

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Acting Experiences

O. H. 599

JOHN CHRISTOPHER ABBEY

Interviewed

by

Carol Shaffer Mills

on

October 9, 1981

## JOHN CHRISTOPHER ABBEY

John Abbey was born a Capricorn sometime in the 20th century and that is all he will own up to as far as that fact is concerned. Seriously, we know that the date of his birth is January 11 and that his birthplace was in Girard, Ohio. His family was musically inclined and he was exposed to theater productions from six years of age on. He participated in productions of theater during his high school years in Ambridge, Pennsylvania at St. Veronica's High School. He read about the Youngstown Players in his teens but was too "shy" to approach the Playhouse at that time.

Mr. Abbey saw many touring acting companies during his youth and was privileged to see such luminaries as Ethel Barrymore and Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Many of these productions came to the old Park Theater in downtown Youngstown when it was a "legitimate" theater, before it switched to burlesque and movies. At this same time, Mr. Abbey joined a dramatic society called "The Green Masque Club". He did a very small part in one play with this group which gave him a chance to further vent his love for theater.

Mr. Abbey saw the Lunt's in a production of "The Taming Of The Shrew" around this time, and remained a loyal and devoted fan of the acting couple for life.

During the Second World War, John Abbey joined the Air Corps. While in the service, he saw several glimpses of "greener fields" that he would have liked to have returned to at the time, but family obligations brought him back to Youngstown.

John finally worked up the courage to attend Playhouse readings and was cast as the lead in his very first attempt at reading, in a production of "Three's a Family". This auspicious beginning led to his 36 year association with The Youngstown Playhouse where his talents graced countless productions, the last one being "On Golden Pond" with another grand essence of the Youngstown theater, Helen Moyer. This production was on the boards in the Fall of 1981.

At the same time that John participated so fully in Playhouse productions, he also had a full-time job with Republic Steel Corporation where he had a long and esteemed career from 1936 until 1978. John is a member of St. Columba Cathedral in Youngstown, Ohio and has won several "ARTHUR" awards at the Playhouse, which honor outstanding accomplishments at that theater.

Personally, John has a reputation of being a cultured, well-traveled gentleman, who is always gracious and helpful to newcomers and scrupulously disciplined in every production that he graces with his presence. This writer had the extreme pleasure of playing with him in "Look Homeward, Angel" as Thomas Wolfe's parents, one of the most memorable of this writer's fond reminiscences. We sincerely hope that John Abbey continues on into the 1980's as he has in the previous four decades.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN CHRISTOPHER ABBEY

INTERVIEWER: Carol Shaffer Mills

SUBJECT: Playhouse, members of the theater, plays

DATE: October 9, 1981

M: This is an interview being done with John Christopher Abbey, a Youngstown theater person for many years. It is being done at the Youngstown Playhouse, on Friday October 9, 1981, at 9:00 p.m. The interviewer's name is Carol Shaffer Mills. This is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program.

A: I don't remember that much about my childhood, not that it was an unhappy one. I can remember being held by my father when I was probably a year and a half old. I can remember sitting on his lap when I was maybe five. Our family consists of my parents, two older sisters and myself. My father played guitar and loved music. My one sister would sing lead, and my younger sister would sing alto, and I--at the grand old age of five--would sing tenor.

M: What would you sing, what kind of songs?

A: "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," "Silver Threads Among the Gold," which I think is the same song, all of the old standards that my father liked. It was nothing probably that my sisters liked, and I was too young to like anything. I just went along for the ride.

M: Was your mother playing the piano?

A: No, my mother had no musical background at all. My mother, I know had a good theater sense. One of her sisters was an actress as a matter of fact and played at the old Gaiety Theater in Dublin, Ireland. My mother was born in Ireland as were all of her brothers and sisters. My aunt, whom I never met, decided to go on the stage. At what age I have no idea.

M: What was her name?

A: Her real name was Elizabeth Brennan, but strangely enough she chose the name of Lillian Russell. She was not the Lillian Russell.

M: She just chose that name.

A: She chose that name. She was older than our Lillian Russell.

M: It was a coincidence?

A: It was a coincidence, right. She traveled, I guess, the theater circuit in Great Britain. Eventually I found out . . . I wrote a letter some years ago to the manager of the Gaiety Theater. He had no recollection--he looked it up; he must have looked it up; he certainly had no recollection.

M: Do you know his name?

A: No, I have forgotten his name. He said that she had married some producer. She was no relation to our Lillian Russell whose real name was Helen Leonard.

M: Yes, it was Helen Leonard.

A: Helen Leonard, and she was from Clinton, Iowa, not Dublin, Ireland. I think that possibly my interest in theater was developed more because of my mother's side of the family than my father's side of the family. As a matter of fact, I remember when my sister was married. I was six years old. That was the day that I had my first experience with legitimate theater, believe it or not. I will tell you how it happened. My sister had a very quiet wedding; she didn't want anything elaborate. In those days, the 1920's, they didn't have elaborate weddings because people could not afford them. My father decided that he was going to go out and celebrate when they left for their honeymoon. My mother looked at me at the age of six and said, "Well, John, if he can celebrate, so can we." There was an old theater in Youngstown at that time called the Hippodrome.

