

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Acting Experiences

O. H. 350

NANCY JONES

Interviewed

by

Carol Mills

on

December 8, 1981

## NANCY JONES

Nancy Jones was born in Wales on June 19, 1906, and spent her childhood there, growing up in the rich coal mining atmosphere of the Rhonda Valley. Nancy excelled even as a child at oratory exercises and her youth was enriched by exposure to the classics of literature.

After Nancy moved to America, she married William Joseph Jones. They had two children, Robert and Susan. Nancy gravitated to the young Youngstown Playhouse in its formative years and she worked unstingily for the organization for several decades. She not only acted on stage, but did every chore that arose backstage as well, and was known for her hospitable front-of-the-house personality because she always managed to make each newcomer feel warmly welcome.

Nancy's home also served as a welcome wagon haven to out-of-town actors and directors, where they were tucked into one of Nancy's cozy rooms and treated as members of her family during their stays in Youngstown. She ran lines with actors, listened to their woes and delights, and exalted with them at their triumphs.

Nancy's last appearance on the Playhouse stage was in the prestigious play by Paul Zindel, The Effect of Gamma-rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, in which she portrayed Nanny, an aged boarder in the home of the acerbic "Betty the Loon." She is loved by dozens of "playhousers" for her pixie charm and dedication.

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INTERVIEWEE: NANCY JONES  
INTERVIEWER: Carol Mills  
SUBJECT: Childhood, Acting Career, Actors, Performances  
DATE: December 8, 1981

M: This is an interview with Nancy Jones in Youngstown, Ohio, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. This interview is being held on December 8, 1981, at Mrs. Jones's house on Summer Street in the south side of Youngstown.

Mrs. Jones has been very active in the theater in this area through her long life here and also in Wales before she came to America.

Nancy, maybe you could start by telling us where you were born.

J: I was born in Maerdy in South Wales in 1906. I came out to this country in 1923. I was sixteen or thereabouts. I got my first job. Things were in pretty bad shape in Wales at that time. There was great unemployment and everyone was "on the dole." Two could live cheaper than one. "On the dole," that's what they call relief or welfare today. I waited for the quota and arrived legally on the quota. I came through Buffalo, New York, to Youngstown, Ohio.

M: When you came did you have relatives to come and stay with?

J: Yes. I had a sister here, a brother-in-law, two nieces, and a nephew with whom I made my home. We lived beautifully and happily. I had a job; I worked at the Mahoning Bank. Oh, first I worked in laundry because I was impatient to get started on a job. It was pretty tough; there were a great many ethnic groups there. A knife would be flying over my head and I had never seen anything like it in my life. Yet, I decided to get the experience and carry on.

At church one evening, I met Dr. Reese, "Bone-setter" Reese. He was very famous all over the world at that time. He asked me what I was doing and I told him. He shook his head and said, "Oh my, we have to get you to work in a different job." So he got me to work at the Mahoning Bank in Youngstown. I worked there five years. Then I got married, naturally.

M: Where did you meet your husband?

J: In church. We were all members of a chorus that my brother-in-law was the director of. I met him, as a matter of fact, the first night I came here. I was here in the morning and at night I had to go to choir rehearsal immediately. So off I went and my husband was in the same choir.

M: Were you all Welsh singers, because Welsh are known for their singing?

J: Yes, we were all Welsh. I looked at him, he looked at me, and from then on there was sort of an affinity. We had a conversation. Of course, I was much younger than he, and he said, "You go out into the world and enjoy yourself. I'll be waiting when you have finished having all the experience of a new life that you want." And sure enough he was there.

M: How long did that take, Nancy?

J: How long did he wait? Five years.

M: Isn't that wonderful.

J: Lo and behold, I promised my parents that I would take a trip back before I ever got married or did anything. So I was determined to save enough money and go home, which I did. When I came back, there he was waiting.

M: While you were talking about home, would you mind going back and telling us about your home territory in Wales and what it was like there when you grew up? Tell all the wonderful stories that you have told me about the different conditions in Wales and how you learned so much there about people or your loving family, and your childhood memories from there that you would like to share.

J: The memories are beautiful. I could not forget what my father said, "Come back the way you left." That's why I didn't get married before I went back.

