

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
OF
KENNETH ROWE
OF THE
FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

INTERVIEWED BY
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Oral history of Kenneth Rowe of the Federal Theatre Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan on Aug. 14, 1979.

SPORN: August 14, 1979. This is an interview with Professor Kenneth Rowe of the University of Michigan. He will talk about some of his ideas on the Federal Theatre Project during the 1930's. What I'm doing is investigating those three projects that I mentioned to you earlier. I'm trying to evaluate the materials those projects produced. That's one objective. Another is to determine, if I can, what effect government support of the arts had on the subject matter of the artists and on the craftsmanship of the artists, what degree that was allowed to develop. I'm also interested in knowing, how these projects reached new audiences. It was the objective of all these projects to reach as widespread an audience as possible. For example, Hallie Flanagan, of the Federal Theatre Project, mentioned that one of the main objectives was to develop a completely untapped audience, in contrast, to, say, the carriage trade which attended the theatre in New York city. So, I'm interested in finding out about those kinds of things.

ROWE: I react immediately to your last question, how the new audiences were reached. I knew that that was one of Hallie Flanagan's primary concerns. I don't know how it was widely, just for the one situation, in which I was in direct contact was with the Federal Theatre in Detroit. That was well conceived and operated for that purpose. In taking to reach a fresh audience, it was very successful in doing so. As you know, from our conversations on the telephone, this is all a matter of memory. I find that I don't have documentations that I hoped I might have. It's long enough ago, memories are very, very vague. I don't remember what the name of the theatre was. Although, I have a folder here, with a few letters in it, that I didn't know I had, when I talked with you before. I'm not sure that the name of that theatre and it's location in Detroit, is in one of those letters. I'm going to give you the folder.

SPORN: There were several locations. One was called the Lafayette Theatre. Another was the Cinema. Every so often, they shifted around.

ROWE: This wasn't it. It was the Lafayette Theatre. That was one of them.

SPORN: Downtown. Big downtown theatre.

ROWE: Yes. This wasn't either of those. They put this in working man's neighborhood. There was some old theatre building there, I don't remember. I was there, I saw a production. That's one of the things I remember about, but I don't remember what the building was, whether it was a former stage theatre, movie house, or what. At any rate, the idea was locating it in the midst of the audience they were hoping to reach, who were not a theatre going audience. They aimed it, their programs they produced at that audience, when they got that audience.

SPORN: Do you recall any of the plays you did see put on by the Detroit Federal Theatre?

ROWE: Actually, I saw only one. I knew what others were. Some of them were plays that I knew and some of them... The ones that I knew were primarily plays that were written for the Federal Theatre and being distributed by the Federal Theatre to anyone who wanted to do them. I don't remember what the one that I saw was, incidently.

SPORN: It wasn't One-Third of a Nation was it?

ROWE: Well, I saw that several times but I don't know whether the Detroit Theatre was one of them or not. What I remember that it was a good house of working class man and, from what I understood, from the Federal Theatre staff there, that their audience was, basically, people to whom theatre was new and they were an enthusiastic audience. If that was typical of other Federal Theatres, the theatres really accomplished something of value. Hallie Flanagan, undoubtedly, knew what was going on there and was most happy about it.

SPORN: She had some criticism of the first few plays that were put on by the Detroit Federal Theatre. The first few plays were plays like Boy Meets Girl. Another one, by Robert Sherwood called Road to Rome, which I didn't think was such a bad play...

ROWE: Neither was Boy Meets Girl. It's an extremely good play.

SPORN: She thought that neither of them captured the vitality of the industrial life of Detroit.

ROWE: That's right. They're both quite unrelated to the industrial life of Detroit. First, one can't always tell, what will attract an audience that's unaccustomed, comparatively, to theatre. Sometimes... I've had a few experiences of that kind. Sometimes, exactly what people not accustomed to theatre respond to is the, is very foreign to them. In other words, you might say, that its dramatic feel is something strange, new and different. I know Mrs. Flanagan was thinking in terms of producing plays that would make direct contact with the life, the surrounding life, of this unaccustomed theatre audience. In other words, she wanted theatre to be, not gentle entertainment, but a very vital force. I think that you can attract an audience that's strange to theatre. At least, in some cases, you can attract them either way. By what is close to them, or by what is very foreign to them. The in-between is what doesn't interest them.

SPORN: Of course, the Federal Theatre didn't restrict itself to one kind of play. Near as I can tell, they had four kinds of plays that they wanted to do: the classics, religious plays for occasional purposes, entertainment from Broadway (if they could get the rights to them), and then original plays connected to the lives of the people whom they hoped to reach. So, there were four kinds of plays they were interested in doing. This is exclusive of vaudeville things that they did and the puppet theatre for children, which they also had. All four of those plays are represented in the repertoire of the Detroit Federal Theatre Project. One-Third of a Nation would represent the kind of contemporary play connected to the lives of ordinary people. It played in Detroit, for several performances.

It Can't Happen Here, also, played here. It was one of the 21, or 22, or 23 cities, in which the play opened simultaneously. Did you know any of the personnel, like Verner Haldene, who was a director for a period of time?

ROWE: That name, as soon as you said it, when we were talking before, sounded familiar to me. I'm sure that, at this one theatre, that's all that I visited of the Federal Theatres in Detroit. There was one occasion, I was asked for some conference, on some problem, I'm not sure even what, and I know that Mr. Haldene was... Is that right, Haldene?

SPORN: Yes.

ROWE: I'm quite sure that he was the person whom I was going to confer with. I have a kind of vague mental picture of him, in my mind, but I can't remember anything about what went on.

SPORN: James Doll was then the stage manager, I guess, the stage designer for the Federal Theatre Project. He's the man you knew from Michigan.

ROWE: Yes, I knew him, of course, very well, here, for years. He was the costume designer for University of Michigan productions, for years. At times, there was a rather very close relation between costume and stage design. He would do both. A year after he left here, in New York City, my wife and I knew him well enough that we used to meet when we were in New York. He became very prominent in the unionization, in the union of the, I don't know what the scope was, scene designers and costume designers. I don't know whether it took in other technicians for theatre or not. But, he was the, whatever that position was of that union, for New York City. In other words, he was rather unusual because he was to such a degree an artist and, at the same time, an organizer and an activist, we would say today, I guess.

SPORN: He's dead now. I've been told that he's survived by some family, who live here in Ann Arbor.

ROWE: He had relatives in Ann Arbor, when he was here.

SPORN: But, you don't know...?

ROWE: I didn't know anything of them, except I just knew that he... I think his mother was here at that time, he referred to her here in Ann Arbor.

SPORN: You also knew Arthur Miller, when he was here?

ROWE: He was my student for two years, in playwriting. I've never known a student better. We were very good friends.

SPORN: He wrote a play, I mentioned this on the phone, They Too Arise, which the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit put on for a one night performance. Is there anything you remember about that play or any comments you might want to make about that?

ROWE: Was the production in Detroit entitled They Too Arise or The Grass Still Grows?

SPORN: They Too Arise is the title....

ROWE: The reason I ask is that.... Excuse me, you were going to say further?

SPORN: I was going to give you a little synopsis of the story to see if it's the same one.

ROWE: Oh, no. I remember the story.

SPORN: So, they are the same plays? It's just the wrong title.

ROWE: Yes. He wrote that play under the title of They..., was the title originally. It was his first play and it was from the year of when I was on leave of absence, that sabbatical year. He wrote that play in a sophomore writing course, the same as Professor Eric Walter because Professor Walter recognized that playwriting was what he wanted to do and that he had talent. So, he let him write a play in the course, which was not intended for playwriting. Playwriting course was bracketed that year while I was away. He received the Hopwood Award in the spring. A minor award because he wasn't.... Minor awards were open to people of any level. Major awards, only to upperclassmen and graduate students. I believe he was a sophomore. Have you met any reference of what was called the Bureau of New Plays at that time? The director was Theresa Helburn, one of two co-directors of the Theatre Guild. It was sponsored by the Theatre Guild and three of the motion picture companies. It was at the time, when the motion picture theatre was deriving its material primarily from plays that were first produced on Broadway and then adapted to the screen. They were interested in fostering new writers and new plays that, of course, the Theatre Guild was interested in it, the director for the theatre. So, the

ROWE: Bureau of New Plays was the national competition of fellowships and scholarships. Theresa Helburn wrote to me about Arthur Miller's play, . She submitted it in the spring. No, that was when the Hopwood Award came, I guess it was in October that he submitted it, the deadline being the following February. She was so struck by it that she wanted me to get in touch with him, and discuss the play with him and see if he was interested in rewriting it. As it was, as I say, it was his first play. He wrote it in six days of spring vacation. She was so impressed by it, that while as it was, she didn't think it could be in the final consideration for the awards, she thought that it was likely that he could rewrite it before the February deadline, so that it would be.... I was getting back from Europe in September or October and he had already registered when I was back. For some reason, it wasn't open to him to register for the playwriting course, after I got back. I simply worked with him and just as though he were a member of the course. He rewrote the play and worked on it and submitted it for February and received one of the Bureau of New Plays fellowships, by which he was financed for the following year at the University of Michigan. The rewritten version then, he changed the title to They Too Arise. It was given production by the.... The Theatre Department didn't do it. The Hillel Foundation Chapter here had a very active rabbi that was very much interested in theatre. They had a very active Hillel Players. The Hillel Players produced the play which is a, of course, it's a Jewish home family background. After he left here, I immediately, the first year after he graduated here, gave his rewritings from They Too Arise, under the new title the Grass Still Grows with the repertoire, trying to produce it for him. I don't know where this.... I'm sure that the Federal Theatre production could not have come before the Hillel Players production, that was the first staging of it.

SPORN: In the playbill for it, by the Federal Theatre Project, the description of the performance is that it was put on, I think at the Jewish Center of Detroit, by the Hillel Players, but

SPORN: sponsored by the Federal Theatre Project. It may be that the Federal.... Although, the Federal Theatre Project players were actually in it. I mean, I saw the playbill and saw the cast of characters, but, there is obviously some connection between the two.

ROWE: Well, there's some doubt they're the same play.

SPORN: No, I mean, between the, say, the Federal Theatre Project and the Hillel Players. They may have worked together.

ROWE: Well, the Hillel Players, I'm pretty sure they didn't. Well, I don't know. The only way, in which they would have been working on it, the production here, by the not Detroit, but the Ann Arbor -- was there a Detroit then, Hillel Players?

SPORN: I think so. Well, the Hillel Foundation, or something of that sort. It was put on in the city of Detroit.

ROWE: It may have been the other way around, that the Hillel Foundation cooperated with the Federal Theatre production.

SPORN: It could be.

ROWE: Or, if there is a Hillel Players in Detroit...when you said it was Federal Theatres casting?

SPORN: It was a Federal Theatre play casting. It was put on for one performance only.

ROWE: That would have been after the production here on campus.

SPORN: Maybe so.

ROWE: Was it presented as being a premiere, a first production?

SPORN: I don't recall. I can check that by looking at the playbill.

ROWE: There is a way in which that could be done legitimately? You see, he started rewriting as soon as the play, as soon as he....

SPORN: No, I don't.... It doesn't strike me that that was the way it was billed. It was just a play by Arthur Miller. There was no mention about who Arthur Miller is. Of course, at that point, his name would have meant very little to everyone.

ROWE: That would all be very natural.

SPORN: What surprised me, was that this turned out to be the first play he wrote. At least, in so far, as I could tell and had one performance. He did belong to the Federal Theatre Project.

ROWE: He joined the Federal Theatre Project, oh, he joined the Federal Theatre Project immediately on graduating the University of Michigan. These things I've been saying about Arthur, of the history of this play, these are not memory, these are from documentation. I had a continuous correspondence then with Miss Helburn about his work and Norman Rosten's, who also received.... He was a graduate student at Brooklyn College, and received one of the fellowships and was sent out here, then, to exercise the fellowship. The specification, in each case, was they take a course in playwriting and the Theatre Guild elected to, if they were in agreement to, that they come here for the playwriting course, here. This is Arthur Miller's theatre essays, edited by Robert Martin, here at the University of Michigan. He did a very nice.... He's a very meticulous scholar, Robert Martin is, and he did a literary chronology from the book and all of this, when he got his data for, for the early part of it, here, for the early part at the University of Michigan, when he was a fellow from the combination of Theatre Guild and Bureau of New Plays which covered my correspondence and then some from Arthur Miller, the period he lived here.

SPORN: It says here that the play was produced in Ann Arbor and Detroit. So, the Detroit production was the Federal Theatre Project production.

ROWE: Where is that it says that?

SPORN: It doesn't say Federal Theatre Project, but, see here. The second line there.

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BEGINNING OF SIDE B. TAPE 1.

ROWE:commercial theatre play, by one of the more distinguished playwrights and a Broadway success. He did exactly the kind of mixing of media in the format of that play, that the "living newspapers" developed.

SPORN: Eric Bentley did a version of Galileo in which he does that, too. I suppose, now that's become one of the techniques that's used quite frequently in the theatre.

ROWE: It is still used frequently. On the whole, though, I think

ROWE: it came to a peak, which has passed. I don't think it's....
Now and then, it's a very effective practice produced, but, on the
whole, I don't think it's one of the better fashions that has
developed....

SPORN: You don't recall whether you saw One-Third of a Nation in
Detroit? You did see it, though?

ROWE: I've seen the production of that play more than once but I
don't remember that I saw it in Detroit or not. I well may
have.

SPORN: Did I ask you on the telephone? I heard a report that Arthur
Arent, who wrote One-Third of a Nation, came to Michigan
during the sit-down strikes of the Flint plants, with the
purpose in mind of gathering information for a "living
newspaper" on the automobile industry. Did I mention that to
you on the telephone? No? I'm trying to track down to see
if that was actually so, and if so, whether he had any notes or
manuscripts around. Nobody seems to know about it, not even the
people down at George Mason University, where the Federal Theatre
Project collection is most extensive. Do you have any inform-
ation about that? No.

ROWE: Speaking of Arthur Clifford, I can't remember whether he
was, do you know, whether he took the course in playwriting,
was in my playwriting class or not?

SPORN: No, that I don't know.

ROWE: I don't remember for sure, either.

SPORN: Did you know him?

ROWE: Very well. He was a person I admired very much. I know we
talked about playwriting together, but I can't remember whether
he was in the playwriting course or not. Most of the plays, most
of the plays that he received the Hopwood Award on what play?

SPORN: Yes.

ROWE: In most of the plays, receiving the Hopwood Award were written
in the playwriting courses, naturally. Every now and then,
there was one, this person was enrolled in any writing course.
That was always necessary for eligibility and, every now and then,
somebody wrote a play enrolled in another writing course, partic-

ROWE: ularly, the advanced graduate courses, in which you wrote in any form and you wrote, sort of like, writing a doctoral dissertation with your chairman. You applied to an individual, sent to a number of members of the English Department, any one of whom was eligible to take students for this graduate writing course number. So, if a student was particularly interested in writing, working with any person in the department, on this list, he applied to that person, and if he accepted them, why, they might write in any form with him. Every now and then, of course, the play would be written in that way that would win the Hopwood Award. I don't know that.... Are you interested in...? You know the script then, that received the Hopwood Award, is that right?

SPORN: Oh, yes, there is no question of that. In fact....

ROWE: You know the script then, so it isn't of any interest. What I was thinking was that you see the file of all the completed plays in my playwriting course, that I mentioned on the telephone. Two thousand of them, scripts, approximately. He was in the Rare Book Room.

SPORN: It is. Well, I would be interested in anything else that he did. Yes, I would be interested in any.... He wrote in every form available. In fact, won Hopwood Awards in other forms as well, in other years. Once he won it for poetry. Once he won it for an essay. An essay of evaluation of contemporary poetry, a critical essay. I'm not sure whether he wrote some short stories, and won in that, too, but he did at least in three different forms. He won Hopwood Awards in three different forms, in three different years.

ROWE: If he did take the playwriting course, and what he wrote for the playwriting course happened not to be what received the Hopwood Award.... Do you know more than one play manuscript of his?

SPORN: No, I don't. I just know that....

ROWE: If it happened to be, it would be more likely than not, that it would be, perhaps, his first playwriting and one which you would know to have been later, perhaps. Since he worked in different forms, he might have taken, signed up with someone who he found himself congenial with, for that graduate writing

ROWE: course, and might have written that play there. So, that if you are interested in any other possibility, that other scripts by him, playscripts by the author, that whole file is arranged by the author's last name, alphabetically. In other words, if he was in a playwriting course, it would just be a matter of having the Rare Book Room look for people, look for Clifford in that file and see if it is there and if so, his name is there, if it is....

SPORN: I will certainly do that. What is it particularly that you remember about him? You said you knew him well.

ROWE: When I say I knew him well, I just.... I didn't know a lot of facts about him. I just knew him as a mind and a personality. We had conversations together at times. He may even have been in the playwriting course. We had the sort of conversations that might have been conferences, you know, on the plays.

SPORN: It's interesting that a number of people remember him.

ROWE: Well, he was a personality of beauty.

SPORN: And, people are impressed with him, but very few people remember any details about him but, more or less, say the same thing that you did, that he was quite talented, brilliant man, and so on. In fact, he later joined the Federal Writers' Project, as I mentioned earlier. In going through some of the administrative correspondence in the National Archives, some months ago, I came across several exchanges of letters between some of the national administrators, such as Henry Alsberg, who was then the director of the Federal Writers' Project, had the corresponding to Hallie Flanagan, head of the Theatre Project. In those letters, there are several comments that Clifford is the very best editor that is on the Federal Writers' Project and the Washington office had a great deal of confidence that if he were assigned to do the job, the job would get done, and get done professionally.

ROWE: That sounds, just the sort of thing one would expect about him.

SPORN: Of course, all of this has piqued my curiosity, I would like to know more about him, since....

ROWE: You knew about his becoming confined to a wheelchair?

SPORN: Yes.

ROWE: Of course, that.... Anyone who had known him before.... I

ROWE: didn't see as much of him after that as before, but I met him then, now and then, occasionally.

SPORN: You knew him before he became disabled.

ROWE: Yes. It was just the.... Never any complaints, you know, His confidence, from the same condition and position, his confidence was happy, cheerful, alert and interested. He was just so much mind and personality there, triumphing completely over the physical.

SPORN: What happened, do you know?

ROWE: No, I don't. But, he went right on, you see, being productive.

SPORN: I didn't know that this happened somewhat after he had grown up.

ROWE: I think so. I'm almost certain. It could be that I just.... Again, after forty years, many things that I don't think of for a long time. I'm getting to distrust my memory very strongly. What could happen is, is that I could have, might have seen a snapshot of him earlier or I could just imagine him, because he had so much spirit and vitality and quality in him and in effect, almost no body, it just seemed almost, that the body almost wasn't there. You could imagine him, you know, on his feet, being an active person physically. You could imagine what he must have been before this happened. It could be that I'm imagining the part before that.

SPORN: I really don't know.

ROWE: I thought that I had known him with legs.

SPORN: James Doll wrote a play which won an Avery Hopwood Award. The story of the play is about four students at the University of Michigan, two of whom are from New York and characterized as New York radicals, one of whom is from some small town in the Midwest, a young man with a great deal of writing talent, who wants to be a writer but who has a social conscience. The third seems to be an older student, a year or two ahead of these three and who is characterized as being the observer. He stands off from the events and comments on them and so on and can sort of see all sides of the various sides of the conflict. What these two New York students do is to convince the Midwest

SPORN: student, who wants to be a writer, to participate in a certain demonstration around a certain cause which has a great deal of justice to it. As a consequence of which, they are expelled from school. At least, two of them are expelled from school, the two New York radicals. The third Midwest person is finally given a chance to continue school. That's more or less the outline of the play. Later on, about two or three weeks ago, in going through some newspaper articles of that period, I came across a series of news stories on an incident of that sort. There were students of the University of Michigan who went on some kind of demonstration and the President forbid them to do so, but they went ahead anyway and then were suspended. I'm not certain that that particular incident is the basis for this play but it sounds so close an incident to it, and in terms of the years — the year of the play and the incident — they're close enough together so it makes some sense. I'm sure it must have been some famous case on campus.

ROWE: Certainly. Sounds that way. I remember such a case, when I was a graduate student, I was _____ and never thought I, and I may have known.... I just don't remember now.

SPORN: Do you know who that James Doll, who did this play, who won the Hopwood Award, was he in your playwriting class?

ROWE: No. He was working on the play and he wanted to submit it to the Avery Hopwood Awards and he didn't have much time. He enrolled in the playwriting course and his schedule was very heavy in theatre work. He enrolled in the playwriting course for eligibility, with the understanding with me — you see, I knew his total theatre experience and I knew that he could write. In other words, I wasn't worried about the formalities of his relation to the course. In other words, it was put in the time, write a play and he was free to attend the classes and take part in the discussion and possibly reading his own play for group response, for criticism, as he found time or as he felt it would be constructive. He did attend some classes but with very, very little relation to the course. His play, incidently, was one that didn't receive one of the Bureau of New Plays'

ROWE: fellowships or scholarships, but it was in the honorable mention group. (Pause). Let's see, at least I think that's, I think that that's the way.... In other words, James Doll's play may very possibly, a copy of it being in the playwriting class file. I think he was enrolled.

SPORN: Does the name Peggy Fenn mean anything to you?

ROWE: Peggy who?

SPORN: Fenn. F-e-n-n.

ROWE: No.

SPORN: Stephan Nastfogel?

ROWE: No.

SPORN: When the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit first began....

ROWE: Nastfogel might. If I'm right, possibly arouse recollections of the other name, it doesn't at all.

SPORN: When the Federal Theatre Project first went into business in Detroit, at least some of the people I interviewed who were in it say that at first it was organized around, sort of on a star system with some of the people who had professional, the greatest amount of professional experience before, being the centers of attraction. Stephan Nastfogel, apparently had, at that point, relatively extensive stage experience. He was a stage designer. He was the, in fact, the stage manager, stage designer before James Doll, and then Peggy Fenn is another name, she apparently had a great deal of stage experience, locally. I think somebody once mentioned that in the Bonstelle Theatre, in fact, she had been in the Bonstelle Theatre. There seemed to have been a controversy around that concept of organizing the Federal Theatre Project, you know, the star system. The attempt then was to select plays that would then be vehicles for the stars rather than plays that would be something that the theatre and some of them could do, and so on. I just wondered, if perhaps, you had heard anything about that or knew anything about that?

ROWE: No, I never did. I never was aware of that approach being made in the Federal Theatre and I should think that it had been very foreign to Hallie Flanagan.

SPORN: I don't think this was national policy. I think what happened,

SPORN: in terms of, as each region organized its own group, there would be different ways of doing it. I think Hallie Flanagan would probably have insisted on the latter and, I think, ultimately did because the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit suspended for about three months, suspended its operations for about three months. There were two major reasons. One was this business of it being organized around a star system and the other was that a fair percentage of the budget, maybe half or even more, was going to pay for real estate. In other words, pay the rent for the theatre they were in and that, too, felt that that should not be the case, that the biggest part of the budget should go to personnel. So, they stopped production for about three months, reorganized and I believe, moved to a different theatre and began production again on a different footing, although, people like Peggy Fenn remained in it, Stephan Nastfogel, in fact, did leave and that's when James Doll came into the group. One of the questions I have to ask is, Norman Rosten was a member of your play-writing class?

ROWE: Yes.

SPORN: And, some of the plays that he wrote would be in the Rare Book Room, in your collection?

ROWE: Yes, This Proud Pilgrimage, that's the..., of which the Theatre Guild did, is in there. It was produced by the Theatre Department, Speech Department which included the Theatre Program. It was one of the most interesting, effective productions they ever did to a new play or a play. The Theatre Guild had a Sunday afternoon program for a period, what they called, limited audience plays, that could not..., were experimental. Those were the best things they did, actually, from that Sunday afternoon, some of the most interesting things programmed for that period. They had quite a close association from that program with the Group Theatre.

SPORN: That was called the Theatre Guild of the Air, as I recall.

ROWE: No. Theatre of the Air was a radio of news, radio plays. They just called it the Sunday Afternoon Program or Series, as I remember. The point was that they achieved arrangements with the Theatre Unions for a great deal of concession, in other

ROWE: words, on those because,... I don't remember where they were presented.... It was not a big theatre....., and not a, in essence, a limited number of performances. In other words, by getting concessions from the theatre unions, particularly, the Actors Union, they were able to produce them so much more economically than the regular productions. It was a group theatre, wasn't it? It was the method theatre, the left wing theatre. I think they had some arrangement with them by which some of their casting was in the Group Theatre. In other words, they were giving additional acting opportunity, broader acting opportunities, as well as playwriting. They did Norman Rosten's This Proud Pilgrimage, that he wrote here, it was one of those productions. Incidentally, the man who played the leading part in it, which is a very major..., it's a very strong leading part, left here at the same time that Norman Rosten did. He went to New York to become an actor and has. He has continued ever since as an actor. He played the leading role in the Theatre Guild's Sunday afternoon production of it. Miss Helburn saw him here, saw a production here and was impressed by him and got a casting part.

SPORN: Do you remember his name?

ROWE: Bronson. Wait a minute. No, Bronson was the name of the part he played in the play. The play was the Haymarket, based on the Haymarket bombing episode and the part of Bronson in the play is Governor Altgeld who pardoned the....did a detective job, sort of, after. He believed in the innocence of the people involved. No, I don't remember the name of the man, the actor now. He made an apparently.... That was it, he was so absolutely Bronson, you just forgot it. You just remember Bronson, that's what you always think of. I saw him in other parts, too, but that was the first time I'd seen him act. Well, yes.... I don't know if it's anything else except This Proud Pilgrimage in that file or not. I think that would be the only....

SPORN: Again, I can check that.

ROWE:long play. You can check that. Do you know This Proud

ROWE: Pilgrimage?

SPORN: I've heard of it. I don't know it directly.

ROWE: He wrote both stage plays... I'm almost sure that he wrote at least one stage play, long play, for the Federal Theatre. For a Federal Theatre production, as well as the radio plays. Are you acquainted with any play that he wrote for the Federal Theatre?

SPORN: No, offhand I'm not, but I can very easily check that through the Federal Theatre Research Center at George Mason.

ROWE: I may be mistaken because he was, first, by being on the payroll of the Federal Theatre was paid to write, but not necessarily for them.

SPORN: Well, we did have a National Service Bureau, which was a play bureau and they did collect original plays. Some of them were written by people who were in the Theatre Project.

ROWE: In other words, they acted as an agent to a degree to help people get the plays produced.

SPORN: Yes. Well, the National Service Bureau served a number of functions. They not only were a clearinghouse for original plays but also for any play that might be used by the Federal Theatre Project. What they would do is to evaluate, read the plays, evaluate them, find out if they were old plays or by, say, plays of the near past by contemporary playwrights. They'd have to find out if they could get those plays, permission to produce those plays at nominal fees. But, they would check over the plays, whether they were old plays or new plays, for their suitability, in terms of their quality, in terms of their subject matter and in terms of their technical suitabilities because they probably always were helping a cast, how much scenery, and so on and so forth. So, the bureau would evaluate all of this and then got together a library of plays from which the different local theatre groups could select plays to do.

ROWE: The thing is.... I know that during, I got a running, sort of, from Norman Rosten, sort of, a running diary practically in letters. He'd just write whatever was going on in regular intervals to me and my wife and me. He was working on plays

ROWE: while he was employed by the Federal Theatre, that he seemed to be having production prospects, outside the Federal Theatre, as well as, in the Federal Theatre.

SPORN: Do you have that correspondence?

ROWE: I don't have it now, I just remember it.

SPORN: I see. Speaking of correspondence, that Hallie Flanagan correspondence that you referred to, is it possible that it's survived somewhere? That at the moment, we just don't know about it?

ROWE: I doubt.... I don't think I could have missed it while I went through, if it's there. The more I, this little file that I found was in the few letters from various people in the New York office, makes me wonder more and more, about my memory of all that. The thing is that these letters are, they come down into 1938 with, which I think, the last one is January, I'm not sure. At any rate, they come down into 1938 and there isn't any indication in any of these half dozen letters of my being in any position of regional advisor, you know. They're simply things that I, as an individual had responded to with information desired and as far as I can see.

SPORN: May I look at them?

ROWE: You can have them. Is that just one folder there?

SPORN: I see two folders.

ROWE: Let's see if I.... Here it is.

SPORN: For Norman Rosten?

ROWE: No. Oh, yes, I looked through, that's some personal letters there. I didn't mean to bring it down, too. But, I.... They're later ones. See that?

SPORN: What?

ROWE: Correspondence still.... But, I remember very well his.... Both he and Arthur Miller graduated, well, Norman Rosten wasn't graduating. He was a graduate student from Brooklyn University when he received his Bureau of New Plays Award and he came here then as a graduate student, But, they both left here at the same time. They both went in and joined the Federal Theatre and the payroll. Then, they both just went right on writing,

ROWE: writing great gobs and getting favorable attention, script after script. I remember a, sort of, parallel situation there. I know I remember distinctly that his writing, Norman writing radio plays for the Federal Theatre program.

SPORN: This is very interesting correspondence, yes.

ROWE: You see, it comes down so close to the closing of the Federal Theatre. It makes me wonder if, I don't know, there was so many different organizations, forty, fifty years from now. The various war effort projects involving theatre that I was involved in, I don't know, just over that many years, you accumulate so many, so many different things, that I lose track of them, what I remember. What I think is, either I'm mixing up this regional advisory matter because I've been, everything always has a regional advisor somewhere. (Laughter).

SPORN: Very true.

ROWE: You know, I've been regional advisor, I don't know just how many times, for how many things. Either, I'm getting that mixed up or this is a possibility. I got some impression from that correspondence that there may have been, that there may have been, stemming from Hallie Flanagan, an intended movement from the centralization that you get from these letters. You know, everything, they had scripts going out, being selected in New York and being sent out to people for consideration, production all over the country, that sort of thing. I think there may have been a movement towards, some, a not as complete centralization, which never really got going because the theatre was closed rather abruptly.

SPORN: She was very much in favor of decentralizing....

ROWE: That's just.... You see, that's what I remember, is that, the first letter from.... I remember a letter from Hallie Flanagan, it seems to....

SPORN: She wanted a central office, though, to be able to guarantee that the local groups would maintain very high standards.

ROWE: That's exactly.... She wanted someone that she felt, had confidence in. This is my recollection, you see, and you are beginning to confirm it. My recollection is that she wanted someone that she had confidence in, in each of these regions, then.

SPORN: Oh, I know that they had advisors and consultants in other regions, who were not necessarily part of the payroll, but just outside of the Federal Theatre, who would be sponsors and also consultants. But, she was very, very anxious to have, in other respects, a very decentralized set up. She wanted local groups, in fact, on occasion to do original plays dealing with the local region, various problems typical of the local region and in some places, the Federal Theatre Project was very successful. For example, a play called Altars of Steel was written specifically for the Federal Theatre Project and about the steel industry in the South. I believe Montgomery, Alabama, the growth of the steel industry there in the summer.

ROWE: I remember that script, it's one of the ones that's in that... I was getting, these scripts were coming to me regularly. They were sent over to the Labadee Collection. Altars of Steel, I think, is one of those scripts there, isn't it?

SPORN: Well, they've actually separated those plays. Well, I'll have to check on that. Maybe not. Maybe, they are still in the Labadee Collection. I'll check on that.

ROWE: What else would become of them?

SPORN: I don't know. At one point, after, what's her name? Who was the original curator of the...? A woman, who was the great friend of Joseph Labadee.

ROWE: Also, incidentally, a great friend of Hallie Flanagan's.

SPORN: And, a great friend of Hallie Flanagan.

ROWE: Hallie Flanagan's and a great friend of my wife's and I.

SPORN: Oh. Is it Alice...?

ROWE: I'm trying to...

SPORN: The name will come back to me.

ROWE: It will to me at any moment. She was...

SPORN: She had apparently many plays in her possession.

ROWE: Yes.

SPORN: The present curator there told me that at some point after she died, the people going through the collection decided that these plays really had no place in that collection which was mostly political and economic and more labor materials and therefore, separated them out and it was his impression, in fact, that they

SPORN: may have been lost as a consequence. But, I'll check on the ones you know.

ROWE: Well, that's how.... I just keep almost saying it and the point is, the name is so familiar because....Amos.

SPORN: Amos, right.

ROWE: I started to say the name is so familiar because her brother was one of the wealthiest industrialists in Ann Arbor and had this great mansion and grounds. The Amos House, it was willed, Mrs. Amos willed it to the University and that is where they entertained their most distinguished guests and that sort of thing. Agnes Amos was....

SPORN: Yes, Agnes. Agnes, right.

ROWE: Agnes was the sister. She was an anarchist and that was always....(laughs).

SPORN: Yes, right and so, I guess, was Joseph Labadee.

ROWE: Yes, he was. She knew Emma Goldman. She knew all the anarchists, all of those people very well, indeed. Well, that's how I came to send them over to, at the Labadee Collection, was that she knew that she was getting plays. She had collected Federal Theatre plays and I told her that I had these, you see. And, you see, I was using them in my classes,

SPORN: Oh, you did. In what way did you use them?

ROWE: Something, rather, bringing the influence of this kind of material and techniques to the....

SPORN: Into the classroom.

ROWE: Into the playwriting, to the playwriting students. In other words, I was assigning their, reading it was some of it and I was also making recommendations for the production of community organizations and that sort of thing around the state. In other words, I was acting like a regional advisor for various....(laughs). Whether I ever, whether that ever happened as a formal position or not, only I....

SPORN: So, then your classes did come into contact with those plays?

ROWE: Yes, yes. So, Agnes Amos knew that I had these scripts and, of course, whenever I was through with them, she wanted them for the Labadee Collection with her other Federal Theatre plays and,

ROWE: of course, the Labadee Collection contains, she had a lot of plays, before Federal Theatre, you know, that were directed to the social causes. When I was through using them, I just didn't get around to getting them over there to her and while she was still there, and so I assumed that if she had a collection of plays that she wanted these with, that it was the thing to do, was to... I retired and was clearing out the office...

SPORN: Oh, then you gave it to the Labadee Collection?

ROWE: So, I gave them in the Labadee Collection there.

SPORN: Well, those would still be there then.

ROWE: I gave them, explaining the circumstance that they had been promised to Agnes Amos for the Labadee Collection.

SPORN: You don't think that some of your papers might have gone to the Bentley? Are any of your papers in the Bentley?

ROWE: Yes, but that's all the... I was chairman of, of what was called "Chairman of War Activities" for the American Educational Theatre Association and I've forgotten what the position was called, but it was a consultancy from the National Theatre Conference to the Joint Arms Services in the war and when it, well, there was one backfile drawer out of that and that's what's at the Bentley Collection. In other words, it was a University of Michigan. I knew something was going on from the University of Michigan that was of some historical interest, you see.... That's the only thing that I had for them.

SPORN: Well, I think this has been most interesting and if you ever do locate those papers, those Hallie Flanagan papers, I'm sure you'll let me know.

ROWE: You'd obviously.... If the impression that I have, you see, is that from these letters, that when these letters were received, that I could not have been appointed as a regional advisor or even that any such office existed and it was so near.... And, they come down to so near the closing of the theatre, so that I don't think there could have been any very extensive.... There may have been some, you know, single queries which might have stemmed from Hallie Flanagan. Even some of these might have stemmed from Hallie Flanagan through the Office Organization, through various individuals

- ROWE: writing and signing, but, it also strikes me as a possibility that she had, was working towards, for a regional development, organize regional development, because I have a feeling of having received a letter from her and I'd be willing, you know, that about this matter of regional development and I'd be willing to be an advisor. She wanted someone that she had....
- SPORN: She may have, then of course, after....
- ROWE:for each of the regions.
- SPORN: After the Federal Theatre Project closed down, she then had a Rockefeller grant to set up the structure of a national theatre, on a regional basis. She was working at Vassar then, she went to Vassar and for about a year worked on it. I don't think anything ever came of it, but, I have seen papers of hers to the Rockefeller Foundation submitting names of people in different areas that could be the basis for....
- ROWE: As a matter of fact, I'd forgotten all about that. I think she probably wrote to me in one way or another.
- SPORN: She probably would because she tried to contact theatre people....
- ROWE: I know that.... Because, I was in contact with her in relation to that project.
- SPORN: Yes, she contacted people all over the country on that.
- ROWE: That's another thing. Maybe we had contact on different....over a good many years. I remember that now.
- SPORN: Well, if by some chance it should turn up somewhere with something, I would surely appreciate looking at it, at any rate. It should be of great interest.
- ROWE: I certainly would keep that very fully in mind. I'm sorry that I could not be more productive at this time.
- SPORN: Well, the interview has been very interesting in the number of things you've commented on, which I'm sure will be very, very useful to this study and I'd like to thank you very much for giving me a couple of hours of your time.
- ROWE: Well, I've enjoyed it very thoroughly too. I'm trying to think of any points I should add. One other value that the Federal Theatre had which is very secondary, in the sense, to making a contribution to subject matter and techniques and motivation. The

ROWE: point is that it did, in a very difficult way, so economically difficult a period for the arts, and for everything, but especially for the arts because the arts are considered in this country a luxury and so in the Depression period, it did sustain some of the most, subsequently, most important talents through that period. Arthur Miller being one of them. And, Norman Rosten was a writing talent up in the very high order.

END OF SIDE B. TAPE 1.

BEGINNING OF SIDE A. TAPE 2.

ROWE: I can't think of the name of this actress.

There were two, two actresses who had retired, each of who came back with theatre when there was a very, just right part for that elderly actress and the actress was exactly right for the part. Now, Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, do you remember who?

SPORN: I saw her.

ROWE: Who first played Linda?

SPORN: I saw her. Yes, I saw her in the play. In fact,... Taylor.

ROWE: Who?

SPORN: Taylor.

ROWE: Laurette Taylor?

SPORN: Laurette Taylor.

ROWE: Yes. Well, this is a parallel circumstance. An actress of the standing of Laurette Taylor, you know, around the same age and retired after some time and seemed just the right casting for the leading role in Rosten's play. They opened in the production. It was a good play, it was a play I think had especially high likelihood of Broadway success. It was a good play and the kind of play you could see on Broadway. It opened in Princeton. You know the theatre there, the try out theatre? I'll have to remember the name of that theatre. But, anyway, you know about that. The opening night she collapsed. Either it was that, either opening night or, yes, I think it was opening night and they closed for... Whether they had an understudy or not, I don't know. They closed for a week and tried to open again, there at the Princeton theatre. Something like this having someone done a very fast preparation

ROWE: for the part and I don't even know whether they decided that it was worthwhile to try to open it again. I know they made an attempt of introducing someone else on very short notice, you know. At any rate I think they did, as a matter of fact, again there at Princeton but decided not to take it into New York. It just wasn't working. He just had.... That's an example of the bad luck he had. He just had a sickness of such things and then, as you know, the high position that he had gained in commercial.... I won't say commercial, much rather they in Columbia Broadcasting and NBC were both maintaining a really high grade drama program as a, not commercially, but as a house, a sustaining program for new plays. Archibald Macleash and so on. Norman Rosten.

What was the third one, perhaps the top one of the three? I know I thought for quite a period that those three were certainly the most outstanding names in radio drama.

SPORN: The third one, is that also a Norman?

ROWE: I think so. That's what I was thinking, it was also a Norman. First name. Or else the last name, that could be too. Well, then the.... Of course, what closed the Federal Theatre was the beginning of the, I think the beginning of the Communist panic. I remember there was quite a bitter letter from Norman Rosten not without Congress. But their being responsible for closing... Simply, not continuing so far the Federal Theatre. He said, I remember that letter very well, ordinarily, I would be, at one time, I would have been panicked to lose a job, but I'm so full of hope now from the play I'm working on. He was not worried about himself and it wasn't for the loss of, closing down of jobs even, whichever. It was that he simply believed in what the Federal Theatre, like what we've been talking about, what it was doing, what it was contributing to the development of theatre and art in this country and Congress simply had no concern for anything except money, financial interests and no sensitivity to things of the mind and the spirit. It was actually, I think they, Hallie Flanagan wanted this for the kind of theatre it was to be, but that kind of theatre to a large proportion of the congressmen smacked so of Communism. There was a lot of argument and hollering in Congress about the

ROWE: social aspects, the sociological aspects, the political aspect of the theatre.

SPORN: Oh yes, there was a great stir and fuss.

ROWE: I think that's really what closed it.

SPORN: Well, it seems so. I think Hallie Flanagan feels that way, too.

ROWE: I think so. Well, I don't know whether, something, I don't remember the man's name. It was a man in Buffalo, just proud individual, in the midst, was able to get away over to this country, in the midst of the witch hunt era. He determined what names went on the list of entertainers in the entertainment world and on blacklist. This blacklist was sent out to a thousand people, something like that with each of them to write to ten more people to boycott any productions these people did.

SPORN: Was his name Fred Turner?

ROWE: I don't remember his name at all. That could be.

TAPE STOPPED AND STARTED.

ROWE: The fella got on that list. He had been making his living writing radio drama and he was, he couldn't place anything at all, simply put him off the air. Not only that, his wife, who was a very talented.... Incidentally, both Arthur and Norman found their wives, two beautiful girls here at the University of Michigan.

SPORN: Oh, really.

ROWE: Arthur's first wife and Norman's only wife and married her shortly after leaving here, about a year or two, one or two years, I think. She was talented and had become, doing very well at television drama, too. Simply by association, she was also off the air and both of them were making their livings together. In other words, he's simply had an extraordinary array of bad luck. But, he did a lot of very fine things on the air and a couple of major things in theatre. In other words, he was another clientele being sustained by the Federal Theatre.

SPORN: I can't remember, is he still alive?

ROWE: I think so. We kept up, until my wife died which is now, it's hard for me to realize how fast the time goes, it's six years now. Up to that time, because my wife, you see...my eyesight got...kept up, did most of our corresponding, personal correspondence, you know. At least,

ROWE: I communicated at Christmas. I communicated with everyone that we were in the habit of communicating with at that time. I received a prize and I have had, I had at least one or more, Christmas, at the time, greetings from Norman. I don't remember that I did the last, I don't know for sure, the last year or so. The point is that I just found myself, I was just always too much behind on things I had to do to keep up the....

SPORN: You don't recall where he lived then?

ROWE: Yes. The last communication, which may have been as far back as five years ago, maybe I received a card from him since I wasn't getting any out. It was in Brooklyn. I have his address, if you want it, the address that....

SPORN: I would appreciate it very much.

ROWE: The last I heard from him, it was still the same address in Brooklyn Heights. I don't have how to reach you by mail. I have your office telephone number, you know.

SPORN: Let me give you my address.

ROWE: Are you writing on something there for me?

SPORN: Yes.

ROWE: And, I'll send you.... If anything occurs to me, or anything comes up, I'll make a note of it. I'll send Norman Rosten's last address that I have. One other thing I was going to ask you, did Kimon Friar....is that a name that you are familiar with?

SPORN: Oh, yes. Sure. Kimon Friar was both in the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Theatre Project.

ROWE: That's what I thought. He was another one of my students.

SPORN: He did a Detroit version of Doctor Faustus.

ROWE: That's what I thought, that that Doctor Faustus version was his version. It was his version that was such a success in New York, too, wasn't it? The Federal Theatre production.

SPORN: No, I don't think so.

ROWE: Or, is that a different one?

SPORN: Different version. Then, he was also in the Federal Writers' Project collecting folklore material and things of that sort. In fact, I did have one other question that won't slip my mind. He was on a magazine called New Writers' magazine put out by,

SPORN: well, he was one of the editors. John Malcolm Brinnin was one of the editors and he was not on those projects. But, he associated John Malcolm Brinnin, that is, associated with a number of people who were on the project...Maxine Finsterwald, I don't think she was here at the University.

ROWE: I know her last name is not familiar.

SPORN: Anne Persov.

ROWE: Yes, I remember her.

SPORN: Who also was here and did win an Avery Hopwood Award for poetry, a very fine book of poetry.

ROWE: Her name was Anna Marie, wasn't it?

SPORN: Anna Marie Persov, right. Then, Anteo J. Tarini, a man who went to Wayne State who was on the Writers' Project and several others. So, I'm very interested in contacting John Malcolm Brinnin. I've been in touch with him, in fact. I plan this fall to interview him. He's at, I believe, Boston University.

ROWE: That Doctor Faustus production in New York, was Kimon Friar's production, his staging of it entirely independent of that?

SPORN: Yes. Well, Doctor Faustus was done in quite a number of places.

ROWE: I know, it was done, but there was staging in New York that was such a notable.... Again, one of these experiment-
al....

SPORN: That was the Orson Welles' production. Orson Welles and John Houseman.

ROWE: It was the, the one I'm thinking of, at least that I thought was the New York might have been Kimon Friar's in Detroit that I saw. It was such a notable staging, in terms of the use of light. It was actually staged with beams from above, beams of light moving about the stage.

SPORN: I suspect that was the New York....

ROWE: I think that was the New York production. It was written up a good deal, I remember and I saw it.

SPORN: I'm trying to remember who the....

ROWE: I don't think that was Orson Welles and John Houseman.

SPORN: Well, I thought there was... The Kimon Friar, I'm almost sure was the version used here, in Detroit. It was quite a successful....

ROWE: That's what I thought.

SPORN: Quite successful.

ROWE: That was the case, too. I wasn't quite sure that that was Kimon Friar or not. That's another dealing with, rather values in the Federal Theatre Project, that division, that division doing classics, but the point is, the classics were done with such originality...

SPORN: Oh, yes.

ROWE: ... as that Doctor Faustus, technical originality and imaginativeness and creativity....

SPORN: I was going to ask you that, too. In addition to the subject matter being directly related to the problems of people, other kinds of plays, where the subject matter was not directly related, but which were redone, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado, done the swing version, which adapted the idiom. At least, the musical idiom and also the language idiom of various ethnic groups and such things that the Federal Theatre did too, and that was very imaginative. Here in Detroit, for the Merry Wives of Windsor, which was the very last play put on by the Federal Theatre Project. In fact, it was on the night the Federal Theatre Project closed down. James Doll did a prologue for it, rewrote a prologue for Merry Wives of Windsor. Very cleverly done and he captured the rhythm and the quality of language of the play itself. So, it was very well done. So, they did things of that sort which was very nice. In fact, One-Third of a Nation here, as well as elsewhere, was slightly rewritten, adapted to certain local conditions. Where the national play basically referred to New York, the New York scene, there were some things put into the Detroit play which refer directly to the Detroit situation.

ROWE: Oh.

SPORN: In fact, one of the characters was Frank Murphy, then governor of the state and there were references to political characters in the city of Detroit. So, it was a minor adaptation, but still, they did things of that sort.

ROWE: That kind of thing, in relation, you say in the Gilbert and Sullivan and the Doctor Faustus, the thing done with old established classics, doing such innovative and they were so true. I mean, that New York

ROWE: lighting, light staging entirely by light for Doctor Faustus was...
It's true the play, it was indicative of the play in a mute, creative way.

SPORN: Yes. Yes.

ROWE: So, that's another value to chalk up, a high mark.

SPORN: For the Federal Theatre Project.

ROWE: For the Federal Theatre Project.

SPORN: Yes, indeed. I'm sure it is.

ROWE: Well, I guess that's...

SPORN: OK.

ROWE: ...everything that I can think of.

SPORN: Thank you very much.

END OF SIDE A. TAPE 2.