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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Playhouse

Personal Experience

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ROBERT GRAY

Interviewed

by

Carol Shaffer Mills

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M This is an interview with Robert F. Gray, Director in Residence at Youngstown Playhouse, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Carol Shaffer Mills, at the Youngstown Playhouse, on December 7, 1981, at 12:30 p m

G I was born November 21, 1931 I have been told that when my mother went to the hospital, I was a month later than I was supposed to be and none of her maternity outfits fit her. So, she went in one of my grandmother's coats and one of my aunts-who is kind of a chubby lady- one of her dresses and they put her in the charity ward So, the doctor had her moved out of that

I do not really have very many early memories I was a very happy child, I was a very spoiled child I was an only child and, of course, anything within reason that I asked for was given to me, even though times were tough. My father was a manufacturer's agent, a traveling man He sold bird cages, dog toys, and garbage cans, which I often thought was a fascinating combination. My mother was a college graduate Dad never went past the eighth grade, but dad was a great appreciator of certain forms of theater, when he was a younger man before he got to the point where he lost a lot of his hearing While he was on the road, he would see live theater and, of course, movies at the same time. He liked magic. He had a wonderful library of books about magicians, and he loved circuses and had a fabulous collection of books on circuses I was very privileged as a small child Before the tents -- like Wringley Brothers and Cole Brothers -- before those circuses stopped coming to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I was born, Dad would take me out at 4 00 or 5 00 in the morning, and we would watch them set up the tents That was as much fun or more fun for me as it was to go to the circus performance itself

Mother went to college and her major was music So I got whatever background in music that I have from my mother Dad loved barber shop quartet singing and things like that, but mother was really a very fine musician, both a pianist and a singer I was told that when I was about four, she would be playing at the piano I would go over and sit on her lap and say, "Make my hands do it, too " She did not want to teach me At the age of five she started me with a piano teacher I studied piano for twelve years It has come in very handy in later life I have gotten a couple parts because I could play the piano

M Why did she not want to teach you, Bob?

G She felt it was bad for a parent to teach a child

M They could not be objective?

G Something like that, I assume About that same time you could say that I had my first introduction to theater of any sort I was given for Christmas a marionette, a commercial marionette Clippo the Clown made by F & B Dowe Company I remember it very well The following year my uncle and dad and

mother all got together and made a little stage for me. I got a couple of others. There were five marionettes in that series that that company put out. I would do little plays at church carnivals, school carnivals, and things of that sort. My first live appearance was in the second grade. I was master of ceremonies at some sort of a school program. My folks were there. I would get up and announce the next act. I know we rented a set of tables for me from the local masquerade house. That was my big launch forth into show business.

My marionettes remained a vocation with me through high school. Then in college at the first school I went to I had a friend who was interested in marionettes. She and I did a couple of shows in that area. Following my college graduation, I toured with a company doing scenes from Shakespeare in the Dakota and Nebraska.

M: Would you tell me something about how you formed that company and where you got those young people? Also, your age at the time was quite young right?

G: I was twenty-one when we were on tour. That was the year of 1953 to 1954. I went my first two years to Albion College in Michigan. My second two were at Denison University. I heard about Denison from a woman who had studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Art when it was really something, back in the good old days. She was a fine actress and a wonderful director. She headed a theater department at the Baptist church in Grand Rapids. Imagine a church with a whole theater department. I joined that with a bunch of other boys. We were called the Builders' Guild, and we helped with sets and things like that, and occasionally did shows. The first time I was ever in a Shaw play it, was not religious drama per se, it was good drama. She remained a friend until she moved to Indiana.

M: What was her name?

G: Her name was Amy Loomis. Amy recommended, not because it was a Baptist school necessarily, but because she knew it was a good theater department, that I transfer to Denison because there was not that much theater at Albion. Although at Albion is where I met Bentley Lenhoff, the executive director of the playhouse where I am currently working. If it had not been for him, I would not be here now, probably. Everything gets interlaced here.

While I was at Denison, the then head of the theater department, Ed Wright, who has since retired -- Ed was a member of the International Platform Association -- he said that I had an interesting voice and a wonderful face for make-up, but that more than that he could not promise me anything. He never encouraged anybody to go into theater. He said that since I had this other sideline of marionettes, that I should join the International Platform Association and tour with them to high school assembly programs. I thought that sounded like an interesting thing to do.

For a senior's honors project kind of thing, I built the stage and

marionettes I did scenes from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and scenes from "Macbeth" However, it became a little peculiar because once we got out there, we did not know what our territory was to be We found out We started in North Dakota We played the Rosebud Indian Reservation for grade school children who did not even speak English -- they still spoke their native tongue -- so Shakespeare did not go over too well with them

At Christmas time we came home and added a couple of fairy tales to the repertoire, in the event that we were stuck at an elementary school rather than a high school Basically, I still think it was a good idea because so many people in those rural areas do not really get a chance to see Shakespeare I mean, they have not read it in school Even with marionettes, it was more interesting I did the opening scene, the murder scene, and the sleepwalking scene from "Macbeth," and a sort of compilation of the play scene and some of the stuff from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" It was about a forty-five minute program We played for that entire year until my father died in March I broke the contract with the company and the tour and went back to Michigan.

M. What would a company like that pay in those days?

G In those days we had to do the collecting from the schools ourselves We would cash the check, and then we would send a money order to the firm in Los Angeles They were a Los Angeles based company National Schools Assemblies they were called We were paid \$225 a week Out of that, I had to pay the guy who traveled with me and helped me with the manipulation and setting up and all that I paid him a salary out of that That would also have to cover our transportation, we had a panel truck The company was called Bob Grazemary and Adds

M. What about food and lodging?

G You stayed where you could stay

M Tell me about a typical place where you stayed

G We stayed in a place called Turtle Lake I remember that It was not very large The water was so saline that we were obliged to buy water to brush our teeth I really remember that vividly We played one place called, I believe it was Hattonger, North Dakota where the entire population, including babes in arms, came to the performance, and they numbered 102 people We would do often four shows a day, 9 00, 11 00, 1:00, and 3 00, traveling twenty miles between each one and setting up this enormous stage. The stage was four feet high eight feet wide The super structure that held the drapes and that hid us while we were doing the manipulation were fourteen feet long and eleven feet high It was a big beautiful stage that I had based on the Marvin and Rufus Rose, who were professional marionettes back in the 1930's and 1940's It was based on

their plans for a stage. It was a very nice tour excepting the fact that we were stuck playing grade schools when we should have been playing just high schools and the distances were so few and far between. It had not rained the summer before; we started in September much on the plans. There was nothing to break the wind, so the wind would blow sand, and the entire surface of that truck was pitted with sand. I remember that vividly.

I remember one place we stayed called Flasher, North Dakota. We had to drive sixty miles to get to this place. There had been like a dust storm before. We went into this hotel, which was a real flop-out, but it was the only place in town to stay. We stayed in there, and the dirt on the floor where it had blown in through the cracks in the window was like a half of an inch thick. It was like you were sleeping out in the desert. It was all over the bed cloth. It was an incredible time. I wonder where I got the energy.

M: You wonder about that. At the time we are so young and we are accepting. Like you were probably terribly underpaid. Of course, that never occurred to you, probably. You were very impressed that you were allowed to do it. Four shows a day; I mean, that is a heavy load.

G: It is indeed. It was a big territory. They had all of the west except in Texas, Utah, anything west of the Mississippi, I think it was. There were four years of territory. Lining up the fourth year you got to play California, but I never went back after the first year.

M: What is this National Platform Company? How did that project start? You said that you applied to them.

G: Right. The International Platform Association is a group of people kind of like the outgrowth of Shatakwah -- people who do folk songs, or people who do magic acts or you name it.

We went to that monologists. It was held in Lake Side, Ohio as I recall, and we drove up from Denison and auditioned. This was in the summertime. I remember that, I cannot tell you what month. Most of the people who booked their season -- and this was the only agency, I would have liked to have gone with one of the eastern ones -- they were the bigger schools, so they would have been more equipped for Shakespeare than to go out into the wilderness. It was a fascinating experience. I have had a very checkered career over the years.

Moving right back to high school, I was in the high school orchestra. I played the bass violin. I never was very good in the bass. Occasionally I played piano, when there were enough bass players that I didn't have to do that. I was still studying piano at that time. I got into what was called the mime's club. It was the drama club of the school. I was in the senior play. For mime's, I was in a series of Thornton Wilder one acts. A friend of mine and I started what we called the Flicker Club. We made movies-silent, of course, because it was eight millimeter. Our first one was a Frankenstein, and our second one was a wolf.

man, and our third one was Blythe's Spirit which was a very peculiar thing to film because it was a silent movie with all of that witty dialogue

The way we would present the programs then, we would present them in an assembly after school for which we charged I think a nickel or a dime for each student, thereby replenishing the treasury so we could buy more film for the next show. A girl was set to play Madame Marcanti in the Blythe's Spirit. The day before we had set-up in a church to use their parlors for the interiors. Everything was scheduled, we had to go with it. The girl had acute appendicitis and had to go to the hospital. They found me to play Madame Marcanti

M. Tell me about that

G My mother had a rather large friend who had given my mother some clothes for a rummage sale, amongst which was an aqua formal. I wore that and I wore long black gloves. I do not know where I got this ratty wig. It was sort of like Swedish braids over the top. I did not know anything about make-up for the film at that time, and we certainly had primitive lighting, saying nothing of the primitive cameras --black and white. We did the bit where she comes riding up to the home on a bicycle. We went out and found a really pretty house in east Grand Rapids, there I was, riding along on the street with a formal on. I shudder to think, I really do. That was one thing.