M: I have heard of that.

A: It catered to traveling companies. One of the companies of "Abie's Irish Rose" was playing at the Hippodrome at the time. My mother took me to see "Abie's Irish Rose." At the age of six I thought it was terribly good. My mother was incensed and insulted by it which proved that she had a greater sense of theater than I did.

M: Discriminating.

- A: No, no, it wasn't that. She just thought it was a terrible play.
- M: That is what I mean, discriminating taste.
- A: Oh, that, yes. She thought it was a terrible play. Anne Nichols didn't think so, who wrote it; it made her a millionaire.
- M: What was her name, the name of the woman who wrote the play?
- A: Anne Nichols. You never heard of her?
- M: No.
- A: It wasn't the only thing she wrote, but it made her a millionaire?
- M: One play?
- A: One play. It made her a millionaire, yes. It lasted so long. It had a tremendously long run in New York. It was critically lambasted apparently, but was well-received by people. It was made into a motion picture with Nancy Carroll. Do you remember Nancy Carroll?
- M: I remember the name; I don't remember her face. What would be the reason that you would think a show like that did have such mass appeal in those days?
- A: I have no idea. I don't know. I remember seeing it maybe three, four, or five years later. Maybe it was longer than that when Nancy Carroll made the motion picture. Even then I liked it. My theater taste had not . . .
- M: You were then like ten or eleven?
- A: Something like that, yes. All I know is I remember that it concerned an Irish family and a Jewish family. The Jewish boy, in order to pass off his Irish-Catholic fiancée or bride as it was on to his family, he called her Rosie Moiphiski. Her real name was Rose Murphy. That was my first experience with legitimate theater. I fell in love with it; I really did.

In school, I went to a parochial school, St. Rose School, in Girard. Every year as part of our curriculum as it were in the upper grades the class did a show. I remember participating in those. I remember in high school participating in the senior class play. Again in those days they did the kinds of plays that were written especially for high schools. Today they do "Oklahoma," "My Fair Lady," "Cabaret," and this is great, and they do plays of that kind--I mean straight plays of that kind.

M: Could you give me a typical name of a play that they did just for high schools then?

A: I think one of them that we did when I was in high school was "Oh, Professor." It was written by a woman whose last name was Cavanaugh as I recall. Those people, those playwrights, made a darn good living writing plays for high schools in those days.

M: Just turning them out like that?

A: Just turning them out, right. They were silly plots, absolutely inane. Today's kids would look at this and say, "You acted in something like this?" I would say, "Yes." They were just awful plays, just terrible plays. These people made a fortune. It has only been since World War II, I would say within the last twenty years maybe--maybe you will recall this too--that they have been doing plays, musicals like "My Fair Lady," "Gypsy," "Mame," and straight plays like "The Crucible" and "You Can't Take It With You" and "Arsenic and Old Lace."

M: In high schools?

A: In high schools.

M: I know. I remember when my son did "Man of La Mancha" at Wilson in 1971.

A: Sure.

M: It was an event. They were the first high school in America to do it.

A: To do "Man of La Mancha," really?

M: Yes.

A: I didn't know that. My interest in theater was always there. I lived in Girard--that was where I was born--for the first few years of my life and then I moved to a place called Ambridge, Pennsylvania where I did this play called "Oh! Professor."

M: Why did you move?

A: Because of my father's work. He worked for an iron company in Girard which transferred its operations to a place in Pennsylvania called Ambridge which is about fifty miles from here, I guess. It isn't too far.

M: Do you remember the name of the iron company?

A: Yes, A. M. Byers. I don't know whether they are still in

existence or not. I have no idea, but we lived there for four years. Then I moved back to Youngstown and stayed with my younger sister. Then eventually they came back to Youngstown. Actually my mother came back; my father didn't. My father and mother separated. I came back to Youngstown. I started to read about the Youngstown Playhouse. I would read about Mrs. Moyer, Mrs. Helen Moyer, and Richard Levinson, and a man by the name of Livingston; I have forgotten which one he was. I thought so much that I would love to be a part of that. I was a very shy teen-ager, extremely shy. I remember getting up the courage one time . . . I think the theater was on Arlington Street at that time, I'm not sure. I called and said, "How much is a membership," and they said, "\$5." Then I hung up right away. I wanted to be a part of it so much, but I was so shy. I would have been afraid to set foot inside of the Youngstown Playhouse. I was really that much in awe of all of those people. I would read the reviews.

M: I acted exactly the same way.

A: Did you really?

M: Exactly. It is amazing that you are saying that. I would make up very roundabout excuses to ask people that I knew that went there at school without appearing interested. I would make a whole ruse up to find out one little bit of information so that they wouldn't know that I was interested. I thought that you had to keep it a secret.