The village that I came from is in the Rhonda Valley and it was quite exciting because I felt . . . Our

high school education over there seemed to be almost like a college education over here. I was ten and a half when I went to high school.

M: What school did you go to?

J: At the Ferndale Secondary School. That's the equivalent of a high school here.

M: In Maerdy?

J: No, in Ferndale. I walked there every day and walked home.

M: How far was that?

J: It would be about two and a half miles. We became a tiny bit more affluent and my father bought me a streetcar pass. But I enjoyed the walk anyway.

M: What did your father do?

J: He was a coal miner and a wonderful person. So was my mother and so were my sisters and my brothers.

M: How many were there?

J: Well, we were eleven to begin with. Four died in a plague of some sort and one was stillborn. There were six of us left, three brothers and three sisters. One went to Australia; two of us came out here; one went to Canada, and that's all I can remember about that.

M: When you were growing up early on, you learned the value of culture and you learned that at home, did you not?

J: Greatly.

M: Would you tell about that?

J: We had opera concerts in Cardiff; we used to go there. It would be about eighteen miles from Maerdy to Cardiff. I had a teacher at home who was quite interested in my interest in theater. She taught me the value of speaking the King's English. (Laughter) She would put me up on anything I mispronounced. Our education was more thorough than I could ever explain. After I was married, I had two children, and I was amazed at the difference in the education. Where we would have eleven subjects, I had to beg for a fifth subject for my children.

M: I see. You thought they could handle more, but they didn't want to give it to them.

- J: I wanted Susan to have art because she was so good at it. I had to put up quite a fuss. I couldn't figure out why they couldn't get Latin. They said that the class wasn't big enough.
- M: Can you tell me some of the eleven subjects that you had when you were in Wales?
- J: We had to take Latin, algebra, English, English literature, music, arithmetic, French, or Spanish, and Welsh.
- M: At what age was this?
- J: I was ten and a half.
- M: What about history and geography?
- J: History and geography. I mentioned chemistry, didn't I?
- M: No, you did not.
- J: Physics. I wasn't too good at most of these subjects, but I enjoyed listening mostly. When I would get awfully tired of them, I would take a walk and take my lunch and eat it in the trees so they couldn't find me.
- M: And no one bothered you?
- J: No, I enjoyed all the literary programs of the school and gym. I liked gym, of course. I won several little silver cups for racing and playing tennis. I'm quite old now, you know, and I can't remember too much, but I can remember those things greatly.
- In Wales we had competitive concerts called Eisteddfods. We used to go there and my friends would say to me, "Nancy, they are having an Eisteddfod in another little village. Come on, let's go. You know you will win the prize, and then we can have some ice cream later." I never came home with money. I would come home with a little bag or a little medal, but we spent the money.
- M: You shared with your friends?
- J: Yes, always.
- M: What were these Eisteddfods for, acting drama, reading?
- J: Everything in the arts: Singing, drama, music, particularly instrumental and voice and choirs. I mean they are big things over there, national and semi-national Eisteddfod. We had more declamation than drama at the time. We were awfully young.

M: Would that be what we call dramatic readings now?

J: Yes, especially Shakespearean. We had teachers who were really so good. They would explain what we were doing and saying. That was my introduction to the drama.

There was a group in the village who traveled all over and many years afterwards--after I had left--they were invited to perform for the King and Queen. I was very proud when I heard about it. I was not with them too long because I had been out here, but I knew them all. When I took a trip back, I certainly was thrilled to talk to them, meet them, and congratulate them.

M: When you made that trip back, what were your mother and father curious about in America?

J: They were curious about everything and, of course, I could relate. We had electric light--one of the first on the street to have it--but mother was particular about putting it out at nine o'clock. If you wanted light after that, you had to light the oil lamps. Father would light the oil lamps and we would sit and talk until midnight, which made mother very angry, of course, but we did. I would tell him all about it. Mother was always too tired and I couldn't blame her because she was doing all of the work.

I was born when my mother was 52 years old. I was lucky to get here.

M: I'll say. You were the baby then, weren't you?