Then the senior play was "Western Union Please." I remember I was in that. Then I took dramatic class from the drama teacher who, unfortunately, was taken very ill. She had to give up drama because they made her teach English as well. She was a graduate of the Yale School of theater, and one of her classmates was Elia Kazan. I learned so much from her, her name was Mary Balian. I learned so much from her together with Amy Loomis, who I told you about before, at really a very early age. That was like through the ninth and tenth grade when I knew these who dynamic women. My father would not let me be associated with the Grand Rapids Civic Theater because, as I recall, he said that some of the Lavender Boys were down there and he was afraid that I would be impressed or enlisted.

M The Lavender Boys. Some of the terminology then certainly was nicer than today.

G At any rate, I did not do anything with the Grand Rapids Civic Theater. I went away to Albion College. I was living in the dorm. At that point freshmen were not allowed to participate in shows. They felt it was too much with the work load and getting used to being away from home and all that stuff. So the spring show was the rival of Sheriton's. Just for a lark, I went and auditioned. With a special dispensation I was given the part of Bob Acres. I had met Bentley before, but that was the first time he and I worked together. He was playing Sir Anthony Absolute, and I was playing Bob Acres.

M What year student was he?

G He was two years ahead of me. He finished college in three years. It took me the full four. Bentley is a year or a year and a half older than I am. Anyway, the following year I did the title role in "Aurtoof", and he played Organ, so we worked together in those two shows. I had a little directing work there -- classroom type direction. I had a class called introduction to theater arts or something, which was lighting and stuff. I did not do a lot, technically.

That was when Amy Loomis suggested that I go to Denison because there was more to do, so I went to Denison. It was an incredible set-up at that time. They operated a summer theater in a tent in the summertime and did ten shows, most of which were very commercial. Then they did six shows during the year which they called Varsity Production, which we would call here main stage productions. They had the directing classes which you could audition for and act for the students who were studying direction. They did two touring theater productions a year.

M That is astounding.

G During the course of a calendar year you could get in like working on thirty shows, it was just remarkable.

M That is astonishing. Explain to everybody what a normal load would be. That is so far beyond a normal load.

G. Usually just four, five, or six varsity shows, and maybe some experimental work. I do not think many colleges have children's theaters.

M I do not think Youngstown State does six performances a year, do they? For instance, using them as an example.

G. I am not sure.

M. I doubt it.

G They may do more like four or five, and they occasionally do that dinner theater thing, which is a supplementary thing. I started with the summer. Then I had my junior year, the following summer, and my senior year. The senior show I did lots of little bitty parts at that time. I did "Dulcie" which was Lynn Fontane's first biggest hit. I was not working with Miss Fontane, but it was the same play. It was the biggest part I had. I considered it a privilege to appear in a production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which I still think, if it were handled properly, could be done here at the Playhouse.

M Would that not be wonderful?

G: The black community should not be offered. They should realize it is a very strong part in their heritage in this country. I do not believe if it was done properly -- and by that I mean with black actors playing the black roles, not black faces as we did -- then it could be a very meaningful thing in the community.

M: Would you mind if we would digress on that for a while? You have held countless interviews, and I think you are an expert on this. That does present a great problem anymore -- integration of the theater is another problem. I would like to just touch on that, how when you hold an audition it causes, a problem because some black actors, for instance, I recalled showed up to do "Fiddler on the Roof". Without appearing to be racist, how does one tell a black person who is knowledgeable about that, for instance, that they cannot be a Jewish serf in Russia because they are black? Would you just go into that more?

G: Right. We had an unfortunate thing this year. A Japanese, I believe who was from New Castle. He was a very nice man. He came over to audition for "Cabaret". There were not blacks working in night clubs, excepting as a novelty

M: In wartime in Berlin.

G: Yes. He came over and auditioned for the next show which was mine, "Life with Father." I explained to him that the Day's who were rather well-to-do-Mr. Day was a stockbroker in 1888 New York -- that it would be unlikely that the Day's would even have a doctor who was a Negro at that time, let alone a minister, and he certainly could not be one of the family. It is the same thing back with one of the first shows I did with you, Carol, in "Dark of the Moon"

M: Yes

G: The blacks were not in a community like that in the hills of Virginia. Even though I used a black man for the conjure man who was kind of a supernatural person, I could not have used him for one of the villagers. I do not believe that the Youngstown Playhouse does enough shows that can utilize black people. I think it would be nice to use more. However, on the other hand, we are not Caramo up in Cleveland, we are not black-oriented, and our audience, very little of it is. Very few black people come, and that is too bad, too, but I think they are probably discouraged. Now the next show I am going to be directing is "Little Foxes". There is a black man and black woman who are housing servants

M: And the roles are quite good, too

G: Yes.

M: I do not mean to dwell on that, but since this is such a particularly large problem --I think it gets larger every day and you are an expert at it -- I would like to talk

more because I do not have any information like that on these tapes. The roles that are written, too. There just are not that many plays that have huge parts for black people. Some of them have come up-and certainly most of them-in the last twenty years. Is that not right?

G. That is very true, excepting menials. Many times like in the "Royal Family" or something which is a show from the 1920's, of course, the house servant and the maid were black. It just happens it can be played white; I have seen it done both ways. But the other problem, and I think it is a key one in this discussion, is that we tend not to do much heavy material here.

We do more musicals and comedies and occasionally I drama, but much of the black theatrical literature like "No Play to be Somebody" and "First Breeze of Summer" and some of those things are so down and depressing. It does reflect, indeed, the sad state of the community. However, the bulk of our audience is not necessarily going to want to sit through that. We have done things before my time, when I was not connected with it, like "Raisin in the Sun." They did do "Ceremonies," and therefore I know that. As I say, it was the occasional black role. I certainly am not adverse to using a black actor or actress.

M. Oh, I know that about you. You bend over backwards to be very, very integrated in your production whenever possible.

G. Whenever it is possible, but I am not going to do it if it is going to change the connotation of the show.

M. I thought it was interesting, what you said about "Uncle Tom's Cabin." I think that is peculiarly a vivid instance because there has been much objection in the black communities across the country about even "Gone with the Wind" being replayed, as you know, and certain plays like that, that were part of what people demand to change history. How do you feel about that?

G. I am totally in accordance with you. I think it is appalling.

M. It is history, and you cannot change it.

G. You just do not wave a wand and it is going to go away.

M. No, okay, we have covered that. Now just go anywhere you want to from there.

G. I came back from the puppet company when my father died a couple of days later. I went with the chap who was touring with me with the marionettes down to visit his mother who lived in Albion. We rode over to East Lansing, which was where Bentley was at the time. Bentley and a friend of his said that they did not think we would be back from our puppet tour. They thought we would be

unavailable They said that they were starting a summer theater.

What they had done was they had taken over an old garage Bentley, on his hands and knees, had scrubbed all of that oil and grease I think we borrowed chairs from a funeral parlor or something like that There was a stage built at one end I think we had twelve funnel spotlights Someplace he got an old, used piano board Mary Phillips and Wentley Benoff were going to do this I was sort of under the sponsorship of Bentley's folks with the understanding that he would pay them back when the thing caught on.

M Could you just tell enough on his life with you at that time so that people would know how his folks were involved in theater and how that did open up the opportunity to you?

G I do not know that Charlie and Sylvia were really involved in theater at all, that was his father and mother

M But they wanted it for him

G They wanted it for him, they were behind him 100% He had been a sickly child, and that was how they had gotten up to northern Michigan They used to live in Florida and the Detroit area He used to have asthma, and they heard about northern Michigan being very good for asthma and hay fever, so they went up and took a turn of the century hotel called the Chippewa and ran it as a resort hotel and made a great success of it, as far as that is concerned He went to Minnesota to work on his doctorate after he graduated. Then he went to Lansing I was not with him there for a period of time We came back and found out that he was starting that, so we went up there

Mark Phillips and his wife and on her fellow from Michigan State called Carlos O'Brien and a couple of other people from there and a couple of people from Albion who we had known We went up and there was a falling out right in the first week of rehearsals Mary and his wife left Bentley called us all together You were laughing about salary, I made \$22 a week and board.

M What year was this?

