

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
ALBERT ORIUCCI
OF THE
FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

INTERVIEWED BY
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Oral history of Albert Oriucci of the Federal Theatre Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan on March 13, 1979.

SPORN: Mr. Oriucci, you were a very young man when you joined the Federal Theatre Project. Would you tell us exactly how you got into it, when you got into it, and how long you were in it?

ORIUCCI: As I recall, . . . back, oh, about, I think it was around 1936, 1935. Economically things were very bad. We had one of the world's worst Depressions at that time and the federal government got involved with different job projects. This was an art project, the Federal Theatre Project. Employed were unemployed actors or unemployed people that had performed in the theatre. How I got involved with it was I had experience, drama experience, in high school, from which I had just graduated. Also, the other factors that contributed to my employment were that my dad worked on the WPA Project for twenty-five dollars a week, something like that. And, if there were any children in the family, they would allow an additional member of the family a job that would pay twenty-five dollars a month. This is how I got involved with the Federal Theatre, plus, as I explained, the experience of having had drama in high school. These are to the best of my recollection.

SPORN: You joined in 1936, right from the beginning?

ORIUCCI: Yes, right at the very beginning.

SPORN: And how long were you with the Project?

ORIUCCI: I think it was like three years and then it disbanded, though. The Project came to an end automatically because the funds were removed, as I recall.

SPORN: Yes, that's true, that was in 1939. Well, would you tell us what you remember of that experience? About the plays?

ORIUCCI: Yes. I know, when I first got involved with it, I was like what they would say now--an effervescent, bubbling, bumbling youth, just loaded with energy and anxious to get going. And I thought to myself at the time, this would indeed be a very valuable experience for me, in a field that I thought I would like to work in, acting. However, it didn't turn out that way.

SPORN: Then, you really did think that possibly this might lead to a career in acting?

ORIUCCI: Oh, yes, We all did. Everybody working down there that had very

ORIUCCI: little experience had nursed the idea, They enjoyed the idea that this would eventually lead to better things for them in the acting career. Of course, we were involved with people, too, that already had the experience, either as vaudevillians or actors,

SPORN: It was a combination then of young people who had no experience and older people who had already theatre experience, but were perhaps unemployed at the time?

ORIUCCI: True. Very true.

SPORN: Do you remember any of them?

ORIUCCI: I remember quite a few people only when their names are mentioned. Up to the point that the names are mentioned, I would remember them. I'm kind of doubletalking right here, but hadn't I spoken with the group here, now, I don't think I could have recalled one-third of them, but as I looked at the names, my memory became refreshed,

SPORN: And, it will get better as we go along. (Laughter). Would you remember, say, one particular, more experienced member of the Federal Theatre Project who you felt taught you something about the theatre?

ORIUCCI: Well, the older men. They rather impressed me, like Courtney White and Oxley Taylor, and that other gentleman that played . . . Oh, I can't think of his name. They impressed me more. I guess I feel the same way today, when I watch TV or when I go to the theatre or to a movie. It seems the elderly men had more the qualities of experience that somehow seemed impressionable to me. I seem to associate with them. Those are the ones I remember real well. They were men of good quality, as far as acting was concerned. The younger ones, at that time, seemed more to be like me and I was inexperienced. They didn't seem to impress me.

SPORN: Now, the Federal Theatre Project, as you yourself indicate, was an attempt to relieve the problem of unemployment, particularly, for them, theatre people, but at the same time, the government, when it came time to support the Federal Theatre Project--as well as the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers' Project--had an idea in mind that it would create some kind of National Theatre which would reflect the culture of the common people, of the ordinary citizens of our country. A number of the people who were in it felt the same way, that here was an opportunity for creating plays and presenting dramas that somehow or other spoke about the people, spoke to the

SPORN: people. Do you recall anything?

ORIUCCI: Oh, definitely. Yes, definitely. What you said just now is an actual fact. As I recall it, it served a two-fold purpose. The main purpose was to restore employment for those that already had been involved with the theatre, and the other purpose, I believe, was to continue a culture, which I think America has--had then and has now-- a culture that pertained to the arts, not only the theatre area, but also painting and things that pertained to the more literate type of culture that we like to be associated with. Okay. Now, I think, at that time, it was almost impossible to put unemployed actors to work without having a younger element in there in combination with them because how could you possibly put on a play if you didn't have the tyro, or the new man, together with the elderly, experienced man? It seemed that they went hand in hand, and that's what happened at that time.