J: Yes. I could always talk to my father. Mother used to get very angry because I was terribly active. Father would make me try to understand why she was angry. He said that she wasn't feeling very well and she was going through the change of life. I didn't know what the change of life was, but I was so glad that there was something wrong with her, that explained it. One day when a neighbor said, "Nancy, how's your mother," I said, "Oh, she's fine. She's just going through the change of life." I met this same neighbor in this country and she always reminded me of it; she never forgot it. (Laughter)

M: How many times did you go back and forth between Wales and America?

J: Three times.

M: Did you get to take your children to Wales?

J: Only my son who was four months old. He was a year old

when I brought him back. The idea was to come back before he had his birthday. He could have his birthday on the boat and still not be charged.

M: That's right. I hadn't thought about that. So you planned it all out.

Where did you live in Youngstown at that time?

J: On the south side.

M: Always the south side?

J: I never lived anywhere else but the south side.

M: Tell me about early Youngstown in those days.

J: To me it was exciting. I thought it was the greatest, biggest town in the world coming from such a small village. I used to walk from Williamson Avenue, where we lived, over the bridge and downtown. I never took a bus--they were trollies in those days. I always walked home because that kind of walk was nothing to me.

M: You were used to that.

J: I was amazed at the steel mills and the lights in the sky. For instance, taking a ride with friends and seeing the lights in the sky would show you the houses that were around there, the silhouette of the houses around.

M: Oh, you mean the lights of the mills? Yes, that's a very unusual sight.

J: The Bessemer, I think they called it, if it wasn't going, nothing was going.

M: Where did your husband work?

J: Sheet & Tube. He worked in the accounting department.

M: What were the mills like in those days from his talks to you? What would he tell you?

J: I wouldn't know too much about the history of the mill, but that was his living. It was interesting to him, and I was amazed because this was a success of America the way the mills were going. If those lights weren't lighting up the sky, then nothing was going. There was no unemployment pay or anything like that. You had to live on what you had tried to save. There was no help of any kind, as a matter of fact.



My husband worked once a week and brought two weeks pay home. We lived on that until the next two weeks. We bought eggs until I thought we would cluck. I made applesauce. I was very young to figure out these things, but we made it and we did not go into debt. If I couldn't afford to pay the rent, I would discuss it with my husband and we would move. We finally ended up with one room and a bedroom.

M: Where was that?

J: On Hylda Avenue almost across from the old post office.

M: You lived in one room with both of the children and your husband?

J: No, just with my husband and myself and my son. Susan wasn't born until ten years later.

M: What year was your son born?

J: I can't remember. Dates are beyond me now. They were interesting times and I never gave up. Somehow we all seemed to band together and make the best of it.

M: Tell me your memories of the Depression.

J: Well, those were the depressed years. We started out with a little money and within one year after getting married, everything went down, and I mean down, the market, you know. The Depression completely took over, but we made it. He would always have, as I said, one day a week, sometimes a day a half. There was no unemployment [benefits] of any kind. You had to depend upon yourself. We did so many things to make it possible.

Sheet & Tube, at that time, had their own stores for their workers. They were selling food so cheap that you could manage somehow to get through it.

M: Can you remember any of the prices on some of the food like bread, milk, meat, and things like that? How much would you spend on groceries for a week?

J: I couldn't pin it down and I would not want to be inaccurate. It was awfully cheap because Sheet & Tube really had some wonderful, wonderful prices for everybody. Eggs you could buy for almost nothing. Cheese was a little more expensive, but we loved cheese anyway, and it sure was a change from eggs.

M: Everybody just stuck together then and helped each other out of it? I don't think that is as true today. How do you feel about that?

J: No, it's not like that. Today they have unemployment and all that, and they don't have to worry about so many things. If they are out of work, they still have money coming in. We didn't have money coming in, except if a man had a day a week. We thought a day and a half was really great.

M: When did you start to see that period come to an end, when you started to feel that the crunch wasn't so bad?

J: It started in 1929, right?

M: Yes.

J: It was years later. It was in the 1930's when things changed and became a little better. Truly, it sort of developed your character; you either did it or you didn't, you sank or swam.

M: Do you remember anything about the political campaigns in those days prior to when Roosevelt and all the New Deal stuff came in?

J: I remember the New Deal and all that, and I remember the Roosevelts. I don't have any great memory of those things now. After all, I am 76 years old.