G: The summer of 1954 He called us all together and said that he lost the guy who was going to direct half of the shows He said that we could try as long as we were with him We were all really gung ho, we all said that we would try That summer we opened with "See How They Run", "Laura", "The Male Animal", and "The Glass Menagerie " I believe that was the season

M No meager lineup You certainly had confidence

G We dressed in a little tiny room It was so tiny and so uncomfortable. It was kind of like in the basement where the parts had been stored in the garage To get

upstairs you had to go outdoors, I remember that. If it was raining, you had nothing to do but get wet. The company was quite small. We were housed in the Chippewa hotel the second summer, which would have been 1955.

M: How did that season go, financially?

G: Not well. We did crazy, crazy things, I remember, for promotion, Bentley had a trailer hitch and a small trailer on the back of his car. We borrowed from a local saloon a little bitty, upright piano. We put that on a cart and rode around town singing. When we did "See How They Run", we all got in track outfits and ran around blocks. It is a resort area. Petoskey, Michigan is a resort area with some very lovely shops and stuff. As for how much money, I cannot remember what that playhouse sat.

M: I remember from that year that the aspiring actors and theater people did not dwell on the money so much.

G: Oh, no.

M: It was the performance and the love of it.

G: Of course, it was not union theater.

M: There was a different kind of naivete or something.

G: Yes. It is true, it is true, they were different plays then. Sex had not reared its ugly head. Things were tantalizing, but they were not blatantly sexual.

The second season, the summer of 1955, I went to Wayne University. A guy I had met in the company was from Wayne. He said that they needed a costume designer -- I mean an assistant costumer director -- at the Wayne Theater. I went down and lied my way into that job, really. Although I had made the costumes for my marionettes and knew my way around the sewing machines, I was not exactly a costume designer, as you would say.

I went up to the fellow who was the head costume man, Jim Essen was his name. He looked me right in the eye and he said, "Can you draft, cut and build?" I looked him right back in the eye and said, "Of course." He did the men's costumes, and I did the women's costumes for "Gigi".

I did a little acting there. That was my first time to play Petruccio in the "Taming of the Shrew," and I played Preacher Haggler in the "Dark of the Moon." I directed "Ring Around the Moon" for directing class. Then Mr. Loon who was the head of the theater department at that time did not want anybody on staff who did not have a master's degree. He said that if I wanted to stay, I would have to go on and take more courses and get my degree. I really did not care anymore about going back to school; so I thanked him very much and left. It was an amiable leaving, it was okay.

Then I went back up to Petoskey with Bentley. That was the summer of 1955, and that was the most incredible summer, I think, of my life as far as trying to learn lines. I played the Bogart part from the movie of "My Three Angels", I played Elwood P. Dowd in "Harvey"; I was the musical director on a funny little review musical called "Three for the Show", I played Phillip the lover in the "Little Hut" which is a three character show, I repeated the aunt in "Charlie's Aunt", I played Willie Loman in "Death of a Salesman" At that stage of the game, I was so exhausted that I said to Bentley, "I'm sorry; I have got to go home I cannot do anything more " He said, "Oh, please, we are doing "Sabrina Fare " It is a tiny, tiny role of the little part of a French man " So I said, "Okay, I will do that, but then I really have to go home because I am tired " I left at that point in the season

M I see this started early then, Bentley's view of the time of the day being stretchable

G That playhouse was an entirely different playhouse I did not even tell you that The Lenoff's -- his folks--owned a series of stores over which were kind of housing facilities That was where we wound up living They gutted the first two floors of this series of buildings and made it the playhouse. It was really kind of charming. I do not know how much that one sat either, but we did live in the top of that playhouse It was incredible

When we got there, while we were rehearsing the first two, we were also finishing up wiring it We did not have a licensed electrician doing that building I think that was against the law, I do not know We were brave in those days

During the last few weeks I was there, a fellow from the errand Rapids, who was the director of the Grand Rapids Civic Theater, came along and asked me to come down and build sets I said, "Sure". That I know a little bit more about than costuming because I had worked backstage and all of that stuff at that I came down, and we did "Showboat"

M You always get stuck with the biggies right at the beginning

G We did the performances in a high school We had checked and got their permission to use their counterweight system so that we could fly the showboat We had to use union stage hands The principals were professionals brought in from New York, I remember that I got to play the part of Jake because, again, I could play the piano

We built the sets -- they were enormous -- in a vacant store in downtown Grand Rapids They then would be trucked to South High School We got into South High School and the custodian said, "Oh, you cannot use the counterweight system " So I had this enormous showboat which had to be built in sections to get in out and of the store downtown and to get it in the truck to transport it to South I sat there sawing the top deck off of the showboat I have never been through anything like that opening We only had one rehearsal on stage There

was a poor girl doing props. Somebody rolled a piano over her foot.

The Civic Light Opera went bankrupt after that. We built the sets actually for "Kiss Me Kate". That was to be the next show. The sets were all done, ready to go, and they ran out of money.

M: That so often happens.

G: That was the end of that. I went to work in a record department of a department store, and then I got a job in the display department of the department store.

M: You have such ease. You have grown up, as you said, rather spoiled. Was it just your love of the theater?

G: I think so, I think it had to be. I cannot believe I was very brave or very daring or adventurous about any of that sort of thing. It was just the thing to do, there was no other alternative, so that was the way you functioned.

Meanwhile, I finished up with the Civic Light Opera and I got the job with the display department. The man who was brought in to direct "Showboat" -- a man named Leonard Patrick -- had been the director at the Flint Musical Tent which was under the production produced by Robert K. Adams, whose daughter is Brooke Adams, who is now the movie star. I knew her when she was a little bitty girl back in those days. They said, "Why do you not come over? We are going to audition some of the Grand Rapids folk for the Flint Musical Tent." We all drove over to Flint.

A fellow by the name of Marvin Poons was the stage manager, he was a wonderful manager. It occurred to somebody that I might be a very good assistant stage manager. Of course, this was an equity company. I was hired as an assistant stage manager. That was when I joined the actor's union. As assistant stage manager you can do almost anything. I did. The first show that summer was a straight show; it was "Seven Year Itch" with Ronny Graham and his, then wife, Ellen Hannley and Leonard Patrick's wife, Gloria Patrick -- but that was not her stage name. That was the first show. The next show was "South Pacific", and I was cast as Lieutenant Harvison in addition to doing what ever else one does as an assistant stage manager, which are very, very many jobs. This is in Flint, Michigan. Well, actually, it is a little town called Kyle, Michigan, but it was called the Flint Musical Tent. They had hired a young boy to be -- I think his name was Martin Rimard -- the set man. Martin was a protégé of a Broadway designer, I cannot speak his name, I am sorry. He did not like to be called a set designer, he likes to be called a placist.

M: What is that?

G: I have no idea. He had a lot of strange ideas. The whole company would go out for a nice dinner, and he would arrive barefoot. He was just a freaky guy. He was perfectly okay, but not very brilliant. So the stage manager, Marvin Poons,

came up to me about a week into the season. We were getting ready to do "Annie Get Your Gun" Martin had designed "Annie Get Your Gun" Next was going to be the "Student Price" Martin said to me, "You seem to be doing most of the work Why do you not design the sets?" I said, "Well, why not?" He was going to give me a little more money I think I made \$125 at that point which after Petoskey was princely.

M I guess that was good money

G Right I designed the sets for the rest of the season This was in a tent, so things were done in the round There was not a lot of flat scenery The stage floor which was a large oval had to be painted for each of the shows and designed to do something interesting There was also a ring around the pipes behind which the lights were on, and that had to be decorated. Then you would do something with the tent poles and the odd furniture and what not. That whole season I worked with the stage carpenter, and we did it One of my friends from Grand Rapids, Bill MacEndire, was a record salesman at that point He used to come spend his weekends "helping" He would arrive on Thursday and stay through Tuesday, then he would go out on the road for two days selling records He did not have that job for very long, but he was enormously helpful.

I got a call while I was in the musical tent asking if I would be interested to do the technical direction at the Grand Rapids Civic Theater because they knew of my work with the Civic Opera, even though the showboat had to be slashed and everything I went and I took over They had a very good man who had been educated and trained at the Kalamazoo Playhouse, but he was leaving He was going to another part of the country, and they needed somebody So the president of the Grand Rapids Civic Theater called and asked if I would like to I said, "Sure" The director at that point was Sid Spade, who came here to do "Delicate Balance" some years ago We did six shows a year I did two seasons, so I did twelve Well, some of them were multiple sets everything from the "Boyfriend" to "Ladies Not for Burning" to you name it It was fun, we had wonderful volunteers in those days We had work nights That is something that I think is missing here at Youngstown Playhouse There just are not any nights to have them Ron Peter, who was on the staff a couple years ago tried to re-institute work nights, and there just was not the feeling for it

M Give us a little capsule version of what a work night is

G Work night is where people who would ordinarily not want to go on stage but want to get involved and do something at the theater would come down and help build scenery or work on costumes or gather props or anything of that sort. The coffee pot was always on. As a matter of fact, it was Sid Spade's idea that we would break when the cast was rehearsing, and they took a break when the tech staff was working I do not mean tech staff, there was one tech person on salary at Grand Rapids Civic Theater

M That was you

G I was the standard director, he was the artistic director, and we had a business manager. The rest were all volunteers. Everybody who was working backstage on costumes, props, or whatever would break at the same time that the cast broke. We would get together in the greenroom and have coffee together. We would discuss what was happening at their rehearsal and what was happening with ours and so on. It was great fun, it was a good time to get a costume fitting. A good time to have somebody check out a door to see if it was working.