A: Exactly, exactly. Once I started working . . . At that time they had traveling shows coming to the Park Theater before it was burlesque. Burlesque was across the street.

M: Just burlesque?

A: That is right. It played across the street at the Princess Theater.

M: Oh, I remember that.

A: Princess Theater, right. But all the legitimate shows hit the Park. Those were in the days when the old actors and actresses weren't afraid to get up off their duffs and leave New York and travel the country and give those of us who couldn't get to New York or Chicago or to Cleveland or to Pittsburgh the chance to see them here in Youngstown.

M: Do you know some of those people? Can you tell me about any of them?

A: Certainly. I can tell you a story about Ethel Barrymore. At one time, Miss Barrymore had a drinking problem. Her doctor advised her to stop drinking for her health's sake.

She did. She was booked into the Park Theater while touring in "The Corn is Green." During the intermission she saw several of the stage hands having a beer during this period. She proceeded to "chew them out" for drinking while working on "her" show. She said words to the effect that she would have no drunken stage hands working on "her" show!!

M: That's a funny story.

A: My first exposure to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne was at the Park Theater.

M: In what?

A: In their 1939 revival of the "Taming of the Shrew." They revived it for British war relief. It was revived in 1939 or 1940, one or the other. I think it was 1940 when it hit Youngstown. All of those old-timers played the Park Theater.

My interest in theater was still very strong.

M: What did a ticket cost then, John?

A: Oh, gosh, I forget. I think the very best seat--I think; please don't hold me to this--was probably around \$5 or \$6 or something like that, maybe not that high. This was in the orchestra, maybe not in the first ten rows of the orchestra or anything like that or in the loges. They were darn good seats. They were downstairs.

M: Quite a pretty penny too for that time.

A: It was at that time; yes, it was. That was forty years ago.

M: In 1939 weren't the premiere seats for "Gone With the Wind" 75¢, or was it 75¢ for the regular seats to get in to see it?

A: I don't know; I have no idea; I don't know what the price was. I didn't see "Gone With the Wind" the first time around.

M: People were outraged. I remember people talking about it.

A: Is that right?

M: Yes.

A: Maybe \$1.25?

M: That is unheard of. I remember my parents planning that as if it was an excursion to fantasy land. We were waiting for that movie to come.

- A: In the meantime, I joined a dramatic group here in Youngstown that had been operating, I guess, for a number of years. It was at St. Patrick's Church. It was called the Green Masque Club. We did a play. I have forgotten what it was. It was one of these high school type plays that they did in those times.
- M: Were these all young people?
- A: I would say it was kind of a heart and hand club, if you know what I mean. They were a nice group of people. The ages varied I would say. It wasn't a large organization. I think maybe they did one or two shows a year or something like that.
- M: How did you find out about that?
- A: I don't know. I have even forgotten that. I guess I knew some people from St. Patrick's or something like that.
- They would bring in guests every once in a while. One night-- this was in 1937--they brought in Lawrence Lawlor from the Youngstown Playhouse to give a talk on theater. Well, I had read about Lawrence and his association with the Playhouse, so I thought I was seeing a god of the theater there. I really was because Lawrence was very, very knowledgeable about theater and especially the Lunt's.
- M: Would you say just a little bit about his background because he had connections in New York, didn't he?
- A: I don't know.
- M: At that time I think perhaps he may have.
- A: Lawrence gave us a talk on theater. He talked about Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. I had heard very little about them, and I knew very little about them. I thought from what he said and how much he liked them they must be pretty great. If ever they were to come to Youngstown, I was going to go to see them. Two or three years later they came in the revival of "The Taming of the Shrew." Well, I fell in love with them from that moment on. I tried to make it a point to see their productions twice if it was possible. I liked to go and watch the play; then I liked to go back and watch them just to see what they did. I didn't have to worry about the story line. I just wanted to watch their technique which was just marvelous. But they were not, repeat not, technical actors. I saw everything that they did from that time until the last play that they did which was "The Visit." The only one that I missed was "Quadrille," which starred, of course, the Lunt's, Edna Best, and Brian Ahern. They tell a marvelous story about Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Do you want to hear the story?

M: Yes, as many of them as you have.

A: In this play--I'm not familiar with it at all--but I understand that Mr. Lunt played some sort of rough railroad man with that kind of background. He had one line in the show on which he could never get a laugh. It was when he would ask for a cup of tea. He felt that he should have a laugh when he asked for a cup of tea since he was this rough kind of person. He said to Miss Fontanne one night, "I can't understand this. I can't understand why I am not getting a laugh." She said, "Alfred, it is because you are asking for a laugh and not a cup of tea." The next time and from that point on he got his laugh. Isn't that amazing? When he asked for a cup of tea, he got his laugh.

M: What about the stories that go around about you--the good one's, John--that you got to know the Lunt's?

A: No, I didn't get to know them. I never got to know them, but I got to meet them.

M: They were aware that you were like a lifelong fan.