The joy of my life came when one of my nieces came in on a Sunday afternoon. She said, "Nancy, you know they have started a Playhouse in Youngstown and they are having tryouts for A Midsummer Night's Dream." Well, I had put a roast in the oven and I thought, "I can't leave." Then I decided to put it on low and take a chance. I didn't think I would be there very long anyway, so off we went.

M: Where was this at?

J: Arlington Street. Lo and behold, the director was so exciting, but he had a terrible headache from listening. I don't know how many people were trying out. He kept rubbing his head and I came up to him and said, "I know you have a headache, but I have been listening to the reading and I want to read." He looked at me and said, "Well, go on, get up on the stage and I'll tell you where to start." He gave me a book and I went up and we started to read. I read for Titania and that was it; I got the part. He said, "You have a child, don't you?" I said, "Yes." He asked, "How old is he?" I said, "He's four years old." So he said to bring him, too. He played the changeling child. I now had to go home and face the fact that maybe I had a burnt roast. My husband happened to be at work that day. I came home and my husband was sitting there quite calm. I asked him if he had looked in the oven. He said, "Yes. Where have you been?"

Before I replied he said, "It's all right. I know where you have been. You've been around the theater, haven't you? Don't worry, I took the roast out."

M: Was this a new formation of the theatre just starting then?

J: That was my start in the theater. They hadn't been going too long. It had always been sort of a closed reading, but this was the first time. From then on, I never stopped.

M: Tell about some of the early days at the playhouse. What did they call that playhouse then, the Youngstown Playhouse?

J: Yes. It still is called that. Maybe I'm wrong, but all I know is the Youngstown Playhouse.

We played A Midsummer Night's Dream for six performances, which was very unusual. Usually it was three. I loved it and I enjoyed it and I was hooked, as they would say today, for the rest of my life. We worked very, very hard. We would take list after list after list and I would call, using the telephone every day, all these people from every list that Helen Moyer would give me. I would contact them and sell them tickets. That's how we grew.

M: Where did she get these lists? Did she compile them?

J: No, she would get them from other organizations. She would get the list of teachers. It was quite a time. It was quite exciting also because the theater was growing every year. Finally, we moved out of the carriage house and into Market Street at an old movie theater. The carriage house was quite comfortable, but quite limited also.

M: About how many people would the carriage house hold?

J: About 165, I think. More and more people were becoming interested. The tryouts with the director we had were almost as good as the performance.

M: Who was he?

J: Hubbard Kirkpatrick. He later married Mrs. Sampson.

M: I don't know who that is.

J: A billionaire.

M: From here?

J: Yes.

M: Tell me about her.

J: Her background was in steel. She was a widow and had a great fortune. She fell in love with the director and they got married. So they changed directors.

M: Oh, they did?

J: I can remember excitement with every drive, and the work that went with the drive, to call people to get them interested and sell the membership. It wasn't easy but it was accomplished. We had good people who guided our efforts and helped us in that way, many, many wonderful people, as a matter of fact. There was Mrs. MaCalla and George Keepers. I can't remember all of them, but they too were supportive and interested. They were a joy to work with and fun to work with.

M: What would a ticket cost then?

J: A membership was five dollars.

M: For the year?

J: For the year.

M: How many shows did they get for that?

J: Three or four.

M: So the people responded to this then, did they?

J: Yes, they did. It was an exciting time because young people did not have much going for them in this town at that time. Backstage work was their joy. And those who could be on stage, it was their joy. They learned so much about theater. They put on some darn good shows, if I do say so.

M: Tell us about some of those.

J: Each year we would have a comedy, a classic, not a musical at that time, I don't think, a contemporary play when it was released from New York, but mostly older plays. I wish I could remember some of the plays. I'm sure the Playhouse has records of those things. I know I don't in my head.

M: They tried to give everybody a mixture then and make it more homogenized?