M. Camaraderie.

G: Exactly that. Actually, the stars on the stage would not be much if it did not have scenery and costumes to work with, so everybody is important in a community theater. In my work here -- since I had just been directing here, not doing technical work at Youngstown -- I try to make my crews feel that they are important because they are. I honestly believe that. And they should be having a good time, they should not sit around and waste their time.

M No, it should not be a drudgery

G: No

M. It should be for the pleasure and the fun and the fulfillment for when they come here

G: Exactly that. So, at any rate, that was what happened there for two seasons. The summer of 1957 Bob Adams took over, in addition to the Flint Musical Tent, the Detroit Musical Tent. That was a little bit different season. We would play a week in Flint, and then we would split the show and play it a week in Detroit, so we only did six shows instead of twelve a year, but they were very elaborate. We did "Naughty Marietta", we did "Peter Pan". Joe Wilder came in to play Peter Pan, we tried to get Joe Gray as a matter of fact. Peter Ford did the professional flying. When that season was over, we each got a free ride on the harness set-up and found out just how difficult that it is to make it look graceful.

I went home and there was not a job. They had to find a man who was more qualified to do the sets at the Grand Rapids outfit. I was really tired of technical theater anyhow. I was about to go apply for unemployment -- the first time ever. I was literally on my way out the door of my mother's house when the phone rang from Pittsburgh. I really have this wrong. That was a year later. It is difficult for me to get this in the right sequence.

After the second summer in Flint and Detroit, I took a little vacation and came up to a friend's cottage in northern Michigan and, of course, had to go over and say hello to Bentley, as I had not been with him in those two summers. He said, "Please come back". I said, "I would love to, but musicals are not really my

cup of tea " He said, "I will give you \$75 a week plus a room " We sort of had a gentleman's agreement, which is about all we ever had in our life in the time we have been working together I do not think we have ever had more than one or two written contracts

So then I did go back home, and I had another season of technical direction at the Grand Rapids Civic Theater Then I went back to Petoskey We opened with "A Visit to a Small Planet", and I played the lead. I played the role of Charles He was from the movie "Bernedette "

M I do not know the stage version

G: Gene Walter Kerr did it At one point Bernedette had been telling me about what happened at the spring I told her to go back to the lady and tell her this and that and the other thing It was a long series of things that she was to tell the lady to do, and I got it all screwed up Then the last sentences in my speech was, "you repeat after me what I said " She gave me this baleful look and proceeded to give it back to me exactly as I had said. She was a very good actress

The seasons prior to this I had directed for Bentley "Charlie's Aunt" and played the lead, which was a bit of a taxation, and I did that the second time we did it I think those were the only two shows I directed during the first two seasons

The next season which we are now talking about, which is now 1958, I directed about three shows I was with Bentley about eight years So the following six summers I spent with Bentley

M At Petoskey?

G: At Petoskey By this time they had built a beautiful playhouse about seven miles north of Petoskey in a little town called Eden, which sat just under 800 people

M Then you were successful in this venture

G Fairly, yes The problem is that people in that area have the idea that summer is front porches and swimming and boating, they do not really come up Most of the people from the Chicago area or the Cincinnati area would see professional companies doing these theatrical things that we were doing. Often it was the local population that saw us rather than the tourist trade There was a professional company over at Traverse City where they would get television names, television stars, or commercial stars, whatever, to come in and do a package show So if people really wanted to see somebody who was famous, they would go there

M That gives you invaluable experience. What you got to do in those eight years, many actors never get a shot at.

G Oh, yes The opportunity to play so many things that I was not really right for

M The challenge

G In this day and age there is so much type-casting going on I got to play oldsters and youngsters and Japanese -- you name it It was fun. I really had a good time. There was a wide range of roles, and I cannot say anything else but that I really had a wonderful time It was an extremely creative period, and I enjoyed working with Bentley

While I was back at the Grand Rapids Civic Theater we had a directing workshop A young man named Ron Parker came and got involved there, and I directed Ron in his first show at Grand Rapids It was "The Marriage Proposal" He was, and is, just a naturally talented actor.

M Certainly, I agree

G: Through me he met Bentley, and Bentley had him up there for six seasons. As a matter of fact, Ron and I have worked together in various places in the country almost every since It has been a wonderful, strong and warm, supportive friendship

A man named Yule Tarrant who, at that point, was the head of the Erie Playhouse, had gone around the summer stock circuit looking for actors for the winter season He saw me do Creetown in "A Visit to a Small Planet" If I do say so myself, I was pretty good in that part It was a very splashy role, very theatrical, of course Mr Tarrant called me and offered me a job acting in Erie By that time I had a few financial obligations, like car payments and things of that, so I was unable to work there for the money he offered me which, as I recall, was \$75 a week I told him at that time that I would be more than happy to be in his acting company and do technical work as well, if he could increase my salary He could not, fine

A woman named Faye Parker, who was the company manager for Grace Price who ran the Pittsburgh Children's Theater, called and said that she was looking for an actor to play the giant in "Jack and the Giant Beanstalk". That was the day I was almost on my way out the door for the unemployment office when the call came from Faye Parker in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania saying, "How would you like to come and play the giant in "Jack and the Giant Beanstalk?" As a matter of fact, that touring children's theater I said that we had at Dennison University, I had played the part in that very version of the show.

M You always got called to work That is unusual.

G Pretty much

M Those things do not happen frequently

G No I said, "Sure " So she said, "You have to drive the truck with the scenery in it too, but we will pay you \$75 a week " No, it would not have been \$75 a week It must have been \$50

M Maybe you could do that because you wanted to do it more.

G Maybe It could be Anyhow, I went to Pittsburgh By that time Grace Price had founded this This was founded way back in the beginning of what we know of in this country as children's theaters When I was a kid, I remember very fondly seeing productions done by Claretree Major that would come through from New York I just thought they were wonderful If Claretree Major's company was as small as ours was and it just seemed grand because it was on a big stage with lights

Anyhow, I played the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk" Ron was on his way to New York and stopped off to see me A girl who was playing the harp in "Jack and the Beanstalk" got sick I said that Ron was an actor; he stepped right in

M He did not play the harp, did he?

G Oh, no, he did not have to play the harp. He had to wear this dress that the girl wore, and it looked kind of silly. He went back with his parents' car and drove back to Michigan He then flew down and joined the company down in Cincinnati and was with them for two seasons That was just the way those things were We would have our winters in Pittsburgh and our summers in Petoskey It was a nice change, and you were working in theater all the time

I did three seasons with the Pittsburgh Children's Theater Ron went to New York to try to make it big in theater I went to study voice because I was having a little trouble at the time While I was at the Pittsburgh Children's Theater, I not only played the giant, but I would do some of the female villainous roles, too I played the stepmother in "Cinderella" I played the evil fairy in "Sleeping Beauty" All that falsetto, singing as well as speaking, did something to my vocal chords I thought I would study. I knew a girl who was a very fine singer, and she suggested a man in Detroit I made an appointment and went to see him He said that there was something physiologically wrong with my throat. He sent me to a specialist and the fellow told me that I had a tumor on my vocal chords He told me that I had to quit smoking to clear up that infection. He scheduled the surgery for that coming October Come October I went and had it removed Fortunately, it was benign, but my voice has never sounded the same to me after that. I have had a real psychological thing when I have had to appear as an actor. It does not really bother me When I listen to a tape of myself before the operation, before the problem and I listen to a current tape, it does not sound like there is all that much difference

M. But your mind

- G: My mind has made the difference I had the pleasure of playing with you in "Tobacco Road" The gentlemen here at Youngstown who was scheduled to play the role got sick or something, and Bentley, knowing that I had played it in Petoskey, called on me to come out here to Youngstown
- M I think we can say here that by this time the fellow who had originated the playhouse in Michigan, Mr Bentley Lenoff, had been hired in Youngstown, Ohio as the executive director, and called upon his old and dear friend and co-worker Bob Grey to come and play Jeeder Lerner -- a major and very difficult role -- in the play "Tobacco Road" that was done here. He felt that he needed a professional touch which Bob could furnish in 1968
- G Yes, it came out in 1968 We played the show in January of 1969. That, however, was a few years later After I got the throat thing, everybody said it was fine, even though I had this thing about it I went to New York myself.
- M What year would that be?
- G. 1958. Bob Adams, the guy with the Flint Musical Tent, by that time was into children's theater himself One of the directors he had had with him in Michigan was his director He did historical things. They were really musical -- shorts, small cast musicals This was a story of Tom Jefferson, and I was to play an old family friend I remember in the first performance I came out and my line was "Tom, boy, Tom, lad, what a mother! How is your surprise?" Right back at me he said, "Fine sir How is yours?"
- M. Would you tell a little bit about when you arrived in New York and how you felt as a young man after all that anticipation?
- G Yes What I did know, which does happen to some people, the more you do, the more you learn, I have the feeling that you do not really know. Having had this extraordinary situation, until the voice problems, of working practically constantly in theater -- I mean earning my bread and butter in some form of theater from the time I left school -- not many people I knew had done that I found it very gratifying that that was the case However, I had not built up the insulation needed to face the rejection of New York
- M Tell about that
- G I would go and buy all the periodicals, I bought Backstage and Variety and stuff I would look at all the auditions and find something, something that I was just sure I would be right for, and I would go and there would be 150 people lined up there, desperate for that same part I only could take "Thank you We will let you know", or "No, you are too thin", "No, you are too fat" -- name it. So that was about the extent of that

M. Did you have your equity card at that time?

G Oh, yes. I have had me equity card since 1956 when I went with the Flint tent, which was professional I keep my membership, even though directing is not part of the actor's union, it is a different union. It is harder to get back in, so it is better to just keep paying the minimum dues

Someplace along this period of time I got a job in marketing research as a typist and stayed with that company for several years.

M. In New York City?

G: Yes, in New York City They were awfully good to me During that time, Ron and I were sharing an apartment Ron, through a friend, got a job at the Fantastic, like the assistant stage manager, which meant that he had to do the laundry and iron the clothes and run the lights It was one of those funny things So he had that job Shortly there after, he moved up to the part of the mute in "The Fantastics"

M. Tell about how long "The Fantastics" was running

G Oh, yes When I was in the show still, it celebrated its fifteenth anniversary. I think it is in its nineteenth or twentieth year by this time.

M. Off-Broadway It is the longest running musical in the world

M Right

G So Ron moved up to the role of the mute, and I auditioned for the old actor. I was again told, "Thanks No, thanks " I had wanted to be the old actor because I had played it in Michigan years before with the Civic Theater That was that, I thought. It was like a season later that Eddy Garrobran became stage manager He was friends with Ron and he said to have me come down and audition again. So I auditioned for Eddy, and I was cast I think I called everybody in the whole world to tell them that I had a part in New York

M You called me here in Youngstown Interpassed in that period from when you went to New York later from your first appearance her in a play in "Tobacco Road" until you did "The Fantastics," Bentley got in the habit then of having you to come and guest direct, so we all got to see you time and again then in between those times

G Right That is true. I remained with "The Fantastics" on and off for two and a half years. In order to maintain myself, because the actor's pay scale was not that great for off Broadway at that time, I was still working for the Marketing Research Company during the day "The Fantastics" is like "The Musketeers" in

London, which is also very long running. Practically everybody in the business has played one of those parts at one time or another; so there never was any problem if Bentley called me and asked me to come out to Youngstown to direct. All I had to do was tell the stage manager, and he would get somebody to go on for me. As a matter of fact, Ron started going on for me, after he dropped out of the show as the mute, he started going on as the old actor whenever I would come out to Youngstown.

M: It is a wonderful, little close-knit theater.

G: Yes, it is.

M: And very unusual.

G: Yes. So, I did come back. The first thing I came to direct in the fall of 1969 in which Bentley asked me to direct was "Black Comedy" which was a one night play. The show had been precast. I felt really bad because I had to let one of the guys go because I just could not work with him, I remember that vividly. Then I came back again that spring or winter and did three shows running, one right after the other—"Don't Drink the Water", "Blithe's Spirit", and "Cactus Flower". I remember you did me the favor of playing a part in "Cactus Flower" because I could not get anybody to play it.

M: During all of this you would go back and forth to New York. Your life was on the plane constantly.

G: Right. Then the next season we skipped a whole season. Then the following season I came back to direct "Dark of the Moon". Subsequently, I have been back over the years until 1973 when Bentley said to me that I should just come and be on staff full time. At that point I was directing two shows a year, and then I moved up to three shows a year. The last two seasons and this season I will be doing four shows a year.

M: Plus you have your awesome abilities that you use in the office all the time.

G: Right. Because of the years in marketing research and the typing and those things, I became a fairly decent statistical typist. I was happy to put these skills to work. I would rather be busy when I came out from New York. I really did not have any other obligations, other than to direct a show, so I would come over and fiddle around the office. If the campaign membership drive was on, I would help do that and do whatever I could. I then started working in the office.

Now that I am getting old and more decrepit, Bentley is awfully good to me. When I came directing a show, I usually only put in about three or four hours in the office. I like when I am blocking a show to have a floor plan from the scenic designer, Paul Kimpel, and little wooden pegs that I can move around to

be the people I think that if I do have the talent as a director .

M. You are still saying that Even if you were directing thirty shows a year, you still say, "If I do have the talent . " You always preface your remarks that way

G Let us say, "I do have the talent" I think part of it is my stage picturization and my ability to direct comedy, which I think is very difficult.

M How about your ability to move large cast shows around, which most people do not have? And take people who have minor parts and make them stand out and give attention to all facets of the production, which so many directors do not even think about in their shows?

G Again it is that thing we were talking about earlier This is their application It is my job, I am paid to do it, but if they are here to have a good time and you do not waste their time by blocking and having them try it this way and trying it that way, you have a concrete idea You would be willing to change it, of course I am willing to change characterization ideas if somebody comes in with something better than what I have thought of I am very flexible in that event, and I feel very fortunate to work with the staff I think Paul is a greatly gifted man in both costumes and scenery. I think this town does not know what it has got Having worked in several community organizations, as well as professional organizations, the general level of quality that goes on our stage here, I think, is remarkably good

M I want you to tell more about that I do not know exactly what position, but I know it is uppermost in America for a community theater and the tremendous advanced technical equipment and facility Would you go on about that?

G, Yes Most community theaters have exactly the staff we talked about in Grand Rapids There was a director; there was a technical director, and there was a business manager Well, now we have a permanent staff of nine people, plus all those part-timers We are some place between a professional and a nonprofessional theater We have a reputation to live up to We are one of the largest budget community theaters in the country I believe there are two others that are bigger -- I am not too sure about that anymore, it has been so long

M Where would those be?

G I think one is Omaha, and one is someplace out further. I am really not sure

M You mean on this side of the Mississippi we reign king then?

G Yes, we are number one

M: That is pretty good. What I like to think about is how many times in New York, once I started to go there and tell people that I was from Youngstown Playhouse, the people know that name.

G: Exactly.

M: In theater across the country.

G: That is true.

M: That and TNT (Trumbull New Theater).

G: That does not necessarily evolve from the fact that we have brought in guest actors. We have brought in guests. There have always been artistic directors here -- I mean, people who have directed Broadway folks like Arthur Sercum. He directed the "Gish Girls", directed "Bang Cat", directed lots of people. We have had some very fine professional directors here over the years. We have had some dogs, too.

This is the third playhouse as I understand it, Arlington was quite small, and Market Street only sat 130 or something. This, before they added the balcony, sat about 500, now it seats 620.

M: Many Broadway houses do not seat that many people.

G: Right, right.

M: I do get angry about the people in this community not being aware of it.

M: Yes, outside of the circle of people who participate. The others make kind of degrading remarks sometimes. It may be a Midwestern attitude. What do you attribute that to?

G: I really cannot say. I have sat in on board of directors meetings where they have discussed this very problem. Some people say it is because we are not social enough and that the symphony has a classier operation. Well, I do not believe that. I do not feel that way.

M: No, that is not true at all.

G: I certainly think that we contribute culturally to the community with all of the public service things we do for the youngsters in the area, having special performances of our regularly scheduled shows to which we invite university students and give them a discount, and sometimes even free tickets for the speech and communication department, and tickets for a charitable organization like the blind and Easter Seal and things like that.

- M: Social functions that use recycle or use in a different manner the facilities available at the Playhouse That has been done by the community They have this wonderful arena we are sitting, in and also the new addition that is fairly new -- the Helen Moyer Room upstairs where they have banquets Always we are striving to fit into the community need
- G: Right, and provide a genuine service other than just entertainment. Now on the other side of the coin, I feel we do too much popular entertainment and not enough serious stuff I am not saying I am the best director in the world
- M: I know you would never say that, Bob You would never say that you were the best not serious director in the world
- G: But I will say this that I did direct the only two Shakespeare plays that have been done here in thirty years -- good, bad, or indifferent
- M: They were both marvelous productions I wonder if you could pinpoint more why is it that we have this wonderfully functioning place with all of these people available --sometimes it is hard to drudge up some men -- that by and large it certainly has more to offer than most places like that? Why do we not do more of these type of shows?
- G: As I understand our history, back when a man named Kirkpatrick was the artistic director, they did Ipps and Czenhoy and Shawl and Shakespeare They also did Ivern Avello and "Old Coward" and things like that, but the steady dies was not all fluff Then someplace along this line -- this happened on Market Street, I believe, around the time of the Second War when men were scarce -- they started doing really drippy shows I mean, silly, innocuous things maybe to make people feel better when the war was on, but they stopped doing the classics The only people who were doing the classics were what they called the experimental group They did some Shakespeare and what not, but they were always relegated to the basement When they moved into this Playhouse down here in the arena, they never got to do an experimental show on stage. Was "Cherry Orchard" main stage?
- M: Yes, we did that main stage.
- G: It was main stage, okay I take that back
- M: But I would like to say that it was a four-act play, and after the third act the majority of the audience got up and left after the third act, they did not know there was a fourth act coming
- G: You see, there you are; that is part of life.

M But that is how you educate people

G Yes, but the audience has not been educated

M They need to be

G They need to be

M I think they would learn

G: And you cannot shove it down their throat, but it should not all be light and fluffy. It is not all light and fluffy; I mean, we are doing a drama and a comedy drama this year. We are doing three musical comedies, which I think is excessive. They sound like they are grand, and they are practically always sold out. But when you figure the amount of costs to costumes and sets and stuff to do a musical, to say nothing of the union of musicians we have to use.

M Exactly.

G: They do not really make that much money, but they are audience pleasures. There are people in this community who I am sure would buy a season ticket, or at least would come to a single show, if they had the opportunity to see something like an Epson.

M The main thing there is to keep the place running in the back and forget about

G I believe that is the philosophy of the board of directors at that point. They go along pretty much with what Bentley suggests, and he is canny, he has raised the tone of this place. I mean, financially, he had built it into a big business. Unfortunately, if I may be candid -- I certainly would never say anything deprecating to Bentley -- but he does not come from a community theater background, as I have come. Therefore, it is his job to be the executive director, if he chooses to direct a play, fine, he will direct a play. He has gotten a play. It is totally at his submission.

M Which is a loss to the theater here, because he is great

G He is a very fine director, he really is. He does not take an active artistic interest. If the season is popular, if it will make money, fine. That is an unfortunate thing. We are busy all the time. You could not hardly schedule a show down here in the arena anymore.

M: Right. I know that.

G You have to use this as a rehearsal hall because there are social functions going

on What used to be the rehearsal hall is now the bar, and then they have that room, which I cannot stand, as a rehearsal hall, but there are things going on there, too.

M Yes, a magnificently appointed and quite large back room that they have added on to this I think they could be more of that mellowing out in other directions and not lose the classics I do not want a playhouse where that is all they do.

G Oh, no

M: I think a few of them There is a room

G: I do, too. Hopefully the time will come I am not saying that we do not do fine plays, like "Little Foxes," which is coming up is a milestone in American theater, but we could do some more modern shows. I would love to do a restoration comedy I would love to do a Moier But where are you going to get the people? And that is another thing If you are doing a stylized show -- something that requires a sense of period -- then your director has to work twice as hard because you have to try to instill some sense of that style. I mean, people who move in those costumes in those days and ages, in those periods of time, and the very social order of things, dictated how movements were done Well, you cannot expect Joe Blow to come walking in off the street from the steel mills and be able to play Tartu

M Not only that, you are teaching people how to move and talk better I have seen you do that You have been tremendously helpful in giving people assets that they did not have before You have also taken British playwrights' works and Americanized the language so that the actors could use it more with more facility Now that is a formidable task

G, Yes I thought it would be much easier That is an interesting point you have there We did a play called "Hable Le Haslob" a few years ago It was a foreign comedy They did it on Broadway with Phil Silvers and Virginia Wolf, Sandy Dennis Phil Silvers and Sandy Dennis were two of the people I remember They just changed Brighton to Pittsburgh or something like that without changing the melody line of the speech, without changing the phraseology. It just did not work It was no wonder that show did not work on Broadway. When I did that move over Mrs Marcum and decided to lay it in New York rather than London, it entailed rewriting the show literally three times Each time it was getting it a little more American Unfortunately, there was one section of dialogue about a page long that there was no comparable thing that I could find in America that would work

M Let alone the hours of work on your own time

- G Right, right Fortunately, the last year we had a British farce which was "Chase the Comrade" last year we had a British-born woman and her husband helped us with our pronunciations That was incredible, and everybody seemed to adore it Everybody had a good laugh out of it The fact that we did it British was fine This year I would have loved to have done "A Lady's Not for Burning", "Important of Being Earnest", but because I am also doing a musical of "My Fair Lady" which is stylish and British, I do not think you can give the audience too much of that in one season I think you have to go a little sparingly
- M You try so hard to be homogenizing in selections I do not think people realize the agonization that you go through to do stuff like this It just does not come pouring out
- G Oh, no I think people are totally unaware of how difficult it is to put together a season For instance, we would love to do "Death Trap," which is currently running on Broadway Of course, we cannot do it. If the "Little Foxes" was still running in New York rather than Los Angeles, we would not have been given the rights to do the "Little Foxes" Now that is a forty years old show
- M: You are right.
- G But the rights and royalties There is a Carousel Dinner Theater over there in Ravenna The play brokers have to protect the professional theaters before they can give something to the summer show If somebody wanted to go through there with a production of some razzle musical that is on Broadway, we cannot get the rights until after they have played it
- M That is true I recall being involved in something like that You are now a Youngstown resident and have been since 1973.
- G Several people have said to me, "How can you be happy here in Youngstown when you lived in New York?" I have made wonderful friends They say, "Why would you want to leave New York and come here?" It is very simple If I could be doing what I am doing in Youngstown and still be doing it in New York, I would love it, I would just love it But nobody has been calling me up and asking me to come direct Broadway shows, or even off-Broadway shows.
- M I consider you an authority -- and also an articulate -- on this subject. Would you please tell the difference between a typical day in Youngstown in the theater and a typical day, if there is such a thing, in New York in the theater, and why that precludes doing this in New York? Put as much flavoring and coloring as you can, and I know that is a lot
- G Okay

- M Because you are capable of making the comparison
- G First of all, there are enormous differences in putting on a show in New York than there are in putting a show on in Youngstown So you have to be aware of these difference before you can really make any sort of comparison In New York, of course, it is all union --at least Broadway and most off-Broadway, and some of off-off-Broadway, in fact It goes on infinitely The man who owns the theater has to have his piece of the pie Whether it is a musical or not, you have to pay three musicians for every single performance That is not cheap wages that they have You have union stagehands, you have union lighting people Of course, all of your actors and actresses are union, your box office personnel are union Therefore, they are going to do a production of the "Little Prince" which a young boy, a ten year old boy in Youngstown is in, with Michael York
- M Is he playing the little prince?
- G No, he is not playing the little prince He is playing one of the other little boys But at this stage of the rehearsal.
- M. What is his name?
- G His name is Greg Shaffer from Warren He was originally cast in "Life With Father" Then this came up and so he went to New York and got the part. His brother stepped in Both of them have been acting in the children's theater. At any rate his father was telling us that that show was capitalized at \$1 5 million It was not through angels, but through the sale of stock
- Now you are talking really big business the running of the theater, all of the union people that you have to pay, right down to the little ladies who hand out the programs It is all union. Well, we do not have that here at this playhouse except when we do a musical Also what we do not have here, which is rather unfortunate, we rarely do an original show If we do a show, it is a show that somebody else has tried out, has worked on, has done until it is as good as it probably can get You are working with a proven commodity when you are working Youngstown I do not really know quite how I can compare a day in New York.
- M. Let us pretend that Bob Gray is holding an audition for one of his shows in Youngstown, Ohio to cast people in the theater Then compare that to Bob Gray going as the actor in New York to an audition.
- G Okay That is very good Bob Gray in Youngstown, Ohio sits down and reads plays and reads plays and reads plays and decides that he wants to do a play. We will just say "Little Foxes" Bentley happens to like the idea, so then Bob Gray types up a little announcement that says who is needed and what is needed and how many people are in it and what age they should sort of look like

if they are not actually that age then they should be able to convey that to an audience. This gets mailed out to our try-out files. Everybody who has ever applied to be in a show or anybody who wants to get involved in the theater comes down and we fill out a card for them. They are all notified of the auditions and when they will be. There are scripts made available so that they can check them out and familiarize themselves with the script, maybe practice reading a little bit in their bathrooms or whatever at home before they come down to the playhouse.

Then they come down here, and they are terrified. You would think it was a performance, but this is not an unusual phenomena for Youngstown. I do not think anyone likes auditions. The last few times I have had to audition for anything, which is quite a few years ago now, my palms would sweat, my underarms would be like faucets, just sheer, cold, nightmare terror. Apparently that is true here in Youngstown. People want to be in a show. I have heard people say that this is a closed show and that we precast shows, it is not true. If somebody works lights on a show and then the next show they work on props and the next show they do something else, if they come to the point where they want to carry a tray out on the third act, by God, they are going to carry that tray out. That is my attitude toward that. I have to make sure that the important roles are able to be played, but I will take a chance on somebody where some other directors around here will not.

M: That is very true.

G: Did I cover that topic?

M: You give them all a script, they all get to sit and read. Hands are extended to them in welcome. At least an attempt is made to make them feel comfortable, whether they do or not.

G: Whether they do or not, right.

M: And they read. Tell about how long it takes to hold readings.

G: Oh, yes. Frequently, we do it on two different evenings. If somebody is unable to attend, I try to accommodate them by having a private reading for them. If indeed, I am not certain, if I have three or four people who I think would be equally good, then I would like to hear them again. So I would have a callback audition maybe a week later and try to beat the bushes if I had not found somebody who comes in on their own to take a part.

M: Let us say a typical play that you have done. I cannot think of a typical one. Let us just say "Dark of the Moon". That had a cast of how many?

G: Twenty-six or twenty-eight, about thirty people.

M So putting that much time into talking and interviewing and listening to that many people for that one show takes up a lot of time Now tell what it is like to go to a New York audition for a call, which is usually already precast, although it never says it

G Yes I have only really auditioned once for a Broadway show It was handled in the fashion which I imagined a Broadway audition would be held Maybe I tell that story?

M I would love you to

G I was in "The Fantasticks" playing the old actor It was a Sunday matinee and Harold Prince was the producer

M The Harold Prince

G The Harold Prince, producer, director. He brought his two children to see the matinee That is a tiny, tiny theater. He could not have been more than eight or ten feet away from me for most of the time I was on stage This was prior to his production of "Follies" which was a story concerned with a reunion of a group of people who had been in like the Ziegfield Follies over the years before the theater was going to be demolished

I got a call from Mr Prince's casting director. I very nearly fainted She said, "Mr Prince saw the 'Fantasticks' the other day." I said, "Yes, I knew he was there". She said, "He would like you to audition for 'Follies'. How old are you?" As it was true then, I said, "On the sunny side of forty " She said, "Oh well, Mr Prince would like you to audition for him anyway. Do you sing?" I said, "No". She said "Oh, well, Mr Prince would like you to sing for him anyway " I said, "What would Mr Prince like me to sing?" She said, "Oh, something vaudevillian " I said, "What do you mean specifically?" She said, "Oh, you know, 'Be My Little Lady Bumblebee', something of that sort." I said, "Okay. When?" She said, "It is to be at the Alvin Theater " I cannot remember, but it was about a week from then

The Alvin was where "Company" was playing The set for "Company" was on stage That also was a Harold Prince show. I went to the music dealers and I bought "Be My Little Lady Bumblebee", and I also bought "Under the Bamboo Tree". I learned it I was studying with a very funny, lovely, really older Italian woman who was a vocal teacher She was helping me with "Be My Little Lady Bumblebee" and "Under the Bamboo Tree".

I get to the theater on the day of my appointment, and if you think I sweat any other time, I about died I did not have to bring my own accompanist Coming out of the playhouse door was Betty Gard. John Cue Bubbles was waiting in the wings to audition. All of these really famous old people were there. Then it came my turn I walked out on stage, and the auditorium was dark. I knew that Steven Sundime and Harold Prince and a few other important folks

were sitting out there They said, "Yes?" I said, "I am Justin Gray " He said, "Oh yes, I saw you in `The Fantasticks'. I said, "Yes, sir "

M. Speaking into the darkness?

G. Yes, speaking into the darkness, trembling He said, "You are a very good actor " I said, "Well, thank you very much I am glad you enjoyed the show " He said, "I particularly enjoyed you. What are you going to do for us?" I said, "I am going to sing `Be My Little Lady Bumblebee '

This nice young man who was playing the piano strikes up the introduction I cannot remember a word I lose it after about two words. Mr Prince said, "That is all right Just relax Take it again " He was the kindest man in the world, I must say So I tried it again Then there was another voice that said, "For God's sake, just go over and stand behind the pianist and read the words if you are having trouble "

M Steven Sundime?

G Maybe I have no idea So I went over and I read them Once I got going I was okay and I could walk back out and sing the rest of it They said "Thank you." They did not even want to hear "Under the Bamboo Tree" Then Mr Prince said, "You are much younger than I thought you were " That was my thanks, no thanks from Harold Prince I was gratified that he thought enough of me to have an audition But if he thought I was an old man when he was sitting ten feet away from me, oughten I be able to put on make-up like that to play an old man?

M. Were you not doing a wonderful job of acting That is the whole point, acting from eight feet away or ten feet away

G. Right Usually the other shows I auditioned for in New York were held in a loft or somebody's grubby little apartment that was a fourth or fifth floor walk up. You run into all of these peculiar, desperate people who all wanted shows

M. Yes

G You did not know Do you remember Janet Burgers?

M Yes, I do

G She was directing a show that a friend of hers had written This was early on in my stay there They were having auditions in a great barn of a place down on Fourteenth Street-a great, old loft building. I went up there, and it was bitter cold. There was not any heat in the building Everybody was sitting around in coats The part that I was auditioning for was a man who, as he was shaving that morning glanced down and saw his first gray pubic hair It must have been a

wretched play, I never went to see a performance of it. Everybody was all really very serious about it. They said, "Would you mind trying that with a little more emotion?" I thought, oh, please, let me out of here. Too much of it is pretentious and so sad.

It is not like in England where people have repertory companies, where people have stock companies. I mean, we have regional theater in this country and some of those actors are brilliant because they have had the experience of working. Even summer stock is not the same anymore because it is more star packages that some go through and you do not get a chance to do different shows with different people; so we do not have that experience building thing to build your technique. I must say that the stint with the Pittsburgh Children's Theater playing for audience after audience up to like twenty-seven or thirty productions of "Jack and the Beanstalk" or "Cinderella" or whatever it may be, in different houses with different stages and traveling in between, to hold to the attention of children is not an easy thing. You really learn your beans about how to be on stage and play it and get your focus and keep it moving because a child's attention span is very limited especially with television now.

When children's theater first started, for instance, I often heard Faye say that when Grace of Clartree Major were first starting out with their touring companies, all they had to do was show up. But now with, television children have no theater manners anymore. They are used to talking, they are used to eating, they are used to getting up and going to the bathroom; nobody has trained them. They do not get a chance to see live theater as often, so they do not know. They will talk, they will carry on unless you rivet them with a good performance. I swear, that is some of the best training that you can get.

- M: I was appalled and also disheartened in New York about showing up at auditions and finding out that there were people like Joe the cab driver and Mike the bus driver and Sam the vegetable man and the girl who sold blouses at Macy's -- I am not putting these people down -- they decided that they wanted to be in a play because their brother told them they were pretty. They did not have any experience; they could not read a newspaper, they could not read the lines at the auditions and yet they were given at nonequity auditions a script to read and at equity auditions, which is supposed to be the elite group of actors that they force you to join when you get in it, you are not allowed to audition. Tell about that. You do not get to show your stuff.
- G: Right. It is which comes first, the chicken or the egg? You cannot have an audition if you do not have an equity card, and you cannot get an equity card unless you are cast in a show. I got in a very special thing there.
- M: Everybody had to. You take your equity card into the people, you hand it to them with a picture and a resume and sign up on the sign-up sheet which looks like the dead sea scrolls. Sometimes there are five names on the sign up sheet.

- G. Exactly A lot of them are illiterates
- M Tell about what happens when the director finally, nine, ten, eight, seventeen hours later, when he talks to you
- G Exactly that By that time he could care less I mean, he has totally lost focus He will say things like, "Could you try that again with an Irish brogue", or "Try that with your shoes of Maybe that will help you relax "
- M That is when you get to audition How about equity? They are called pre-equity interviews for the auditions You stand in line fore nine to ten, eleven, twelve hours a day on the floor and knit and do macrame and look upon the past mistakes of your life while you talk to other disgruntled actors only to go into this huge room. The people say there, "Oh, yes, you are Carol Mills. Is it not nice to meet you? We see you did " and then they name one show off your paper you have submitted "Thank you very much for coming It was so lovely of you, especially on this cold winter day Good-bye " You know that your picture is going in the waste basket
- G. You leave the picture, and it is just going in the waste basket, exactly
- M: You paid \$1 50 per picture
- G. Right
- M Per picture And they throw it in the garbage
- G And then the resume has to be processed
- M Yes. You are never heard from again You could be the greatest actor in the world You do not get to audition
- G Right
- M: They already usually mostly have it precast. Is that right?
- G. Unfortunately, yes I mean when they open it up for what they call the cattle call, it usually is just going through the motions because yes, indeed.
- M To the air the phoney equity rules
- G: You do lose perspective Mistakes are made Some of them are very funny Some of them could hurt a lot I have always loved Bentley's story Bentley used to go to New York City to audition people because he liked to announce his Petoskey Playhouse and his Broadway plays and his Broadway Players I do not

know, Petoskey, I guess, has done a couple of them, two or three of them over the years. One of the people who came and auditioned for Bentley was Barbara Striesand

M. Tell us about that

G He has her picture over his desk -- the one that she left with him. He thought after she left that she was interesting. He said that she read pretty well, but who wanted to see another homely Jewish girl

M Those are kind of the monumental mistakes that can be made

G Right. Another funny thing that happened, and this is a personal thing that happened one of the times when I was coming out here to Youngstown. Somebody saw me do the old actor. Then I came to Youngstown and Ron Peter went in and played my part. They said, "I would like to speak to the man who was playing the old actor." He was very good. We want him for a package for 'The Fantasticks'. We are planning to go around the summer stock circuit with John Calvin in the lead." Ron went down and read for them.

I must explain this. The old actor wears a bald pate and make-up. He is supposed to look like he is 112 years old. I have often said that I have never ever got tired of playing that role. It was such a fine part, but I did get tired of forty-five minutes of putting that make-up on every time.

They had not seen Ron; they had seen me, and he got the part in that touring company. I never was angry about it. I was delighted that he had the opportunity. I never had a chance to work in a star package and play in all house places. I just thought it was funny, I was not angry; I thought it was funny for that kind of mistake.

M Perhaps if you did not know Ron so well, you might have been a little angry.

G Oh, yes. I dare say that is possible.

M The ego rejection and the terrible despair that overcomes people and leads to, this laughingly referred to as show business. Some people tend to think of it as light-hearted. This is hard work.

G. Oh, yes.

M And rejection and despair and going without and not having supportive people around, too, encouraging you every minute.

G, Yes, it is not an easy way at all. When my father asked me what I was going to do when I grew up, I said because at that time I had had the puppets and I had done my little master of ceremony's thing where I did not need the microphone, "I

am going into theater. One way or another, I am going into theater." He said, "I wish you could be happy selling shoes. It is a hell of a tough life. Whatever you do, be as good as you can." So that is what I try to do.

H. You are a gift to this community, you are working daily, you are earning your living in theater.

G. Right. Even while I was still working at Marketing Research Company and just coming out here on a part-time basis. People would say to me, "Why do you want to go out to Youngstown?" When I took the job full-time. I said to them quite simply, "I would rather be working in theater full-time than holding down two jobs doing marketing research, even if it means leaving New York." Even though I am typing in the office sometimes on the financial report or typing up the minutes of theater board meetings or something like that, it is still theater affiliated.

M. That is your job, you work at the theater.

G. That is right.

M. It is wonderful, and it is a rare, rare opportunity. I envy you. I would love to be able to work here.

G. Unless there is no security in it, especially community theater. I do not think there is any security in theater, there is no guarantee there is going to be another job unless you are Tyrone Guthery or somebody.

M. I do not think there is any guarantee on anything anymore.

G. I must agree, but you know what I mean.

M. Yes.

G. I mean, there is no pension pay, there is no one who is going to look after Bob Gray when he is an old man.

M. What makes us get this way? How do we get to be this way?

G. I think in our case it stems from the movies, I really do. I went to the kiddy show every Saturday afternoon, and there was a theater in Grand Rapids, Michigan that even at that time showed older movies like "King Kong" and some of those things that I was too young and had missed growing up. I got to see those things, and I fell in love with them. I learned an awful, awful lot from those old movies.

Living in New York where they were on television all the time, you get to

see them again and you say, "Oh, God, that is a brilliant comedy play " You can somehow sometimes relate that to working with people. Maybe you have never been in a situation where you are smoking a cigarette with a cigarette holder in a posh, London bistro of some sort, but you saw Carole Lombard do it.

You know how she acted and the way the waiters behaved and stuff If you can retain that, if you can get Joe Blow or whoever from here to do that, you have recaptured that something They have learned something that they were never exposed to That is wonderful

M It made me feel good I was doing what I wanted to do

G This is one of the toughest things for me to do, I do not know how other directors feel about this, but knowing how I have felt -- professional theater included -- when I have been told, "No," it is not easy to tell people here at Youngstown Playhouse, "No " I mean, everybody wants the part otherwise they would not be at the auditions

I think of this young lady, Peggy Malard, who was just in one of these one-acts An experimental group did the directing seminar She did "Hello" out there To my knowledge she had done theater work here at Youngstown, otherwise she is just a chorus girl in the musicals She is a good dancer and all that She has wanted to do a part. Kathy Ripple directed it It brought tears to my eyes It was a very sensitive, beautiful performance that this girl gave I was telling her, "No thanks," because I thought of her as a chorus girl That is terrible of me, but she did not lead that well. Now I know that she has it. If you are patient, maybe you have to be patient to work a little harder to get it out I would cast her

M: It is strange to me that so many people seem unaware of the work that it takes and the slavish devotion and the growing seventeen layers of skin to take all of that hurt, there is a lot of them

G Technically one of the toughest shows I have ever tackled was "A Midsummer Night's Dream" I used four little girls for the four little fairies. They were so faithful, they would come night after night after night with their kids when they were needed I said to Mrs Morrison, "Is this not fun?" It was tech week, that is when you are putting it all together with the costumes and the lights and the scene shifts and everything I said, "Is this not a fun time on the show?" She said, "I will tell you something, Bob. I have never been around this sort of thing very often I will never take a play for granted again " That is true, it is true. Unless you have been exposed to going through the entire rehearsal run of a show, you have no idea The average person has no idea You just do not spring full blown from a movie

M From the bottom of the orchestra pits, no All the many people who have to cooperate, the costumes, the people who carry the props, the movements they

have to coordinate with the scenery, getting the scenery, making it, painting it, dragging props out of closets, calling on people, getting advertising promotion, typing up things, calling up people to come and audition-it is a monumental projection. Do you think it got its bad name in the days when people traveled around England? I do not know. I always was amazed when they told me, "Are you going to that playhouse with all of those orgies?" I have never been to one yet. Nor have I seen hide nor hair of one here.

G: People do tend to exaggerate in those things. It is true. Until very recently -- by that I mean the last fifty years -- actors have really been treated like second-class citizens.

M: Why do you think that is?

G: They considered that the women were fast.

M: Immorality about them.

G: Yes, and little better than whores. A lot of this stems from our religious, not prudishness. I do not know. America is a young country and was not quite able when people came over here for religious freedom, they got it. They remembered what they learned in Sunday school over there which was not a fully developed philosophy of religion. Here you are stuck with all of these narrow minds that people had. I do not mean that necessarily holds true in San Francisco or in New York or Chicago. Other than that these little towns these people come through on tours and some people would not even let them use their hotels, or restaurants, they were not allowed.

M: They were not allowed to sit at certain places or gather in public parks in some places.

G: A lot of it is the trouble of the managers like in the nineteenth century. If they ran out of money, they would leave you stranded someplace. There you are out in Podunk someplace, you cannot get back to New York or Chicago or anyplace else to get another job, so you have to borrow money. Some of them would steal chickens or money or whatever they could do to get back to a base so they could try it again. They did try it again. They went out on the road, and they might get stuck again.

M: Maybe that gave some background to people. It is nice to gather together from someone for some warmth when you are stranded in the Rocky's or something. I do not know. But I have always wondered where all of these activities were going on.

G: Nobody has time. You are too damn tired for one thing.

- M When I worked in summer stock, the people crawled off the stage and into their pallets and went to sleep to get up three hours later to start all over again
- G I think everyone thinks that it is just a glamorous sort of thing. I was talking to an actor last night who came over to pick up the script to "Little Foxes" He is a very good actor, I think, around here locally He said to me, "It is a hobby, but it is a serious hobby When I do a show, I want it to be good, and I want to work hard That is why I like working with you, Bob because you have things organized and we do not waste time." I thought that was very interesting when he said that it was a serious hobby
- M: I look upon it more than that now. That is the thing about this theater I was impressed by the punctuality and the discipline that I learned in this theater and then went off totally unprepared for the lack of it that I found in New York, directors not coming to their own rehearsals
- G Oh, yes
- M: Unheard of things Saying you will start at 8:00, and you will start at 9.30 That has never happened at this theater This place is run very professionally People are not treated in that manner Of course, it is not excusable anywhere
- G Unfortunately, what happens though is that some people do become very good after they worked here a few years, then they pickup and move to New York to try their wings Unfortunately, some of them do not make it, but some of them end up tending bars or something and just never come back, then we have lost a good actor We have to start all over again training someone else That is what I am hired to do
- M: Yes, the constant training process. It has to go on because where do the actors come from? They do not just grow like you said out in the cornfield
- G The other thing that we did not touch on is that some people who play awfully well do not audition well, I mean, they get up and read for somebody And vice versa is true Some people can read like Sarah Burnheart
- M You find out for sure after they are cast in the show that they are not going to be able to carry it even to such extreme as to having them to remove them which is never a pleasant situation
- G That is why I am always more eager to use a new person in a small role, to see and then let them work up and let them deserve to work up That is what it is all about
- M. Alright, I think Mr Gray is going to run up and start doing one of his nineteen

jobs again, so I am thanking him That is the end

G: Thank you, Carol

End of Interview