A: I have written to them, and I have always gotten a reply always, always. He died in 1977. It was like a theater god dying. He was just so marvelous.

Anyway, as I said, I saw everything they did up through "The Visit." I saw "The Visit" three times. I drove to New York to see it with Rod McDonald and Gerry Bloomberg. At that particular time, in 1958, they were supposedly not going to take "The Visit" on tour. I wanted to see it, so the three of us piled into Rod's small car and drove to New York. After we had seen the performance Rod said, "Here is a pen and paper. Write them a note. I am going to take it back to them. You are going to meet them." I said, "I will do nothing of the kind. I don't know what to say." He said, "I will dictate it." Rod dictated the note; I wrote it; he took it back, and honest to God, I met them. I met them face to face. Don't ask me what I said.

M: How did you feel? That is an indescribable feeling when you meet an idol.

A: I was in heaven. I finally met and touched them. That was an . . . I can remember my saying how much I enjoyed them. Obviously, that is what I said, I hope. I remember Mr. Lunt saying, "Isn't it a good play? Isn't it a good play?" That was nice.

I was very ill in 1971. I had some very serious surgery. After I came out of the hospital I was sitting at home one

Sunday afternoon feeling very sorry for myself. I thought, I'm going to phone the Lunt's. And I did.

M: And you got them?

A: I got them. She was lying down. I didn't get to talk to her at that time. I talked to him for about five minutes. Maybe it was ten minutes. I told him how much I had enjoyed them and how I had loved them. I said that I had seen every play that they had done since the "Taming of the Shrew" except that four character play that I couldn't think of. He said, "Quadrille." And I said, "Yes, Quadrille."

M: And you told him that you were calling from Youngstown, Ohio?

A: Yes, of course.

M: What did he say? First of all, did you just look the name up in information?

A: I called information, right. They were listed in the phone book in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin. Alfred Lunt was listed in the phone book.

In the service I had seen a number of shows, number one of which was Helen Hayes in "Harriet." I saw the play in Indianapolis. Miss Hayes was touring in it. I saw a farce called "Three's a Family" also in Indianapolis. It was written by the Ephron's, if you know them.

M: Is that the girl who writes? Is that the magazine writer? Is she related to them?

A: They probably are all related.

Anyway, I saw this play. It starred Una Merkel. Then when I came out of the service, I was at sixes and sevens. I really didn't want to come back to Youngstown, not because Youngstown held no appeal for me, but I had had an exciting three or four years, exciting in that I had met all sorts of people at different places throughout the States. Family obligations forced me to come back. I will never forget that summer; I was just unhappy. I happened to see an article in the paper. They were having auditions at the Playhouse--this was in October--for "Three's a Family."

M: Where was the Playhouse located at that time?

A: Market Street. I was never associated with the Playhouse when it was on Arlington Street. I often regret that. I would have liked to have been associated with it there because then I could say I was at the three theaters, but it wasn't to be.

Anyway, I thought I would just go over there. At that particular time they were doing a play in honor of Shaw's birthday or anniversary or some such thing. I believe it was Shaw's 90th birthday. It was called "Fanny's First Play." I'm not familiar with it either. I didn't see it. I knew one of the people who was in it. I got on the bus. I was riding over to the Playhouse when this . . . His name is Jack Bertch. He is no longer associated with the Playhouse. We greeted each other. I said to him knowing full well where he was going, "Where are you going?" He said, "To the Playhouse." I said, "Well, I'm going over too." I felt that I had someone to hold onto.

M: You still felt timid.

A: Yes, still felt timid. I walked in, and Jack completely left me. That was alright because I didn't expect him to go around holding my hand. I sat there. Seated in front of me was one of the biggest men I have ever seen in my life with a black and red plaid sort of lumber jacket on. He turned around to me and said, "Do you want to read?" I said, "Yes." I don't know how yes came out. I think somebody fished it out. He said, "What do you want to read?" I said, "Dr. Bartel," which was just a small part. He was kind of an absent-minded doctor who kept saying during the birth of a child, "We're making progress; we're making progress." I could remember that. They gave me the part of Sam to read which was the male lead. They apparently liked what I did that night. I came back the next night.

M: Who was this "they"?

A: They being Bill Pound--the man in the black and red plaid jacket--who was on the committee. I don't know who else, maybe Judith Chambers, probably Harvey Warren who was the director. Did you know Harvey?

M: No.

A: You weren't associated with the Playhouse at that time, were you?

M: No. Was this 1958?

A: No, this was 1946. Harvey Warren was the director. They said, "Come back tomorrow night." I went back the next night, and they said, "Come back tomorrow night." So I went back the third night. They passed out the parts and gave me the part of Sam which was the lead.

M: Isn't that wonderful.

A: I have often wondered what would have happened if I hadn't

gotten a part. I think that I am big enough to know that I was treated so well and so kindly and made to feel so welcome by these people that I would have come back. I would have come back. I just thought that I had to get this out of my system. That was all there was to it. I had to find out if I could do something.