- J: They tried to please everyone, to please the lawyers, teachers, doctors, and so on, and to please the general public. I went right from A Midsummer Night's Dream into a comedy. I was never more grateful to a director for doing that because I could prove that I could do the one thing--which was Shakespeare--and then the very next play be cast in a comedy and do the craziest things. It was fun.
- M: That's the fun of community theater, isn't it? But there is a lot of hard work also. Tell us some of the projects and things you did backstage. There is always hard work in a theater.
- J: The painting . . . We had a chap who was an architect in Youngstown. His name was Joe Friesen. He designed the sets; that was his hobby.
- M: He did that for fun in the nighttime?
- J: Yes. Joe was always busy, but he could always recruit. We were all terribly anxious to help.
- M: He would get other eager beavers to come and help?
- J: Oh, yes, because he had a job besides. I can remember Joe working so hard on the design of the set, and then the accomplishment of eager people to do their bit backstage, and then the play, whatever it was at the time.
- M: At that time, Nancy, was there a place where everybody gathered?
- J: In the green room.
- M: The green room in the theater? They didn't go out to a restaurant or lounge at that time like they do now?
- J: Later we went to a restaurant in town. I can't remember the restaurant though. It was a lot of fun because we would always discuss everything that was happening and everybody's mistakes and enjoy each other's company, which was great.
- M: Was that downtown Youngstown?
- J: Yes. And I'm trying to think where it was. It was the American restaurant, I think.
- M: Sure, I remember that. It was on Phelps Street, wasn't it?

- J: Yes, North Phelps. Wherever we were, we had fun.
- M: How many people were involved in this thing, roughly?
- J: Oh, not many that I can remember, a s small of a nucleus as there were of people interested. We did a bit of everything, all of us. Then, of course, as we got bigger we came to Market Street.
- M: At the time, the people all pitched in and did work on the stage and everybody cooperated, right? You made enough profits to get a new place, is that what happened when you got the place on Market Street?
- J: Yes. We worked selling tickets. We all made the calls from Helen Moyer's list faithfully and we got results as time went on. As a matter of fact, we reached the point of four thousand members at one time.
- M: Wow! That's amazing. When was the move to Market Street?
- J: You would have to ask the Playhouse. I can't remember the dates. [June, 1942]
- M: Tell about some of the acting you did at the Market Street place.
- J: We had the same sort of program, but we played longer. It ended up that we played two weeks straight.
- M: Right in a row, night after night, back to back, my goodness, that's very grueling.
- J: No, we didn't think anything of it.
- M: I know. No one ever does, but it's when you think about it now.
- J: That's why they started thinking about another theater. It was now getting big enough to start thinking about another theater, to ease up on the two weeks because it was going to get a little more.
- M: You told me once that there seemed to be more of a camaraderie then.
- J: Yes, there was. I'm not saying that there is not any camaraderie now, but then we were desperate to keep going and build it and never fail, and we didn't. We seemed to get better every year. We had a low once in awhile and we wouldn't have very good directors. That changed when Mr. Sircom came in. It got quite exciting.

M: You always paid these directors, right?

J: Oh, yes. They were the only ones who were paid.

M: The theater was quite exciting. My whole recollection has always been that it has been exciting. The only time we grumbled was when we would have plays that were not interesting, such as Up in Mabel's Room, and that didn't go down so well.

M: Did you have to do a certain amount of those to keep the public happy?

J: Yes, we've always given a mixed program for that reason.

While we were on Market Street, we started an experimental theater where we did a lot of plays that were never done. We were a young group and enjoyed that thoroughly, and the Playhouse backed us. We really had to fight our way to get the experimental theater because we were a terribly excited, young group of dedicated actors who were eager to have a good theater. That made quite a difference. We started to produce and built up an audience who got quite excited about us, and they did. They [the regular Playhouse] would get letters asking when was the next experimental theater production.

M: They wanted that one, opposed to the main stage stuff?

J: No, not opposed to it. They accepted the main stage, but they wanted to know when we were doing things.

M: What were some of those experimental works? Can you name a few of them for me, one or two that you participated in?

J: One was The Old Ladies, where we had a set that was truly experimental. I can't remember; I better not get mixed up here.

M: Did you do classics and new plays?

J: Yes, new plays. We were interested in that. It was an exciting time because we had something going in a group for ourselves where we could express what we wanted to do. We never forgot that we had the main theater to be faithful to. It kept everyone busy, busy, busy. Young people, especially, learned so much. It was exciting to have that experimental theater because we read plays which extended the knowledge of the young people who were attending. We would each take a part and then had a discussion of the play afterwards. We discussed what we thought and felt

about it and whether it was worthy or not.

M: You say young people, was this nuclear group mostly . . .

J: Anybody who was interested. I shouldn't say young people exclusively.

M: But there were more of those than any other, right?

J: There were more younger people.

M: Who were some of those people in the early days?

J: George Bishop, Joe Koornick, myself--so many of those people have left town--Liz Engster and her husband, and Judith Chambers, who was not young, but she was enthusiastic.

M: You kept up your relationship with her for years, didn't you?

J: Yes. I never locked the front door because I never knew when she was coming in from either Ireland or Spain.

M: Why would she be going to Ireland or Spain so much?

J: She traveled quite a bit, but always came back. Her roots were here. After her husband died, she lived with her son in Cleveland. We never felt it right to lock the front door because we never knew when she would breeze in.

M: What do you remember about when they decided to pick the new location for the theater, when they finally kept growing to the point that they needed yet another one?

J: Well, I was never part of that. I was always in the acting or backstage crew; the powers that be did all that.

M: What did you actors feel about this?

J: We thought it was going to be a lot easier. They picked out the place. We weren't consulted very much. There were quite a number of people who were running everything.

M: You were just the ones who did the work?

J: Yes.

M: That happens a lot in these kinds of situations. I think that it causes a lot of strained feelings.



J: It was quite a struggle, but an interesting one because, in spite of everything, the right prevailed and we did get to do many plays that would have been frowned upon otherwise. We worked very hard to train people, also.

M: Tell about what you mean by training. That's the thing that we don't have so much in community theater today.

J: Well, in experimental theater, we used people who had never been on the stage. That's what I mean by training them. That gave the main theater a place to draw from.

M: That has always been a problem with the theaters. No matter how talented they are, they have to have some place to show what they can do. They have to have a beginning.

You took your children to the theater a lot, didn't you?

J: Yes, both of them. My son was very active there. His last show was Winterset. He played Mio.

M: Would you like to tell about that? How old was he at the time?

J: Sixteen. The backstage crew used to cry every night.

M: He grew up with that influence though.

J: I never persuaded him any way; it was his desire.

M: Your husband was always very patient and forbearing all of this time?

J: He had his music. He was with the chorus and we were with the theater. When we met at the dinner table, there was always something to talk about. We would always get excited when he was going out of town to sing with the chorus.

M: Did he go out of town a lot?

J: Yes, they traveled, the Sheet & Tube Glee Club.

M: Oh, he was in that. I heard a lot about that.

J: It was quite exciting because when he was going away on these singing trips, we used to support him because he always supported us in the theater. When I brought Bobby in when he was four years old to play as the changeling child, he would come to the theater every night. I would bring him, and then Joe would take him right back. He had to cross from the south side to Arlington Street.

- M: Which is on the north side.
- J: I can remember running up that hill from town many a night to be on time for rehearsal because with that director, you wouldn't dare to be late.
- M: Which hill do you mean? Was it the one in back of McKelvey's or the main one on Wick?
- J: Not Wick, Hazel Street. You would run up the hill. To be late was sacrilege.
- M: Tell about how the discipline seemed to be more dependable then.
- J: Oh, yes, it was. It taught a great many people many things about discipline. You learned discipline, or you were just not in the theater, period. We listened and we learned.
- M: People always talk about how irresponsible theater people are, but I have always found that to be quite the contrary.
- J: I would say that they are most responsible people. As the director would say, "You can't be late in this theater for a rehearsal; the only other place you can be is in the morgue." (Laughter) We used to cringe. I can remember one would-be actor who was late and came in. He had new boots on. The reason he had been late was because he had been horseback riding. The director looked at him and let him squeak all the way down the aisle. We were all quiet and waiting on the state and he said, "Well, well, where have you been?" He said, "Well, I've been horseback riding." He said, "Well, get your ass off that horse and get on that God damn stage. And don't apologize to me, apologize to the cast!"
- M: And did he?
- J: Yes.
- M: He never did it again I bet you, did he?
- J: He never did. The director couldn't stand it; it was an insult to the rest of the cast.
- M: You learn that, I think, more than any other thing. In a community theater that is run right, you must have respect for the people who are working with you. Always get a hold of someone and let them know if something happened ahead of time. Don't you agree?
- J: I certainly do agree. I don't remember many people

being late after that.