SPORN: Do you recall any discussion among the performers, the directors, or any of the people involved about the kinds of plays that were put on? For example, the idea was to reflect the culture of the ordinary man; to reflect some of the problems and issues that ordinary people were concerned about. Sometimes it wanted to be socially relevant, socially significant, and so on. Do you recall if there were any discussions among the people about that question?

ORIUCCI: Yes. I think what you're saying to me, I'm going to make an association with politics. At that time, there was a human cry amongst the more conservative elements of the government or the people who complained that the theatre was red-dominated and that it was a waste of the government's money. I think you're referring to something like that. Are you or am I mistaken? Well, they said it was a waste of the government's money; it was red-dominated. But, from my memory, the things that we did and the plays that we did were no different than those of today. You could use the same analogies today and take a particular play and say, "Well, that man is communist-tainted, or he's a conservative type, or he's a liberal." When three people watch a show, you inevitably emerge with three different opinions, and I think the same thing happened during that time. The more conservative element of the country complained that the theatre should be disbanded because it was controlled by the communist groups.

SPORN: Do you think that the plays you did were attempting to be more socially relevant than the plays that had been performed before the Theatre Project?

ORIUCCI: Just one, maybe. It Can't Happen Here. The others were of Shakespearean type, and I don't think that would have any relevancy with regard to times, the way that things were then. But, one play, It Can't Happen Here, that was politically motivated or politically inspired. It was a play that . . . I can't think of the word now. Even though they say, "It can't happen here," the whole idea was based on the proposition that, "It could happen here." And, they're referring to a dictatorial type government and, I believe, they're referring to Roosevelt because they didn't like him and he was already running for a third term, or preparing for a third term. They assumed that if you had this here particular person running for three terms, he could become so ingrained in the government--he could institute, he could employ on his own, or hire, or assign jobs, like the Supreme Court, to people that thought like he did, and eventually would have the type of government that he wanted. So, they associated this play, It Can't Happen Here, with a dictator-type government and, I believe, they had Roosevelt in mind. That's the way it seemed to me.

SPORN: With the idea of fascism which, of course, was a serious political question.

ORIUCCI: Oh, yes. Fascism, at that time, was one of the main issues. It could have been that they had that in mind. It could have been.

SPORN: That play was performed in 17 cities, I believe, at the same time. It opened here and it opened in 16 other cities, if my numbers are correct, at the same time. But, in preparing for It Can't Happen Here, which obviously has very political connotations, were there any discussions about how to use this political play, but to do it in a manner that was artistically effective?

ORIUCCI: Not that I recall. No. I think they went about the business . . . I think it was Haldene, I think he was the director. They had several directors. There was a little fellow, I can't think of his name. But, I think Haldene was the director of this play and I don't remember ever--unless it was done very subtly--that they had a discussion or a meeting in which they discussed the thing purely in terms of being a political play and not of artistic value. I don't think

ORIUCCI: that ever came about, unless it was done, like I say, in a manner that I wasn't aware of--in such a way that sometimes these things could happen. You know, they do things in such a method that it preys on you and it infects your mind and you're not aware that it happened to you. But I don't think that happened like that.

SPORN: Now, as far as plays that had historical themes that were contemporary, in fact, there were more than just It Can't Happen Here done by the Detroit Federal Theatre Project. You were in Let Freedom Ring by Albert Bein and that was about, I believe, a problem with trade union organization in the south. Am I right about that?

ORIUCCI: Right. Right.

SPORN: Then, were you ever in One-Third of a Nation?

ORIUCCI: I don't remember One-Third of a Nation, now. Let Freedom Ring, I do, One-Third of a Nation--I don't remember if I was in that or not. But, on the other hand, we also did the classicals like Merry Wives of Windsor, Dr. Faustus and, I think we were even practicing on King Lear, which never came about. Of course, that could be like the little old German man said, "Ve grow too shoon olt unt too late shmart." It could be that you put on three of political importance and three of cultural value and this will offset one another and, thereby, deny or negate any thought of having political inclinations--the plays, you know.

SPORN: Well, the policy of the Federal Theatre Project, nationally, was to present a variety of plays. There were four kinds, as I recall. One would have been the classics, which could mean not only Shakespeare, but George Bernard Shaw and so on. The other would be contemporary plays dealing with real problems that affect the common man. Third was religious plays. They did a number of religious plays.

ORIUCCI: I don't remember the religious plays.

SPORN: Then, the fourth category was to do plays that had been commercially successful some years earlier. I Confess, for example, might be considered of that kind which was, sort of, a comedy and you were in it.

ORIUCCI: Yes, that comes to my mind now.

SPORN: William Beyer was, I believe, the author of the play, as well as the director of the play.

ORIUCCI: If you hadn't mentioned it, I would never have remembered it, I Confess. But, now that you mentioned it, it comes to my mind. I think it was

ORIUCCI: Let Freedom Ring, the part where they had the little dog in there, "Georgie." I think that was Let Freedom Ring, I'm not sure. That had political implications, you know, about poverty. In fact, I remember a line. One of the elderly gentlemen in the play, when I question him, "What does 'Lees Miserables' mean?"--unaware as a child in the play that it was Les Miserables, you know--the gentleman that I put the query to in the play, says to me, "Well, they called us 'Lees Miserables' at the time on account of all we went through." Being that he was an elderly fellow, he had gone through the Civil War and he referred those words to that particular time. And, I think that was Let Freedom Ring. That had political implications in a way. But, I confess--I Confess I don't remember that one. (Laughter).

SPORN: That's where a young couple, a wife enters a true confession short story writing contest. (Pause). Did you play in The Merry Wives of Windsor?

ORIUCCI: Yes, that was that picture I showed you right there. I was one of the . . . What did they call them? (Leafing through papers). I think that was it right there.

SPORN: Clown?

ORIUCCI: Yes. I forgot what in the world they called them. Oh, there's a word for it. Shakespeare's word. I can't think of it.

SPORN: Buffoon?

ORIUCCI: It wasn't a buffoon. (Laughs). A valet, of sorts. Actually, I was a valet in the play. Yes.

SPORN: Where were these pictures taken, by the way?

ORIUCCI: I don't know. Hy Fireman took them. I don't remember where that darn thing was taken.

SPORN: When I interviewed Hy Fireman, he mentioned to me that when it started in 1936, a number of plays were put on--two or three--and then, after awhile, they suspended production for a period of time because there seemed to be some problem, and so on. Do you recall anything about that?

ORIUCCI: Yes. That was a problem with the funding, I think. They didn't allow any money. They suspended it--the group and the theatre or whatever it was, and then they restored the funds. I think they went about putting the plays on again. I believe the reason why

ORIUCCI: they were suspended, too, is because it was a political matter, They complained, even though, as you say right now, they did try to take a cross-culture of everything, of different plays of different types. They tried to get different groups, but there still was a lot of complaint that the theatre was communist-dominated.

(TAPE STOPPED AND RESTARTED).

SPORN: You were saying--there was an interruption--you thought that politics had something to do with . . . People were complaining that the plays were too politically motivated, too left wing.

ORIUCCI: Yes, I think that that was a factor, as I recall, but they restored it though. There was a lapse. Maybe a month, maybe two months. I don't remember exactly, but the funds were restored, as I remember it, and the plays continued again, although we never did have much of an audience.

SPORN: Was there any change in policy? For example, some people have given us to understand that, number one, in the early days, a good deal of the money for the theatre went into paying for theatre space, like went into pay for real estate, basically. Some people said that, also, in the early days, there was a tendency to build the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit around one or two "stars," so to speak. People who had experience and were somewhat well-known. Is that . . .

ORIUCCI: No.

SPORN: . . . any part of your memory of this experience?

ORIUCCI: No. I think, even though all the years that have lapsed, I don't think that that's true. Somehow, I think what you're mentioning now is, what they would say in the theatre argot, "professional jealousy." Those words might have prevailed at that time, but, as a matter of fact, I don't think it existed.

SPORN: The group got along very well together?

ORIUCCI: Yes, I think so.

SPORN: Functioned together as a team?

ORIUCCI: Yes, I think so. There was some bickering here and there, but it was petty stuff. It was nothing of great importance that the play was shattered or the program was. That had nothing to do with it. Just minor things.

SPORN: These three programs, if you look at here, show that there were three different theatres used. One was the Lafayette Theatre, one was the

SPORN: Cinema Theatre, and one was something called the People's Theatre. Do you remember those switches?

ORIUCCI: Yes, I remember the Lafayette, and the Cinema on East Columbia, but I thought we did it at the Wilson. No, the Wilson was the other play. That one, that private company. Yes, Columbia. The reason . . . I think they just moved around, maybe because . . . I don't know, to tell you the truth. I don't think that was of any consequence, either. If anything, it might have been a two-fold purpose. The Cinema would serve better than the Lafayette because, for the amount of people that showed, the Cinema would be appropriate because it had only like a three-hundred seating capacity, whereas the Lafayette might have had 1,200. They might have been paying three times the rent for Lafayette, as they were for Cinema. That's a possibility, but I don't think that had anything to do . . .

SPORN: I believe the Cinema Theatre, when they were showing there, also showed movies at the same time.

ORIUCCI: Yes, they showed foreign films. Mainly foreign films.

SPORN: They put plays on the same evening, say, they showed a foreign film.

ORIUCCI: Yes. One of their main films at that time was . . . Oh, I can't think. It was that French . . . Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. I think it was Ingrid Bergman.

SPORN: Was that Intermezzo?

ORIUCCI: No, not Intermezzo. It starts with an "m,"

SPORN: With an "m"?

ORIUCCI: With an "m," I think.

SPORN: Well, maybe we'll think of that later.

ORIUCCI: Yes.

SPORN: Was there any reason why this was called the People's Theatre?

ORIUCCI: No, I don't remember that, to tell you the truth. Twelfth and Seward. I know the address. No, I don't

SPORN: Now, apparently there were some problems with these theatres. For example, I recall that Verner Haldene wrote about some of the problems on staging plays in the Cinema Theatre. I can't remember exactly which play he referred to, but the depth of the stage presented a problem. It was not as deep as, say, the Lafayette Theatre stage . . .

ORIUCCI: That could be it,

SPORN: . . . therefore, it meant a problem in how to set it up, and how

- SPORN: actors would move around the theatre, and so on. Were you involved in any discussion of that problem?
- ORIUCCI: No, I don't remember anything like that. I was never involved personally with anything like that. But, having said that, what you just said now, I believe that could be true because the Cinema was a very small theatre. In fact, I think they showed The Little Pigs there in French.
- SPORN: The Three Little Pigs?
- ORIUCCI: In French, yes. They showed that there. It had a seating capacity of, maybe, three hundred and it could very well be that the stage wasn't of sufficient bigness to handle the situations where you had a big crowd of people.
- SPORN: Would you know . . . Right now, on East Columbia street, I think there is a movie theatre there--it's no longer open, it's boarded up, but I think just before it closed down, about ago, it showed adult films. Would that be the same one? Fifty-six East Columbia would be just east of Woodward, right?
- ORIUCCI: Yes, one block. One block, and it was on the southwest corner.
- SPORN: Oh, it was on a corner?
- ORIUCCI: Yes. The southwest corner. I think it was on the corner.
- SPORN: Okay, let's come around to audiences for awhile. Two things. First of all, some of the plays really did draw very well. In fact, It Can't Happen Here, if I remember correctly, showed to over twelve thousand people in the city of Detroit. It only ran for, maybe, a week or two which for a legitimate play is really very good. Some of the others drew quite well, too. Okay. Not all of them did, but some of them drew very, very well. One of the things that the Federal Theatre Project wanted to do very much was to reach a new audience--people who would not ordinarily go to the theatre. They were trying to reach such people. Part of it was through low cost admissions that were within the reach of a broader audience and part of it was through plays that would have something to do with the lives of working people, lower middle class people, and so on and so forth. Again, would you remember anything about that? Did people discuss that?
- ORIUCCI: Yes, I remember that. That was the general idea. It was supposed to have a broad-based type of admission cost, too. It was supposed to be lower, and this way it would draw people that normally didn't go to

ORIUCCI: the theatre. It would get a new element. I remember that, but I don't think they were successful like that, though. I think who showed, at that time, were those that already had been accustomed to going to theatres. I think that was the main group, as I remember it.

SPORN: Now, these audiences were interviewed in the lobby during the course of the play, and after the play. They were asked what they thought of it, and so on.

ORIUCCI: Yes, they did that.

SPORN: There were some reports about what those people--what the audience thought about these plays. Were you involved ever in the interviewing?

ORIUCCI: No, no. I never was involved with anything. Taking samples of people's thoughts with regard to the plays? No, I didn't have anything to do with that.

SPORN: Did you find that the people who administered the Theatre Project and the people who were employed by it--were there any conflicts between the bureaucracy, let's say, and . . . ?

ORIUCCI: Yes. I think that was one of the main handicaps. Those at the managerial area, as compared to the directorial area--the ones that directed the play or managed the play, or I should say, I want to say managerial area and the director--persons that perhaps were going to rent the theatre, see to it that they get the proper equipment, and things like that, they were never in harmony. They always argued. I remember that.

SPORN: With the director?

ORIUCCI: With the director.

SPORN: With the actors?

ORIUCCI: Well, not the actors too much. The actors might grumble about something, but as far as getting anything accomplished, it wasn't within their realm to do it. It was the manager, and they did have problems like that.

SPORN: What kinds, do you know?

ORIUCCI: Well, they needed material or equipment, or something, they couldn't get it. Or, like Nastfogel, he wanted materials to make different types of scenery that he thought would best fit the play. Well, he couldn't get it. There was a handicap somewhere. Somebody would throw a monkeywrench into it, like they say. He couldn't get this here, he couldn't get that. I remember it. There were arguments

ORIUCCI: about that, between the group that was supposed to, I imagine, see that it became financially feasible and the manager who thought that art was more important. There were arguments between them,

SPORN: You mean the director?

ORIUCCI: The director, yes. I keep saying manager. The director, yes. Haldene had a hard time with them, as I remember. He wanted things and he couldn't get them. Now, what caused that, I don't know. Who knows? The way things are now, you look at it and say, "Well, they threw a monkeywrench and they did it purposely. They wanted the Theatre to break up. They wanted it to be unsuccessful," you know? And now, I say, "I wouldn't doubt it, I wouldn't doubt it." You know, in those times, they would say, "I don't think that's so." But, as you get older, you believe anything's possible. (Laughter).

SPORN: You get more cynical.

ORIUCCI: (Laughs). Yes, I'm really a cynical person.

SPORN: Now, of all the plays you've performed in, do you remember any one more than another or what? Any specific thing?

ORIUCCI: The one I remember more was the one with "Georgie." I think that was Let Freedom Ring, with the little dog. And then, It Can't Happen Here, one line that I remember is that one of the men--the police came in to arrest a man in the house--is like a milquetoast, he's real subservient this man of the house. He's groveling and sniveling before the police, begging for his life. So, this policeman, I remember this, says, "Take the son-of-a-bitch out in the alley and shoot him." (Laughs). That I remember. That part I remember. I don't know why, but it stuck in my head. It did show how things could happen here, you know, and that's the kind of thing you would have to deal with. You wouldn't have democracy anymore, you'd have that dictator, whether it'd be fascist or communist. The man came there and gave a summary trial, not like when you go to court. Right then and there, he decided that you were to be shot. That's the way part of that play was. I mean, they brought it forth like that and I remember the line, "Take the son-of-a-bitch out in the alley and shoot him." I remember that specifically. But, Let Freedom Ring, I kind of sort of remember that because I had a little part in there about "Lees Miserables." That I remember, too. It was Les Miserables, as I stated before, when Grandpa said, "Well, that's on account of all we went through,"

SPORN: You mentioned earlier in the interview that you thought that you might pursue an acting career, and you mentioned earlier, also, that some of the other members of the company felt that they might become actors.

ORIUCCI: That's true.

SPORN: Did you--in your experience, did you find any of them that you thought had the possibility of becoming professional actors?

ORIUCCI: Yes, in this group, I think that Eddie Masson would have been real good--from my judgement, you know. But, who knows? I mean, a youngster's judgement. Jay Michael, I don't think he'd . . . He was too "hamish." But, of the younger ones, now--Eddie Masson, I think he was the only one. George Marianucci, I don't think he'd get anywhere. Like I said, he was more engrossed with himself . . . His egoism. He thought he was the greatest, like this Lila Shipley, but nobody else thought so. But, Eddie Masson, I think he'd have been a great actor, a good actor. He'd have made it to the top. He would have been like a Henry Fonda.

SPORN: Is he still around?

ORIUCCI: I don't know. He was young then. He was only, like, twenty-two. Maybe he's even making pictures, who knows.

SPORN: How about your own progress, did you feel you were learning the profession?

ORIUCCI: Well, I took up singing. I thought, maybe, that would help me. But, I got involved with the operatic type singing and that's not too popular, unless you make it great on a scale of operatic singing. In that area you're going to be confined to the Metropolitan or some other place and, maybe, once in awhile, like Robert Merrill, you might sing "The Star Spangled Banner," you know, when they have a football game. I was pretty good. I got pretty good at it. But then, somehow, it seemed you had to go to New York. That's where you had to go. That's where everything was centrally located in order to do something. That's the impression I got, maybe it wasn't so. I never went to New York and the singing went to waste and that was it. Although, every now and then, I bellow a few notes around, but nothing professional.

SPORN: How come you didn't go to New York?

ORIUCCI: I don't know. It seemed like you'd have to go there and you'd have to start with something, and I didn't know what to start with. I wasn't an actor yet, and I wasn't a singer yet, so what would you

ORIUCCI: start with, you know? Somehow, I got in a rut and I stayed here. And, what was my downfall? I got this job at Ford that payed like seven or eight dollars a day, I thought I was a millionaire after working at the Eastern Market for fifty cents for eight hours, carrying bushels on my shoulders--5:30 till 12:30--that's seven hours. I'd get fifty cents for that and when I got this job paying eight dollars or seven dollars, who wanted to go to New York? (Laughs). That was stupid.

SPORN: Now, you worked at Eastern Market while you were in the Federal Theatre Project, or after?

ORIUCCI: No, I think it was before, just when I . . .

SPORN: Before. And you went to work at Ford . . .

ORIUCCI: After the Theatre Project.

SPORN: After the Theatre Project. While you were in the Theatre Project, that's what you did, you didn't work anywhere else.

ORIUCCI: Yes, that's what I did, I worked nowhere else.

SPORN: How long after the Federal Theatre Project did you get the job at Ford?

ORIUCCI: Well, I worked at Ford . . . I started there in 1940, I think I worked till 1939 here, didn't I?

SPORN: Yes.

ORIUCCI: About a year, maybe.

SPORN: A year later.

ORIUCCI: Yes. Lend Lease. Lend Lease got me the job.

SPORN: So then, after that you, sort of, abandoned your notions about the theatre.

ORIUCCI: It, sort of, slow-ly slinked away. You don't even realize it. You think, "Well, I'm going to still sing." You think that and you're going to still do it, and the thought is still there, It's lurking back here, but somehow it slinks away and it feels like a thief in the night, you know, with tennis shoes on. And it gradually leaves and good-bye, it's gone. And then, you're old, like me--sixty years old--and you say, "Where in the world did the years go? Where did they go to?"

SPORN: Now, of course, there were other theatre groups in town, at that time. Do you remember any of them?

ORIUCCI: Yes, but there were no real professional groups. The only ones that were there were those that were on the road, that came from New York or maybe some other city like Chicago, that had a successful stand

ORIUCCI: and then they brought it back on the road. But, there weren't any in the Detroit area that I remember.

SPORN: Well, there was the Contemporary Theatre group.

ORIUCCI: Yes, the Contemporary, that was the only one. But then, they didn't give that many plays, either. I think they gave one, once in a while. I don't remember. I don't remember. They were there before the Federal Theatre Project, during the Federal Theatre Project and after the Federal Theatre Project.

SPORN: Some of the people who were in the Theatre Project continued to perform with one or another local theatre group. Do you remember anybody by the name of Leo Mogill? He's continued to perform.

ORIUCCI: Yes, Mogill.

SPORN: The reason I remember him is that he's a singer, too, as well as an actor.

ORIUCCI: He is? Mogill. How old is he now?

SPORN: In his sixties, I don't know exactly.

ORIUCCI: I don't know, it sort of sounds like I remember that name. Course, don't you think that's a rarity, an unusual one, though, I mean, with regard to what we're talking about here.

SPORN: You mean that people continued to do that?

ORIUCCI: How many have you come across? What's Edith doing? Is she still going around?

SPORN: She's still involved in dance, theatre. She writes poetry. She's never given up any of that.

ORIUCCI: Oh. She was already involved, you know. She was already established to a degree.

SPORN: Yes. So, some people continued, but that doesn't mean to say that they became professional.

ORIUCCI: Yes, I know.

SPORN: But, they stuck with some of the little theatre groups.

ORIUCCI: Well, that's the way it went.

SPORN: You never did that, once you left the Federal Theatre Project, that was it?

ORIUCCI: Well, I kept up with the singing on my own. I took lessons and all that and I hoped that one day I might do something with it. That went on beyond the time of the Federal Theatre, but then I never did do anything with it though.

SPORN: Now, while the Federal Theatre group existed and the Federal Writers'

SPORN: Project existed and the Federal Arts Project existed, the people in it--some of the people in it--got together in a union. The first union they had was, I think, the American Government Employees Union, and then it changed to something called the Workers' Alliance. After that, it became part of the United Professional and Office Workers of America. People like Arthur Clifford, Anteo Tarini were active in it. Rebecca Shelley Rathmer, she was in it.

ORIUCCI: Yes, I think they were going to have a union of sorts. You're right on that. My memory seems to be coming back a little, but I don't recall it too clearly though.

SPORN: Were you involved in it?

ORIUCCI: I don't think so. You mean, if I joined it, or something?

SPORN: Yes. Were you in it? Did you go to meetings?

ORIUCCI: I don't think so, no, and I'm a good union man. I join any union, as long as it's a union. (Laughs). I don't remember that one. I kind of remember what you're saying now, you know, but I don't remember having joined it, though. (Pause). What was it, now? It was a writers, you say, or what?

SPORN: Well, all of those arts projects that were supported by the federal government, the people in it--some of the people in it--organized the union. First it was in the AFL, called the American Government Employees Union of the AFL. Then, after that, the AF of L withdrew the charter and so the group, for a period of, maybe, six months, formed what was called a Workers' Alliance union. That was an independent union. Then, after that, they allied themselves with the CIO union, called United Professional Office Workers of America.

ORIUCCI: Yes. It seems like that. Your mentioning that, sort of, starts to ring a bell. I kind of remember what you're saying, but isn't there ASCAP? American Society for . . .

SPORN: Composers of . . .

ORIUCCI: Yes.

SPORN: Yes, but this is something altogether quite different. See, ASCAP's not exactly a union. Actors' Equity is. Actors' Equity represented the professional theatre, but did not represent the people who were engaged in the Federal Theatre Project.

ORIUCCI: I see, I see. No, I don't know. You know who would know, maybe if you asked her, Edith would know. Edith Segal.

SPORN: Yes, she was involved with that. Yes.

ORIUCCI: She would know because she was always alerted to these things--joining and getting together, and sticking together. She would know that. She was a good lady. I liked her. I liked Edith. Of course, our thinking was alike, too.

SPORN: Do you remember Arthur Clifford, at all?

ORIUCCI: No.

SPORN: Arthur Miller. Arthur Miller's first play, They Too Arise, was produced and performed by the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit, here. It went on for one performance. Do you remember that at all?

ORIUCCI: No, I don't remember that. Is this Arthur Miller of the Marilyn Monroe fame?

SPORN: Oh, yes. (Laughter).

ORIUCCI: No, I don't remember that. Doug Wright, he would know. He was like, maybe, six or seven years older than me, maybe a little more, maybe a little bit less. But, it's surprising, how three or four years in a person's age can put you in a certain plateau. Like, if you're eighteen and another is twenty-two or twenty-three, how the latter would remember more. Me, something's got to really be . . . My wife, she remembers the god-awfulest, inconsequential, insignificant "nothings." She remembers them. It's got to really be of stupendous importance before I can remember. Shows the kind of brain I got, you know, no good. (Laughs).

SPORN: Oh, no. Not necessarily. Much more may come back to you as you now think about this. This is the first time you've been asked to think about it in many number of years. We may be back to interview you again, as we ourselves get more information. There may be certain things we would like to ask you. I think, maybe, in fact, for this morning we've got quite enough.

ORIUCCI: Alright. Well, I'm sure glad you came. I had to have something to do, life was really dull around here. (Laughter).

SPORN: One thing we would like you keep your mind alerted to--any papers, any information that you may come across, anymore photographs, if there are any, and if you can locate those old programs you mentioned.

ORIUCCI: Right. My sister, I know she'll find them. She's pretty good.

SPORN: We would like to see those.

ORIUCCI: Okay. I mislaid them now, but she'll come across them. I know.

SPORN: Now, may we have these photographs?

ORIUCCI: Those you can have. Yes, because I've got the others.

SPORN: Yes, well, we may return them to you. After all, this may be valuable property.

ORIUCCI: You ought to find out about Charlie Bell.

SPORN: But, there is a way, incidentally, of reproducing these and there is a collection of Federal Theatre Project documents, materials, plays, and photographs, at George Mason University.

ORIUCCI: Where is that located?

SPORN: At Fairfax, Virginia.

ORIUCCI: George Mason University.

SPORN: Yes, along with the National Archives they have one of the most complete set of records on the Federal Theatre Project. I'm pretty sure they don't have these photographs and they would be very interested in them.

ORIUCCI: Oh, yes.

SPORN: But, I don't necessarily have to take the originals. They may have a way of reproducing them and you would get back the originals.

ORIUCCI: Well, that's alright. Listen, use them. You know, they've been hanging around. (Laughs). In fact, I lived on Grandy and Gratiot. I told you, ten years ago I moved here. I went back there and I cleaned up and that's how I found these, you know? Otherwise, they'd probably still be down there and get thrown away. I had my high school--The Arrow--my high school book, and many other things. I looked at it, I guess one is dumb, you know. I took it and I said, "What am I doing with it? I've got it for forty years." Forty-five years ago I graduated, maybe fifty years. No, forty-five. I graduated in 1935. I was seventeen years old. I took it, and I threw it away and then I said, "I should have really kept it," I had it for forty years. It'd been up there for twenty-five years, the third floor where I lived. The building had three floors. I lived on the second floor . . .

END OF TAPE. SIDE A.

BEGINNING OF TAPE. SIDE B.

SPORN: . . . put on while you were in high school?

ORIUCCI: (Laughs, Pause). I don't . . . I think one was, I think, that Shakespeare play--Midsummer Night's Dream, I think it was. We did that.

SPORN: Do you remember the part you played?

ORIUCCI: I don't know if I was "Puck" or somebody in there. One of the elves . . .

ORIUCCI: I don't think it was "Puck." It was one of those elfish creatures in there, you know? That's what I played. It was Midsummer Night's Dream. Then, we had another play, too, but I don't remember that one.

SPORN: Why did you get into the dramatic program?

ORIUCCI: Well, listen, at that time . . . You know, I even took Latin in school. Of what value is Latin? Now I look at it, I can understand it, but when I went to high school . . . I took Spanish and that's the only thing I remember--Spanish. Somehow, because it's like Italian. I can still speak some Spanish. Yo puede hablar un poquito espanol. Do you speak any Spanish?

SPORN: A little bit.

ORIUCCI: Usted habla espanol? (Continues to speak a couple of sentences in Spanish).

SPORN: You speak much better than I do. (Laughter).

ORIUCCI: Well, anyway, so why do you take that up? Do you know what I mean? It was sort of cultural. I come from a devastated neighborhood, over there on Chene. You might not . . . I think, you sort of have a New Yorkish accent? Are you from New York? Every now and then, I hear that "r" isn't pronounced. Anyway, there was this neighborhood. It was Chene street. Okay, on this side lived the colored people and on this side lived the Italians. Only, they were the "niggers" and we were the "wops." On the west side of Chene were the colored people and on the east side were the "dagos" and the "wops." That's the word they used in those days and, I imagine, quietly they use it today, too. Like, a Jewish fellow, he was a "sheenie," and a Hungarian was a "hunkie" and, boy, you used them frequently. And then, I hear these stories, you know, that it's not right. "You shouldn't call him a 'nigger' and you shouldn't call him a 'dago.'" So, I said, "Well, I have to be a notch above them. I'm going to be a little more cultural-ly refined than these people." So, that's why I took up the Spanish and I took up the Latin and I took up the theatre, and somehow it sort of rubbed in a little. I think somewhere along the line I'm above the normal "white boy," sort of, at least I'm proud to be myself, anyway. That's why I took them up. It was a little more cultural to be like that, you know?

END OF TAPE. SIDE B.