M: I'm glad to hear you say that. I would like to ask you a question about that. It is so hard to explain to ordinary mortals. They want to know how we get this craze that we can't stay away from that place or what draws you, and they want you to put it into words, into a box. I can only say that it is a feeling. It is feeling good all over about what you are doing. It is a magic feeling.

A: I think it is like anything else that you enjoy. It is different. I can understand a person being all absorbed in sports; I can understand that because I have the same feeling about theater. It is a sense of accomplishment. It is self-satisfying.

I was ill during the last performance of the play I just finished doing called "On Golden Pond," last Sunday night. I was sick Saturday night, and I stayed in bed all day Sunday until 4:00 in the afternoon. Then you come to the theater. You are still sick. Then you make your first entrance. The person that you are playing is not sick and you play the role. It hasn't happened to me that frequently. It has happened to friends of mine like John Griffith. He has come and performed with a temperature of 102. It has happened to Helen Moyer when she had a bad back. Helen was in a wheelchair. She would get out of the wheelchair and perform on the stage and then come off and get back in the wheelchair again. I don't know what it is. I have no idea. It is some sort of magic that occurs. I don't know; I can't explain it.

M: I can't either, but I know that people want you to sometimes.

A: You can't verbalize it.

M: Just as you say, I can't.

A: I can't verbalize it.

M: It has to happen to you.

A: I'm sure that the same thrill--and it is a thrill--the same response, the feeling of love, the feeling of rapport, the feeling of empathy that you have with an audience is the same I would say, in a sense, probably as that of a baseball player when he gets up at bat or when he is out on the field. I have never been a baseball player. I don't know. I don't know what they go through. I have never been a football player.

I don't know what they go through, but I'm sure that they must do something because they love it so much. You just have to love it.

M: The thing is that it is just such a wonderful feeling to be able to do what you love and get paid for it. That happened to me a few times, and I was awestruck by the feelings.

A: Yes.

M: The double feeling that they are paying me to do this.

A: We don't get paid here at the Youngstown Playhouse as you well know.

M: Right.

A: That doesn't matter to me. I don't care about that aspect. It doesn't diminish the love that I have for it at all. As a matter of fact, I think that if I were to be paid, I would give them the money back. They don't owe me a thing here. I just own them so much. I really do.

M: What I meant is that some people can just do this all the time because they don't have to work at something else to eat.

A: Yes, right.

M: In the theater of this kind, we work at other things so that we can have the privilege to come here for free.

A: Exactly. Incidentally, I would like to make mention of the fact that I worked for forty-two years for Republic Steel Corporation. I retired in 1978.

M: I think it is important for the people to know that people from every walk of life in every profession come to a community theater to participate.

A: Of course, absolutely, absolutely. We welcome them with open arms. We don't ask how much money do you have or how little money do you have. All we say is, "Do you want to read? Do you want to act, work backstage, et cetera?"

M: I would like to know the initial group of people you worked with when you first got here after you walked in off the street and got a lead.

A: I'm still amazed. I really am. As I had said I am in my thirty-sixth year with the Youngstown Playhouse. They have been thirty-six happy, happy years. My friends are all--most of them--from the Playhouse. I've made some valuable friendships, warm friendships over the years. The first play that

I was in as I have said was "Three's a Family," which was a farce. We did it at Thanksgiving time in 1946. Incidentally, I find now that it was much easier to learn lines then than it is today.

M: I find that happening.

A: I have to tell you a little anecdote about Lynn Fontanne again.

M: You may tell 300 of them.

A: You are going to get the idea that I kind of admire her.

M: I heard that about you.

A: If you recall they did--they being PBS--"The Royal Family" a few years ago, and George Schaefer directed it as I recall. Eva LeGallienne played Fanny Cavendish. The part was offered to Lynn Fontanne initially--the part of Fanny Cavendish--by George Schaefer. He called her and asked her if she would do it. She asked him to send her the script. He did, and apparently she read it over. She called him back, and she said, "George, it took me three days to learn three lines and not very well either." So she turned down the role.

The first show that I was in here at the Playhouse as I have said was "Three's a Family." In it were Merv Jones, John Griffith, and George Barry who is a disc jockey in town. I think he works for WHOT. He had the romantic lead. Merv played Dr. Bartel.

M: The part that you had come to read?

A: Yes, because it was a nice, small part. I thought it would be kind of great if I could do it. I have forgotten the part that John Griffith played. As I said I played Sam. I don't remember what his last name was. Midge Reynolds was in it. Did you know Midge?

M: I have never heard of her.

A: Midge and her husband Dick were very active in the Playhouse. Dick was with Shriver-Allison and eventually left that field.

M: Tell what field that is John.

A: He was a mortician.

Myrtle Welton was another old Playhouse character actress who was in it and who taught me very nicely about upstaging. I remember one night we were rehearsing. Apparently, I was upstaging her--completely oblivious of that fact. I had no idea that I was. I don't think I even knew what upstaging meant.

She said to me very quietly, "John, would you mind playing that scene on a level with me?" I said, "I would be glad to, delighted to." She was very kind.

Harvey Warren was the first director I worked under. He was here, I think, two seasons.

M: Where was he from?

A: I don't know. I know he was a classmate of the late Judge Ford at Yale. Whether he was a classmate or a year or so behind him or a year or so ahead of him, I don't know. Harvey is dead now.

The second director I worked under was a man called Arthur Sircom.

M: I have heard of him.

A: He came here in 1948 and stayed five years. Arthur Sircom was probably the best thing up until that time as far as I was concerned. I had never worked under any other director but Harvey Warren. I mean professional director. I understood that they had some very fine directors here prior to my joining the organizations, for instance, Hubbard Kirkpatrick, and some others who were just super directors.

During my association with the Playhouse I have been privileged to work under some other fine directors. Among some of them are Dean Norton, George Hamlin, and Bob Gray, our present artistic director. And, not to forget, Bentley Lendoff our executive director, who, on occasion does some artistic directing.

M: Did most of these people come into Youngstown from out of town?

A: Most of them did, yes. I know that Hubbard Kirkpatrick did. He eventually married a local woman, and I think died here. Arthur Sircom was a graduate of Yale also, Yale Drama School. He had directed a number of things on Broadway. I think one of them was "Sailor Beware" many years ago. He was a fine, fine director. He paid great attention to detail; he was a screamer. You learned under him. I think I learned more in those five years than I have learned in all the years since. I really do. He taught us so much--those of us who were fortunate enough to work under him. He also directed at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis, Massachusetts for years.

M: Would you mind giving just a little mini biography on the honorary awards here?

A: Some years ago Gerry Bloomberg and Maryann Baker felt that the backstage people were the unsung heroes of the theater. It is particularly true in a community theater. They were

right. They are right. Gerry is living in New York now.

M: She is an agent or something, isn't she?

A: I don't know exactly what she is doing. I know that she is working there. I have been told that she is representing Maureen McGovern. I don't know this to be true or not. I heard it. Maureen, incidentally, is in the "Pirates of Penzance" now, on Broadway.

M: I didn't know that.

A: She went on September 8, yes. She took over the Linda Ronstadt role.

M: Another local girl, Maureen McGovern.

A: Yes, well, she is from Boardman, right?

M: Yes.

A: Gerry and Maryann felt that there should be some acknowledgement at the end of the season for backstage workers--some sort of an award. They thought up the idea of the "Arthur" in honor of Arthur Sircom. It evolved not only as an honor to backstage workers, but it also became kind of like our Antoinette Perry Awards. We get Arthur's now and the people in New York get their Tony's. It is kind of nice. It is very nice to receive one as a matter of fact.

M: Describe what the Arthur's look like.

A: I would say they are probably ten inches in height. They are the faces of the masques of comedy and tragedy. They are brass plated or something and set on a wooden pedestal. They have a plate on the front of the pedestal indicating whether it is for the best actor and what the play is and what the season is or best supporting actor, best performer in a musical, best supporting actor in a musical, best backstage worker. There are many, many categories. I like the kind like best newcomers for the season, even juvenile awards for kids who did their first show. It is an encouragement to them.

M: It is a gala evening.

A: It is a fun evening with food. You bring your own libation.

M: I think the term BYOB (Bring Your Own Bottle) started with theater people.

A: I don't know. Usually set-ups were provided, but you would bring your own libation.

M: I didn't know what BYOB meant until I came here.

A: I don't think I did either.

The Civic Children's Theater of Youngstown has no direct affiliation with the Youngstown Playhouse except that we provide them with a place to rehearse their plays and to perform their plays, et cetera. They are a complete and separate and independent organization with their own board of directors, their own officers, their own advisory board, their own executive director who happens also to be their artistic director, their own education director who came here at the middle of last season. Doug Wilson is the executive director and director of the Children's Theater and artistic director. Wendy Buchwald is the educational director. The Civic Children's Theater does a special play at Christmas time. For instance, a couple of years ago they did "A Christmas Carol." Last year they did "Oliver Twist." This year they are going to do "Pinocchio."

Last year as I said they did "Oliver Twist." They put on three shows a morning, and you are dead at the end of it. I came down and auditioned for the part of Fagin in "Oliver Twist." I had a glorious time playing for those kids. They are attentive. If you make a mistake, they know it. They listen, and they are critical.

M: Didn't you also do the role of Fagin for the musical version of "Oliver Twist?"

A: I did the role of Fagin ten years ago--almost eleven years ago--for Ohev Tzedek Temple. I was the musical version of "Oliver Twist" called "Oliver" which was a very rewarding experience for me. I don't sing, but you really don't have to.

M: It was a wonderful production. I remember it.

A: I really enjoyed it. I thank you. Yes, I really enjoyed doing him. He was fun to do. He really was.

M: I've never really seen you play a villainous person. Do you have an aversion to those types?

A: No, it is the way I am cast. I think the closest that I came to a villain was in "Uncle Harry." That was in 1959.

M: Tell me about that. I'm not familiar with that.

A: He is a very selfish brother of two women. I think that he is involved in the murder of one of them and places the blame on the other. That was twenty-two years ago this Thanksgiving that we did that. Vera Friedman played one sister, and Catherine Cummings . . .

M: I knew her and her husband.

A: Catherine was about five feet tall--about the height of Helen Moyer--with a voice way down here.

M: She was very melodramatic.

A: Extremely so. Under Bill Dykins' direction in the summer of 1962 I did "MacBeth," and Catherine played Lady MacBeth. I don't regret doing it. I am certainly physically not right for MacBeth, but I learned so much. You learn so much when you do Shakespeare and Bill Dykins knows his Shakespeare. You learn how to breathe. You have got to learn how to do it. You have got to. It was an extremely rewarding experience for me. Of course, I loved the costumes because it was the first time that I had ever worn those kinds of costumes with the capes. It was great.

M: I never recall seeing you as just an unlikable person. I remember when you did Thomas Wolfe's father in "Look Homeward, Angel." I many ways he does things that displease the family. He's warm and lovable.

A: He is.

M: You can also do many dimensioned people, can't you?

A: I like to. I thoroughly enjoyed doing Norman Thayer, Junior "On Golden Pond." I enjoyed him because he was so darn complex.

M: He certainly was. Say a little bit about him because that is a very recent play. A lot of people don't know too much about it.

A: It is a lovely play about two old people. He is seventy-nine and during the course of the play celebrates his eightieth birthday. She is sixty-nine. He is a curmudgeon. He has been a teacher. I say that he has been a teacher because he comments during the course of the play that he wonders why someone sent him some years ago some salt water taffy because he hates salt water taffy. He said that some former student did it probably who was unhappy with his grades. He either taught on the high school or the college level. He and his lovely wife had been coming to Golden Pond--which is a resort area in Maine and also the name of the lake on which their cottage is located--for forty-eight years. He has this thing about dying. He keeps talking about it during about sixty percent of the play. When his daughter's fiancé's son comes to visit them and stays with them for a month, it changes Norman's outlook on life entirely. He has such a good time with this young, thirteen year old boy. He just has a marvelous time. It changes him to a certain extent. I think that his outlook on dying really takes place in the final scene of the

second act which is the end of the play when he suffers an attack of angina pectoris and realizes how close a call he has with death and finds it not to be very conversational after all. He has a more hopeful outlook that he and his wife of forty-six years will be coming back to Golden Pond next year.

M: His wife, of course, tell us a little bit about her attitude toward his dwelling upon his own demise so much.

A: She, of course, is a very sprightly sixty-nine, in love with the outdoors, in love with life, in love with living generally, gets terribly upset with him when he talks about death which he constantly does for about sixty percent of the play. He will manage to bring the subject of death into some part of a conversation. She gets terribly, terribly upset with him to the extent that she gets very, very angry.

M: Let me comment that many of these tirades of his are enormously humorous.

A: Oh, they are very funny. Norman because he has been a teacher likes to use other people's minds to see what they are thinking and will say things and do things to shock them, not because he means what he says at all, but rather because he wants to see what the other party is thinking. If they have the guts to stand up to him, he enjoys a good intellectual fight. He likes that; he enjoys that. He likes to play mental gymnastics. I think that is the best way to describe him and describe his attitude towards other people, but not with his wife Ethel. He adores her, absolutely adores her. He does many things and talks about death many times just to get her rifled up. He will grin about it afterwards not so that she can see him. He won't do that.

M: Would you like to talk about anything else?

A: What can I talk about?

M: You are not going to say, but John Abbey is a Playhouse luminary.

A: No.

M: Yes, he is, and that is why we are talking to him. He has many, many memories. He has been a force in the Youngstown Playhouse for many years and is an esteemed person here. John Abbey always helps the newcomers and has always been gracious and lovely.

A: I am and always have been frightened to death before I get that first word out onstage. I think I have no voice. I will not be able to go through with this. Before the curtain

goes up I think maybe something will happen that I would not have to go on that night. It is a terrible feeling. The butterflies are there, and people think that you are joking, but you are not joking at all. That is because you want to do a good job. That is the reason. You just want to make the people happy who have paid their good, hard-earned money. You want to do a good job for them; you want to do a good job for the Playhouse, and you want to do a good job for yourself. It is such a rewarding feeling to know that you brought laughter or some tears, some happy memories into the lives of the people who pay their good, hard-earned money to come and watch the actor perform.

M: A lot of people don't know that people who work in a community theater don't get paid. They do this because they love to do it mostly. Most of them I would have to say that is the reason. It is a giving thing and also a taking. You get a lot back.

A: You get so much more back from it really than you give. As I said this Playhouse owes me nothing, absolutely nothing. If I were to leave here tomorrow, I would be in the debt of the Playhouse. I really feel that strongly about this organization.

M: It enriched your life.

A: It saved my life.

M: Could you just say a little bit. We know that you have traveled extensively. People know Youngstown, Ohio. When you mention to them about this theater which everybody here has the right to be extremely proud of, it is known all over America. I would like you to say some of the few things you could about the prestige that this place enjoys nationwide.

A: Indeed it does. I have talked to people as far west as California really who know of us as an organization. We are nationally known. This is not just a line of bologna. We are nationally known, and the quality of our work is nationally known. As a matter of fact I had some letters during the course of the run of "On Golden Pond" as did Mrs. Moyer. We received some jointly. Some of them were from people you don't know talking about the quality of the productions and how much they enjoyed them. You don't get quality by just sitting back and doing nothing about it. You have to have dedicated people from the top on down. You have to have people who are willing to give up seven weeks of their time at the minimum. From the time you have your first rehearsal until you have your closing night, you give up seven weeks of your lifetime. You are not giving it up, and you are not giving it away. You are exchanging it. You are exchanging some things that you may not like to do as well. I know that I don't know of anything that I like to do as well as being here. You love the smell of it even as lonely as it is; even an empty theater has a quality of love about it. It really does. You

can visualize with a work light on the stage--just the work light on the stage being the only thing--and you would see those seats out in the auditorium. You know that there are going to be real live people sitting there not too long in the future. In the next few nights, there are going to be people there.

- M: There is always that edgy feeling that this is growing. Sometimes I felt it was like a short pregnancy. It was this things growing and growing within you. Then when you give birth to it . . .
- A: Arthur Sircom used to say that rehearsals were like labor pains. That was exactly what he had said. Rehearsals were like labor pains. You gave birth on opening night.
- M: I'm glad to know that someone else had that feeling.
- A: Incidentally, he had directed many, many famous people really.
- M: Where did he come from?
- A: He came from Connecticut. Helen Moyer located him. I think Helen was the director finder, but I don't know how she located him, but she did. Actually there was a motion picture couple who were interested in coming here. This was back in 1948. I think he is still directing. His name is Chesney or something like that. They backed out. Then Helen got on the phone and got Arthur Sircom. Arthur came and took one look at that matchbox stage on Market Street and said, "Oh, my God."
- M: You could give me a few minutes' information in the transformation. You said you weren't at Arlington.
- A: No.
- M: But you were very prominent at the Market Street theater.
- A: Right.
- M: Then they moved to this new site on Glenwood Avenue which is now called by special permission with the post office, 600 Playhouse Lane.
- A: Right.
- M: Tell about that transition and the work that went into moving the theater.
- A: We were very fortunate at that time to have as a director a man by the name of Jim Cameron who was a better businessman, organizer, administrator--administrator would probably be the best term for him--than he was as an artistic director. We

were very fortunate to have him at that time because he made--I feel and a lot of other people feel the same way--the transition, the move from Market Street to the Playhouse Lane so much easier. He really did. We moved in here and immediately started to go to work. The last play that we did on Market Street, I wanted to be in it; I wasn't really in it; I wasn't cast in the show at all.

M: That is the sentiment in you.

A: Right, I wanted to have a part in the last performance of the last production at Market Street. The play was "A Visit to a Small Planet." I just asked the director to replace so and so as a TV cameraman in this scene, and that was how I went out on the stage. I had no lines. I just wanted to be in the last . . .

M: Have that last happy portrait.

A: That was it, right. That was in the latter part of 1958 because we opened this theater in January of 1959 with a revue called "Open House." Incidentally, when we celebrate our sixtieth anniversary in three years, we will also celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary in this particular house.

The Playhouse has enabled me to meet so many different people really. Most of them I have liked, and most of the roles that I have had I have liked. There have been a couple of times when you fill in when they need somebody on an emergency basis for a small role or something like that, and you do it. You are glad to do it; you may not like it--the role, I mean. You don't mind doing it because it is all part of the community theater. You may not particularly care for the character that you are playing.

M: Say in your words what community theater means to you.

A: I'll try.

M: I mean some people don't understand that you do all sorts of things in the work area.

A: In that respect, yes. It is an ongoing organism. It is a living thing to me. That is what a community theater is; it is a living thing. It is people doing all kinds of different things with one ultimate goal, one idea, and that is to contribute something to the community. We do feel this way; we do feel that we are making a great contribution to the community as an organism. We are doing it for a lot of young people who are coming in off the street. We are fulfilling a need for them that the YMCA ( Young Men's Christian Association) fills for other people or another group

and the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) fulfills for another group and the little league baseball provides for still another group. We take care of the group that doesn't particularly enjoy those other three. It is a community sponsored love story. It is a love of people for something that is very alive and we hope will never die.

I would be remiss if I were not to acknowledge the contribution of the officers and board members who devote so much of their time and energy to see that the "wheels are kept turning" at the Playhouse, with special praise to Mrs. Helen Moyer, and her late husband Sidney, both of whom gave nearly a lifetime of dedication to the Playhouse.

M: Thank you very much, John.

END OF INTERVIEW