M: He made his imprint. When they finally decided to move the quarters to the new ground which is on Glenwood Avenue near your home here, they had raised enough money and had gained enough prestige in the community that they felt they needed ever bigger quarters.

J: You know we were never in the red. We always operated in the black.

M: That is a very unusual thing for a theater.

J: I have looked at the grants that many community theaters like Cleveland Playhouse get. Do we have any grants?

M: I think they get some. They were getting some CETA things for extra workers. But, I suppose Mr. Reagan has cut some government grants. I know my son's grant was cut. He worked there on a government grant.

J: It is amazing the grants that the Cleveland Playhouse gets. I was up there, kept the paper, brought it home, and showed it to Bob Gray.

M: What did he say?

J: He said that it was quite interesting. It was amazing the money . . . So I think we deserve that as much as any theater I know of.

M: I know the Playhouse was very concerned about the operating budget, operating in the black and not going into debt.

J: Yes, that was a big struggle, but we did it. Helen Moyer's husband, Sidney, was most influential in keeping us on the ball on that.

M: How did he do that?

J: Well, he would give me a certain amount of money and that's it. We had one experimental play and we were given thirty-five dollars.

M: That was for scenery, costumes, and the works?

J: Everything.

M: I remember when I came there they told me how everybody pounded the nails back out with hammers and straightened them again so they could be reused.

Would you tell about the sets and all the people who worked on them?

- J: There were people who had jobs. Some were retired. There was always a backstage crew. And they really enjoyed doing it; that was the fun of it, you know. I don't see that many people around today.
- M: I don't either. They don't have that same happiness.
- J: They don't have the spirit.
- M: They all want to be the lead in the show.
- J: And they all want to be paid.
- M: Bob and I were talking about the lack of what we used to call "work nights". Everybody used to come and pitch in, drink coffee, joke around, and work to make the sets. I used to enjoy that.
- J: The Fish House is where we used to go downtown. That was a wonderful place to go. We couldn't afford more than one bottle of wine between eight people.
- M: What did a bottle of wine cost then?
- J: About \$1.90. We all pitched in. Those were Depression times. We couldn't afford to eat.
- M: So everybody would have a drop or two of wine.
- J: Yes, literally a drop or two of wine, or a small glass of beer. They were so patient with us. Then we went to the old Chateau which was right across the street from the Market Street Playhouse. They kept the back room open for us. We would go over, and we would be quite a crowd. The people at the bar would be quite amused at the fun we would be having, talking and discussing and that sort of thing.
- M: They think everyone is having fun and they kind of want to participate but something holds them back. They say, "That's the Playhouse crowd." How many times have you heard that?
- J: Many, many times. We had the most wonderful couple at the old Chateau. I can't remember their names. Never, never were we not welcome. Everybody behaved themselves, in the first place. They served soft drinks to the young people. There was no rowdiness or anything like that, just happy and serious conversations. They never did anything but welcome us. God, I wish I could think of their name.
- M: What place would they go to when they moved to Glenwood? They had a couple different bar lounges that they used.

- I remember the Flamingo.
- J: It was up the street.
- M: The Candlelight?
- J: Yes.
- M: But before the Candlelight, they would go to the Flamingo when I worked there.
- J: Only if we had a party or something.
- M: Yes, for big things. The Candlelight was where everybody gathered.
- J: Yes, after rehearsal.
- M: When the Candlelight fell apart, they went to the Courtney Restaurant, do you remember that? They got kind of snobbish there, what do you think?
- J: In the first place, everything got too expensive. They never really welcomed us. I remember they did open another room and we were able to go in the back.
- M: They put us in the back to hide us away.
- J: We always wanted to go on our own anyway so it didn't matter. I can't say they were mean to us or anything, but there just wasn't enough room in the restaurant until they opened up another room. It was not for us, but for their own. We used to have parties there too.
- M: You couldn't have parties at the Candlelight?
- J: No.
- M: Then they picked out Gabriel's on Market Street, and they still go there. It's not called Gabriel's, it's called Billy K's now, I think. It's a place to go and relax after all of the hard work.
- J: I must say that nobody ever caused trouble. They never objected to us in that way at all, so you know that we were well-behaved anyhow. We brought in business.
- M: What were some of the favorite roles that you did, some of the work that you did that you most enjoyed?
- J: I can't ever remember that. I played a glorified tart in one play. I'm sorry, I can't remember. You'll have to get that record from the Playhouse.

- M: I can certainly check on that. You were there long enough. Nancy was always the person who tried to make the new people feel welcome. She would always come out with a big smile on her face.
- J: We had to do that, to help the people who came in to watch a rehearsal feel at home. This was a place to come to and learn. They responded to that because you can't have people just walk in and not know what to do. We got a lot of players that way, also.
- M: Tell about some of the things you did. You would walk over to the door and say, "We are happy to see you."
- J: We would definitely make them feel at home. We would shake hands with them, ask their name, take them into the theater, and say, "I'm sure you will enjoy watching the rehearsal," or whatever they were there for. We never turned anyone down. If there was any problem, it was immediately taken care of.
- M: You were the one at the front with the smile and the hello ?
- J: Judith Chamber, myself, and a couple of other people whose names I can't remember. You can't have an organization like that and expect to keep it exclusive.
- M: No, you can't; it dies.
- J: It belongs to the city and where are you going to grow? Where are you going to get your actors from?
- M: I've seen it happen, I'm sorry to say it, where people don't feel welcome. I think you know that is true now. There are not a lot of people like you standing there.
- J: No, they don't use that anymore. We were a group who did that.
- M: They have gotten more businesslike.
- J: I feel like a stranger myself.
- M: There is a few like Bob Gray and Ron Prather who continue to try to help. There is no warmth left like I felt. I just wondered if you noticed that so much yourself because you were a part of that.
- J: I know there is a difference. You can't run a community organization without that friendliness, but they are trying up there. Like you said, Bob tries very hard; Ron tries, and many other people. It's coming back now to somewhat of the same feeling that we had.

M: Tell about some acting couples?

J: The Griffiths and the Tornellos are acting couples, and also very active in supporting and working on everything.

M: Did they meet at the Playhouse?

J: Yes.

M: John and Rennie Griffith, and didn't Merv Jones and Wanda Lou Jones meet there?

J: Yes.

M: A lot of romances sprung up.

J: When we were rehearsing in the summertime, there were so many romances going around that I had to round them up to get them back into the theater.

M: They would all be outside. (Laughter) Paul and Kadey Kimpel are another couple that met there. Sometimes they worked together on shows.

J: It was a joyous time of everybody doing their bit to make things go.

M: A group effort. Do you think that it will ever go back to that time? What is your outlook on that? Do you see it going back to that trend?

J: Oh yes, I do, especially with the people that we have working there now. They are truly bringing a feeling of comradeship with the public and not just the actors. It means a lot to the Playhouse.

When I read in the papers about Cleveland and Columbus and the grants, I think that this playhouse should never be denied.

M: Which is one of the biggest in the United States, isn't it?

J: Yes.

M: I think Bob told me it has the most members and is the largest this side of the Mississippi. It's one of the top three in the nation.

J: This town has a lot of talent. It's surprising where they come from. When people talk about Youngstown--I only speak of the Playhouse--they ask, "Well, do you have any talent?" I say, "You should come up sometime and see a

show."

M: Not only that, but a lot of those people have gone on to really make their mark in the world. Even if they don't go anywhere, the quality of the shows is outstanding.

J: It's professionalism. It's not an amateurish group at all. They are taught in the course of, maybe, four or five weeks, so much. We have the people who have the ability to do that, but it's amazing at what is being done.

M: I don't know all of the things that you have done, but Nancy Jones has been one of the people that I know has given her time unstingily to coach people and to help with their voice in diction because she came from a very proper speaking background. She has spent, literally, thousands of hours helping others.

J: Yes, I did, right here in the basement and over at the Playhouse.

M: She brought people to her house and put them up and kept them. She always made tea, cookies, and sandwiches for everybody. "Room for one more," that was Nancy. She is an institution at the Playhouse. I'm glad she took the time to talk with us. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW