They were sold out on both of those a few nights.

H: Have they tried to cut down on a number of musicals?

S: Yes, I believe they have, partly because of the expense. They do pay the musicians. They used to just pay the musicians that came from out of town, pay them for gas. But I think since we have had official music directors they pay all of them something. In fact, they paid me a little bit for playing for "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown". I couldn't believe it when Andy handed me the check. Realizing how hard everyone on the board worked for a production I really could not, in good conscience, keep it, so I gave it back to the board. I think the royalties on musicals are a little more expensive too. They've done them more nights too.

H: I've noticed over the years the number of performances seems to be increasing. At times it used to be a couple of weekends; now it seems to be like three weekends and a Thursday and a Sunday. Once you get the play down you might as well put it on for that period of time, particularly when you have your own building. Do you have to pay more then?

S: Yes.

- H: Have you found anything to be particularly disappointing in your work with the theater, anything that you wish you hadn't done, not you personally but the theater as far as production was concerned?
- S: Yes. I think I would term it more frustration than disappointment. I used to become very frustrated and I still feel frustration that they were not from a much earlier standpoint trying to sell the house out before the season began. They tended to think that by advertising for each show and talking about the success of past shows that people would just flock to see the shows, and it doesn't work that way. You have to sell your house before the season even begins. Then you have some money to work with. So often we were just scrounging around from show to show and coming up short. When you would spend all these hours on rehearsal and know how hard that everyone had worked and what a fantastic job they were doing, and the curtains opened and maybe fifty or sixty people would be out there; it was very frustrating. I have to say, too, though, that if it is a warm audience it doesn't matter if there are twelve people or 100.
- They sent me to a workshop at Kent, which I felt extremely beneficial and I got a lot of good ideas for fund raising too, which I came back and tried to present. This was just at the time that we were acquiring the State Theater building. The ideas that I gained there for fund raising were a lot of really good ones, important at that time, but nobody seemed to want to listen to them.
- H: With the building, as far as finances are concerned for that, the Community Foundation has given them money for that. Are they making installments on it?
- S: Yes. The money that we have received from the Community Foundation which I believe is an ongoing thing over five years, is a great deal of money and totally for restoration purposes. We cannot use that money to buy the building. We cannot use it for productions. That is strictly for renovation. The money to purchase the building has to come from community fund raising and private donations and things like that. All these problems came up when we got this building. We had to think of fund raising to buy the building; we had to think of season ticket campaigns to try to get money ahead for the season. We have this ongoing operation of the cinema, which is a whole other aspect Nick Verhoff has managed very well for us.
- H: Is the cinema part making money?
- S: I'm sure they're breaking even; I don't think they're in the hole. I don't think they're making a great deal of money. I think mostly they're managing to pay the bills. We had ideas in the beginning that we would run art films or things like that, but I think they've stuck pretty much to family films. They

have run a few art films.

H: They also started out a lot cheaper. They were \$1 or \$1.50 and now they've raised the price too. They probably found out it didn't make much difference.

S: Speaking of raising prices, that was one thing I was very disappointed in last year: The price of the season and individual tickets. For example, when we did "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" in December, I think it was basically considered a show for children. I think that we were thinking a lot of young people would come to see that. I believe the tickets were something like \$5 a piece for children. When you're spending money over the holidays for gifts and things, if you have three children that's \$15 for them to see one performance plus your ticket. I felt our prices were . . . We killed ourselves on those.

H: I just heard the new prices for the upcoming year. The only thing I can say is it certainly encourages the season tickets. I think it is going to be \$6 or \$6.50 for adults. I think this was for musicals.

S: I think the season tickets, though, are very reasonable.

H: Yes, it would encourage season ticket buying.

Have you run into any difficulties with scheduling performances conflicting with other activities? Even now do you notice the difference if you have a play on a Friday night and there is a basketball game?

S: I don't know. I don't know if anyone has done any actual research on that either.

H: You don't deliberately set your schedule so that it won't conflict?

S: It's almost impossible; there are so many things going on in town. I really don't think the theater board has checked into other schedules very much. I'm also on the board of directors for the Community Concert Association and they have to use the high school auditorium so they have to work around that. They are at the mercy, too, of Columbia Artist Management in New York. They have to take the artists when they're in the area. We have to clear it with the high school to make sure there's nothing going on that night. If we do have a conflict there then we have to cancel that concert and try to get somebody else who is in the area when we can have the auditorium. They are more conscious of other activities, maybe just because of having to use the high school.

H: The high school drama department had done "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" two or three years before that. Does the

community theater look at that kind of thing before they decide to put on a play?

S: I don't know whether they do or not.

H: Do you find that it gets to be a little difficult to find enough to do without overlapping with so many high schools and drama groups?

S: There are so many plays from which to choose and you're always torn. On the community concert board we know that if we had four, huge attractions we could probably sell out with no problem, but we feel that it should also be an educational experience and they should be exposed to different kinds of music. The same thing is true in theater. This is the thing that is difficult on the board when you're trying to select plays. Being in the arts you would like to expose people to good drama, good comedy, good musicals, and a good, straight play. When you're worried about the dollars you also have to think about what's going to draw the people. There are a lot of really old, great musicals from the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's that I would love to see them go back and do.

For a while they had a group of ladies from the theater guild, the play reading committee, who would read various plays and give us a synopsis of them. Unfortunately, it seemed like we rarely chose from their list. I think they have always tried to have a musical or two because they've known that they've been more popular. I think the board is probably unanimous in thinking that we should have one drama a year, and one comedy or mystery.

H: Have you had any other problems with directors? I know for a long time you just went with Cathy. Did she resign for a period of time?

S: Yes.

H: Then you had a group of directors?

S: A series of guest directors, amateur mostly.

H: Did you feel that any of them were satisfactory?

S: I don't think that you could compare them with Cathy because she was a true professional and did an excellent job always. When something like that happens you have to make due with what you can. I think that as time went on and we had a couple of unfortunate happenings that everyone realized that we had to try to get Cathy back at all cost. I wasn't on the board the first time that she resigned, so I rather imagine the dispute was over finances.

- H: You mentioned the OCTA and the Kent State workshop. Was this workshop at Kent State from the university or is that from the Ohio Council of Community Theater Associations?
- S: I think it was from the Ohio Council of Community Theaters. I happened to read about it in the Cleveland Plain Dealer and I took it to Tim Smith and told him that it sounded like something we could benefit from. I guess because I had found the clipping and brought it to their attention they decided to send me. It was very good. I think they do something like that every summer.
- H: Is this Ohio group just a voluntary association that community theaters join? Is there a fee involved?
- S: I really don't know. I think you probably don't have to belong to it. I would think that you certainly have to pay something to be a member.
- H: Since you are no longer on the board, what do you see as the future of the community theater?
- S: I think they have some really great people on their board, and if they can keep the quality of professional type people that they have on the board, or people who are keenly interested in the future of the theater that they will be all right. They will continue to make wise decisions then. If they could find a way to do some really dynamic fund raising or get somebody to leave a whale amount of money to the theater so that they could get the building purchased that a lot of their financial problems would be solved. I think they're going to go a long way.
- H: Has the guild become more of a fund raising group than it was before?
- S: I think so, yes. My thinking all along was that the guild, and I think any guild which is a spin-off from a major group like a theater, was a helpmate. It was my idea from the start that the guild should be a fund raising organization and that they should handle the season tickets. Somewhere along the way the guild didn't see themselves that way and apparently thought they were being used. I had never fully understood this. There seemed to be a lack of communication between the board and the guild. They're working much more closely together now. There is better communication. The president of the guild automatically becomes a member of the board. For a while the guild was just made up of ladies. I tried to encourage them to get husbands involved too.
- H: I haven't heard of any fund raising projects other than the productions.

S: This past year they organized our very first Madrigal Feast this past November. It was a huge success. They did it only one night. That was their first really big fund raising event.

Another thing I wanted to mention was that my husband and I were the ones who started the cast parties. We started that right after "Godspell".

H: Is there anything else you would like to add?

S: I can't think of anything.

H: Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW