INTERVIEW 1

Oral history of Edith Segal of the Michigan Federal Theatre Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, in Brooklyn, New York.

SPORN: You came to Detroit in the fall of 1936 for the New Dance . . . ?

SEGAL: To organize the Midwest Section of the Workers' Dance League. The arrangements that I had--I was to get the great salary of five dollars a week and live with a friend whose husband was working in upper Michigan at the time. That was perfectly acceptable to me because I had enough clothes to wear. I had two pairs of shoes and all I needed was money for coffee and things like that. So that I was very happy and after awhile, they couldn't afford to pay the five dollars a week, so I had to try to get on the welfare, which was very difficult because I had to prove first that I couldn't get a job through a Jewish agency as a domestic. Eventually, I went to New York because I remembered that Hallie Flanagan had told me, when she was a judge at a Workers' Drama Festival, that if my dance, which was on the program, had been in the competition, which it wasn't because it was the only dance number, she would have been for giving it the first prize. Well, I went back to New York and, fortunately, I saw Hallie Flanagan. She gave me this lovely letter of recommendation and I still had to get on the welfare, which I did, and subsequently got on the Theatre Project as an actress, that category because there were no supervisory places open. It was a grand experience because I was not only using my training in the theatre arts and experience as a dancer, and choreographer, and as an actress, but I also became an organizer. It was a totally balanced situation: the theatrical experience and the fact that I was able to go and address meetings of unions and get them to buy theatre parties. I didn't mention that, in Detroit, I met the man who was to be my husband for the next fourteen years.

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SPORN: I have one or two questions just for greater clarity. You say you had to get on the relief roles. That was one of the regulations of these federally supported art programs--that the people in it had to come from, 90% of them at least, had to come from the relief roles.

SEGAL: The unemployed.

SPORN: The unemployed. So, this was in Detroit that you had to get onto the relief roles. Okay, that's one clarification. You mentioned earlier that when you went to see Hallie Flanagan in New York, you had to get in

SPORN: to see her rather quickly because that day a group was going to . . .

SEGAL: The dancers were organizing a picket line around the WPA office.

SPORN: Was this a, sort of, corresponding union group to, say, the artists' union and the writers' union? There was a writers' union and there was an artists' union in New York.

SEGAL: I can't answer that question. I just know that dancers had certain demands and they were planning a picket line that day.

SPORN: So you got in to see Hallie Flanagan by crossing the picket line.

SEGAL: No, before the picket line was formed.

SPORN: Then, after that, you came back to Detroit, got onto relief and was finally accepted into the Federal Theatre Project. Another question I have, you say you were able not only to do theatrical work, but, also, through your theatrical work, to address labor unions for the purpose of-- one thing you mentioned was the purchase of theatre tickets, I assume, to attend the Federal Theatre Project . . .

SEGAL: In particular, two plays we produced. One was Let Freedom Ring by Albert Bein, and the other was One-Third of a Nation, the living newspaper.

SPORN: Now, why did you do that, rather than just throw it open to the public and let the public come if they would?

SEGAL: Because the people in the unions were not used to going to living theatre. In fact, most of them, I think, had never seen a play with live actors. They went to movies. In fact, there's a very interesting little story about that and that is, when we did One-Third of a Nation, which is a play which starts with a fire scene and then . . . The whole play is a flashback of what happened--the arrival of immigrants from the old country, the illnesses--and the last scene is a repeat of the first. The house manager, our theatre house manager, used to sit in the audience to hear their comments. At one point, he told us he heard two ladies behind him. When the last scene came on, which was the repetition of the first, she said, "Well, this is where we came in, let's go," thinking it would just go on and on like that.

SPORN: As a continuing movie performance.

SEGAL: That proved that, certainly, these two ladies, as I'm sure thousands of other people in Detroit, had never been to a living theatre and just didn't know there was a beginning and an end. It wasn't like a movie that continued on and on through the day.

SPORN: Who was this manager?

SEGAL: His name was Mr. Daly.

SPORN: He was a, sort of, supervisor of the group? One of the supervisors?

SEGAL: No, he was not a supervisor. He was called a "house manager." He was in charge of the ticket distribution. For instance, I don't know if you know that, when tickets are sold and there isn't a full house expected, they give the seats out in such a way that it looks like it's a better house than it is, instead of crowding them all together in the front or to the side.

SPORN: Was it a policy of the Federal Theatre Project to reach this audience that it felt had never been reached before? Was that a deliberate policy?

SEGAL: Well, it was deliberate because the person, myself, felt that this was a grand way to reach a new audience and to bring to them plays which are meaningful to them. So that, Let Freedom Ring, for instance, was a play by Albert Bein about the difficulty and the experiences of organizing the Southern textile workers and One-Third of a Nation was also about the life of immigrants who came to this country looking for a better way to live and the experiences that they encountered, which were pretty difficult: slum problems and other problems, they were exploited, they were met at the harbors by paid agents who managed to get them to places that needed workers, and so, they became the immigrant workers for various occupations in which they were needed. It was a wonderful experience because these audiences of workers--auto workers, other workers--were very responsive to our plays. In one of the plays, the man that I mentioned before, Matthews, in Let Freedom Ring, he was one of the organizers of the play and . . .

SPORN: Union organizer. He played the part of a union organizer?

SEGAL: He played the part of a union organizer. Shall I tell you about him?

SPORN: Okay, but before you go on to that, I just want to be clear in my own mind, the initiative then for reaching this new audience that had no experience with living theatre before, it came from yourself or persons like yourself. The intitiative came from, shall I say, down below--from the people who were employed by the Project, rather than from the administrators of the Project?

SEGAL: From both. This was a new kind of reaching out. For a play like, what was that beautiful play by the Spanish author? We had an audience of nuns. What was the name of that play, again?

SPORN: Was it Lorca you're talking about? The playwright was Lorca?

SEGAL: No, he was a famous Spanish author. The play was . . .

SPORN: A contemporary Spanish author?

SEGAL: I don't think he was a contemporary, but not too long ago. The play was produced here in New York, too. It's on the program here, I have it.

SPORN: Oh, you have the programs of the Detroit Federal Theatre?

SEGAL: Oh, yes. (Pause. Searching through materials). Cradle Song. Martinez-Sierra. Beautiful play. For that, I remember, we had an audience of nuns.

SPORN: You played the part of a nun.

SEGAL: It was a wonderful part. I played the part of a nun who was very restless and the doctor tells her to take cold showers.

SPORN: Alright. I had one other question, before you go into that Matthews thing. The people listed here [in the program for Cradle Song], for example, like Peggy Fenn, Virginia Barrie, Elynor Knight, Helen Budd, this was the Detroit Federal Theatre Project company.

SEGAL: Right.

SPORN: The people came from Detroit, or had worked in Detroit.

SEGAL: Right. At one point, the Project was embellished, if you want to call it that, by five people from New York because they had an excess amount of actors and actresses in New York. But it was basically a Detroit project.

SPORN: You mean the five people came here to work here.

SEGAL: The five people came from New York to work in Detroit because there was no place for them in New York, but they didn't have leading parts. They were all . . .

SPORN: But when you put on a play such as The Cradle Song, or Let Freedom Ring, or One-Third of a Nation, it wasn't a traveling company that came from New York to put on. It was . . .

SEGAL: Oh, no!

SPORN: . . . rehearsed and practiced . . .

SEGAL: We had a rehearsed play every month in Detroit.

SPORN: . . . by the Detroit group.

SEGAL: Absolutely! Peggy Fenn, these were all local people. She had played with a former group there, the Bonstelle Theatre. Virginia Barrie and all of these people. The director, he came from the Carnegie . . .

SPORN: Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh?

SEGAL: Carnegie Tech. Then, there was Fred Morrow. He was the supervisor.

SPORN: In Detroit?

SEGAL: He was not a Detroit man, I don't think.

SPORN: But he worked in Detroit?

SEGAL: Yes. All of these other people were all Detroit people. We had some former vaudeville people like David Carnes. He had an act called "Mutt and Jeff" because he was very, very tall and thin, and his partner was very short and chubby. They had done this "act" for eighteen years. When I was getting them ready for a performance, and they were going to do this act that they'd been doing for eighteen years--always coming in and exiting from the same direction--I suggested that we change that a little, sometimes come in from the other side. They said, "Oh, no. We've been doing this for eighteen years. You can't tell us." (Laughs).

SPORN: Yes. Alright, speak about that Matthews situation. Before you do, in fact, let me tell you what little bit I know about it because, as I say, I interviewed Hy Fireman.

SEGAL: Hy was with me when we went to Johnny Matthews' house. What happened was . . . People had started off on this automobile, what do you call it? Escapade

SPORN: To Washington.

SEGAL: To Washington.

SPORN: This was to protest something?

SEGAL: This was to guarantee the continuation of the Project.

SPORN: Oh, yes. In other words, you were trying to apply some lobbying pressure on Congress to . . .

SEGAL: Yes, they were coming from everywhere to save the Federal Theatre Project. Matthews had a broken down Ford. He was also considered a gentleman and the scholar of the Project. Very well spoken, quiet spoken person, and he was a good magician. We raised--through neighbors, friends, business people--enough money to give to the march, so he would go. He went with his wife and two children, and some other individual that they put in his car. We were very happy. This whole thing was well organized. We were playing at Belle Isle that night. We were playing Dr. Faustus. Suddenly, Johnny Matthews appears towards the end of the play, and he has come back from this trek. He said he wouldn't go on unless he would go alone and not be part of the whole parade. He wanted the money for the gas and not gas up with everybody, and he just wouldn't go on. So Hy Fireman and I went with him to his house that night and we stayed up for hours trying to convince him to return to this march, because he represented the Project. He wasn't just an individual . . .

SPORN: To return to the cavalcade in Washington?

SEGAL: To the cavalcade in Washington, that's right. I remember, when we were there, he had his little rabbits from the act. He was feeding them paper. (Laughs). However, Johnny Matthews refused to return to the cavalcade. Then came the very unpleasant experience on the Project because some sided with him; some of the top people and the others sided with us.

SPORN: Who organized this cavalcade? Were the administrators anxious to have the people go there?

SEGAL: Yes, they were because they wanted the Project saved, too. But it was not just the Detroit Project, it was a national thing.

SPORN: I understand, but in each area who gave the initiative to organize it?

SEGAL: I don't recall. It just grew, you know, because the need was there. What happened when Matthews returned--we had a meeting of the whole Project and it was very bad. There was a break suddenly. The lovely feeling we had of unity, of getting together to save the Project was gone. Subsequently, Johnny Matthews refused to play certain parts that were given to him and he was dismissed from the Project, whereupon, he decided that he would bring charges against the Project. He got up a whole list of charges and he went to the State Legislature in Lansing, and they wouldn't have anything to do with it. He finally came down to the City Council of Detroit and somehow they gave him a hearing and at that hearing . . . There are clippings here--you can read about it. The place was packed. The whole balcony was filled with people, members of the Workers' Alliance, which was the militant group of unemployed people, and . . . I wasn't planning to take the stand at all, although I came all dressed up. I didn't take the stand, but I was photographed for the newspapers. The Regional Director of the Project was the witness in my favor. I was accused.

SPORN: Yes, you were one of the accused people, accused of what?

SEGAL: I was accused of being the person who had complete influence on the Project. I was the "red" influence, Johnny Matthews said that my Regional Director was my "Charlie McCarthy."

SPORN: So you were accused of being a Communist?

SEGAL: Being a "red," yes. My Regional Director said that I had saved the Project because of the theatre parties that I had arranged and he paid me fine compliments--I was very talented, performed services for the Project as a performer, and so forth. The President of the City Council at that time

SEGAL: was Jeffries. I told you that this Johnny Matthews was a magician and one of his acts was as a juggler. The hearing ended with Jeffries telling Johnny Matthews to go back and play with his balls. (Laughter).

SPORN: When Matthews accused you of being the chief influence, the chief "red" influence in the company, did he cite any specific kinds of things that you did or was it a general charge?

SEGAL: I don't know, he may have charged me with selling The Daily Worker on the Project. He may have, I have to look at the clippings. But, you know, he followed the same footsteps as his brother, Matthews, who had been the organizer for Consumer's Research, and who later became the chief witness, I think, for the Dies Committee. So, it was sort of in the family.

SPORN: When your project director defended you, he cited certain specific things you did to save the company, such as theatre parties. These theatre parties were the ones that you went to the union halls to sell tickets for theatre parties. In other words, you made this advanced effort to get an audience, particularly among working people, to come and that helped to stimulate, to get an audience.

SEGAL: Right, and save the Project financially, make it self-supporting.

SPORN: He also said you were a very talented person. By that he meant, in terms of, what? What did he mean specifically?

SEGAL: I was a leading actress, dancer, choreographer.

SPORN: You were able to bring this to the company and . . .

SEGAL: These things are all quoted in here. There's a letter somewhere from my director, Verner Haldene.

SPORN: We can look at those later, at our leisure. Anyway, so that was that situation. Jeffries, you say, was the President of the Council?

SEGAL: I'm pretty sure.

SPORN: Hy Fireman mentioned the name of Councilman Jeffries. He said he turned out to be a friend during the course of the hearings, but he didn't go into some of the details. You're bringing in more life, in a sense, especially, because you remember some of these quotations. When did you join the Project? How early? The Theatre Project. Were you in it from the very beginning?

SEGAL: Oh, no. The Project was in operation when I came to Detroit. Also, I was a stage manager. A stage manager for seven plays.

SPORN: In the Project?

SEGAL: On the Project. There was one play we did, The Spider. Do you remember such a play? The Spider? There was a scene of a seance going on on the stage. The actors sat in a semi-circle. At one point the stage was completely dark. One of the middle-aged men in the company was seated next to one of our youngest women. Taking advantage of the dark, he tried to "get fresh" and she defiantly brought a complaint against him. (Laughs). Now you asked me when I came to the Project. (Pause). These are all copies of the programs. The originals were in the display that was mounted at my tribute. These are all xeroxes which will eventually go to the Lincoln Center Archive, the Dance Archives. You really should look at these before we go into the discussion.

SPORN: While I look at these, let me ask you--these are pictures of you?

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: Hy Fireman said that he was there from the very beginning. He recalls, in the first place, that the company was organized around what he called "leading personalities" rather than a general company and he mentioned Peggy Fenn's name as a sort of leading personality and so on. Then he said that very shortly after it began, it disbanded.

SEGAL: It disbanded? And then it was reconstituted?

SPORN: Yes, and reconstituted. Disbanded because they were having difficulties with how that company should be organized. Should it be organized around personalities? Should the plays that they put on--they put on plays such as Molnar's Liliom, in the first place; a play by Robert Sherwood called The Road to Rome, and so on--there was some question about the nature of the plays they were putting on. But the biggest question was the way the moneys were allocated. When they first started, they rented, I think, the Shubert Theatre in Downtown Detroit which was very, very expensive because it was a professional, commercial theatre. So, most of the budget moneys went to pay for a piece of real estate and a minimal amount of the budget went to pay for the people who were in the Project and even, he said, the Washington administration of the Project were not happy with this. So, they disbanded. Then, about some months later, I can't remember exactly how many, they reconstituted the group again. This time, it was not built around personalities and this time, they started doing more of the plays that you're talking about. Also, it became a policy of the Project that, say 75% of the budget had to go for salaries to employ directors, actors, actresses, stage hands, working

SPORN: theatrical people.

SEGAL: That was before my time. When I came, the theatre was on Twelfth Street.

SPORN: They were on Twelfth Street? You mean, they had a theatre there?

SEGAL: Yes, there was a theatre. Twelfth and Seward. Previously a movie house, I believe.

SPORN: Alright. Let me just get roughly the dates of these.

SEGAL: Here is, this is about Peggy Fenn. The Bonstelle. That was where Peggy Fenn had been previously.

SPORN: She had established her reputation there?

SEGAL: Yes, I eventually saw Peggy Fenn in New York.

SPORN: After this?

SEGAL: Here is an article from the UAW paper. "I talked to Edith Segal and Peggy Fenn, young in years, ripe in experience." (Pause). Yes. Oh, "Verner Haldene, the director, comes to Detroit from the Federal Theatre in Alabama." That's all about him. There's another . . . Here, "Behind the Footlights," was this article. (Goes through material). This is Hy Fireman. This is a nativity play that I directed for Christmas time. There's Peggy Fenn. See the movement, there's a thing of movement. Hy took some beautiful pictures then. (Pause. Searching through material). Here's <u>One-Third of a Nation</u>. " . . . outstanding performance was done by Edith Segal . . ."

SPORN: Now, people like Richard Gamble, Joseph Foley, William Hathcock . . . ?

SEGAL: They were all Detroit people.

SPORN: William Hathcock was a black man?

SEGAL: I don't think so. We didn't have any black people in the program. (Pause. Searching through materials). This is my report, here, of choreography for <u>One-Third of a Nation</u>, which I submitted and of this one, too--<u>Merry Wives of Windsor</u>. <u>A Crib</u>, that was the nativity play.

SPORN: Were any of these plays written by local people, that you did? It all came from New York or some central place?

SEGAL: I believe so.

SPORN: But, these reports then that you made about <u>One-Third of a Nation</u>--report on choreography--you didn't take the choreography from New York?

SEGAL: Oh, no. We did an entirely different production. I didn't see the New York play.

SPORN: So, in other words, simply, your company got the script and then, you as choreographer worked up choreography, the director worked out his

SPORN: way of handling it . . .

SEGAL: And we worked like this. (Clasping hands, fingers intertwined). That's the way we did it.

SPORN: You didn't simply take over the New York show?

SEGAL: Oh, no. We worked as a team. That was the beauty of this guy, Haldene, the director. He appreciated movement. He had worked in Denver with some dance people. He would say, "Okay, Edith, now you take over." We got along so well that, when I left, he gave me something that I had admired. It was a coat of his which could be worn by a man or a woman because it didn't have any buttons. It was a corduroy coat that he had made in Alabama. Every month when he got his check, the first thing he'd do was call his mother. She lived in some far away place. He was the sweetest guy. He was wonderful, very creative. When he came to New York, I looked him up. I don't know what's happened to him since. We got along so well. The same with Mr. Morrow. They knew my political leanings and they respected me. When we did The Cradle Song, I was one of the nuns, Haldene said to me, "You're the only one who flies." There was a beautiful scene, we sat around this little birdcage--three or four of the nuns--and I worked it out in movement, we leaned back from our knees. The bird was the symbol of what we wanted. The bird was in a cage and we wanted to be free, too. We had a wonderful processional. The stage scenery had, like a bridge, across the back. The nuns wore long skirts and I worked it out so that when we walked, which we had to do several times in the play--walking to the prayers, the morning prayers--the skirts, sort of, swung, in rhythm to the movement, which I did very consciously. Well, he appreciated all these things. I loved working with him. I love the theatre. But that was an especially great experience because I was . . . You see, I also studied acting. I was brought up at the Neighborhood Playhouse on Grand Street on New York's lower east side where I lived. I don't know if you know about the Playhouse. It was one of the three "off-Broadway" theatres in the country at that time. To it came some of the most famous theatre people of the world--Galsworthy, Lord Dunsany, Yvette Gilbert, the six Isadora Duncan dancers. Among my teachers was Maria Ouspenskaya of the famous Moscow Art Theatre. I spent twelve years at the Playhouse, starting as an early teenager, and appeared in seventeen productions over the years. The last was The Dybbuk, directed by David Vardi, of the great Habima Theatre. It was

SEGAL: the first American production in English. I studied dancing with Martha Graham, Michael Mordkin, and many others. And so I came to Detroit with all this varied background, and was able to use it. It was a beautiful experience.

SPORN: Were there any other people in the company who had your political ideas or outlook?

SEGAL: When the conflict with Matthews took place just a few top people sided with him. They were the celebrities.

SPORN: All of this is extremely interesting and helpful. I would like to read you a couple of things from this book. This is on the Federal Arts Project and is edited with an introduction by Francis V. O'Connor. Here is an introductory essay here in which he makes several points. He wants to discuss three things in main. One, that the people involved in this Art Project had some sense that for the first time, or "for one of those rare occasions in history, the artist and an audience were related to each other in a very close way," which could mean a number of things. One, that the artist wanted to get a new audience; to broaden the audience that would appreciate and consume and participate in the work of art. They created an audience for themselves--went to places and showed people their works that had never seen art before, just as you say about an audience for the theatre. They also had some sense of a relationship between art and the culture in which it was being produced, and that could take a number of forms also. For example, in the Art Project, the artist, particularly in the murals, tried to recapture some usable past, some kind of history of our country, and even world history that had some relationship to our culture as defined by the term "democracy," and things of that sort. So that was one thing. So they would go find the subject matters elsewhere. There was also a sense of depicting contemporary events, particularly contemporary events as they affected groups of people who, for the most part, had not been central to the concerns of the artists, like working people and their conditions. It would also involve country people, rural populations and their conditions. These would be contemporary plays. So that was another kind of concern that they had. In that respect, in using contemporary issues as subject matter, you had two kinds. You had those that simply presented conditions and then you had those that were more consciously aware of some function that art might have in stirring people, in organ-

SPORN: izing people, in getting them to redirect their energies for the purpose of changing things. The reason I mention this is that O'Connor says that the artists involved were very conscious of all of this and they were very, they took a lot of initiative in bringing this about. He means not only people who are identified with the left, but others, as well. Finally, the third thing he points out is that, for the first time, artists organized themselves, essentially as in a union, for the purpose of protecting their economic rights and guaranteeing their working conditions and their job security. So, these are three things: a new audience, a certain attitude about the relationship between culture and social issues and art, and organizing themselves into an effective group that could fight for their material well-being. Those are the three things. Was there any sense of that among the Federal Theatre Project people in Detroit?

SEGAL: Certainly not in the majority. There were a few individuals who were conscious of it, not too conscious. The Project was a mixture of all sorts of people, all sorts of backgrounds. Many were old-time vaudeville actors and actresses. There was one man who was an experienced actor, but he was only interested in doing leading roles. When I came to Detroit, it was simply an open-shop town. During the years that I spent there, it became a union town, so that the lives that these people had lived before they came on the Project was a very narrow, sort of, existence. They weren't conscious of union problems, big things happening. When I got there, for instance, there was a demonstration in Cadillac Square with thousands and thousands of UAW men and women marching with banners to greet President Roosevelt. Maurice Sugar, who was a very important person in those years--he was an attorney for the UAW--had an office on Cadillac Square, in a tall building. I don't know whether you know this, but he was also a song writer. He was a good friend. We were in his office on the day of this demonstration and there was a man from the LaFollette Committee, who had been sent to investigate the stool pigeons and company men who were stooling on the auto workers. This man from the LaFollette Committee was standing at the window with Maurice Sugar and myself watching these thousands and thousands of men marching with the banners and the women with the Women's Auxiliary, and they were singing one of Maurice's songs, "Soup." He took out his little notebook and he showed us some of the other song, "Sit Down and Take a Seat." It was

SEGAL: about the sit-down strikes. By the way, this is getting away from this a little bit, but I was in the Soviet Union in 1965, and we visited a school in Moscow where they study English as a second language. I knew that they had used some of my poems. We were listening to this class and the teacher was conducting a song, they were singing "Soup." After they were finished, I told them the origin of the song, that unemployed workers..

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SEGAL: . . . used to stand in the soup line during the Depression. They also recited some of my poems in English. When I came back, I wrote to Maurice Sugar, who was a dear friend. I told him about this experience, that I heard them sing his song, recite my poems, and he said . . . He wrote back and he said, "It just shows what good taste they had." (Laughter). It was wonderful, though, to think that . . . It's what? Ten thousand miles from here. They were singing the "Soup Song" and, of course, reciting my poems, which was a great experience, too. But getting back to your question, when you asked me about these people, whether they were consciously aware of the things you mentioned. No. It was an experience for them. When we had UAW locals come and visit the theatre, they responded to the plays the way they did because they saw their own lives reflected in Let Freedom Ring and One-Third of a Nation. The cast began to appreciate these audiences. They weren't just individuals who came. Sure, it was a process. It was a wonderful process of growth on everybody's part. Of course, we knew that there were forces in Washington who wanted to stop this growth and they succeeded, unfortunately, and there's never been such a period again, blooming with culture and people who suddenly saw things they'd never dreamed of seeing. For instance, the Dance Project here in New York. We didn't have one in Detroit. We only had the Theatre Project, but we were very productive. We did a play every month. But in New York, there was a wonderful Dance Project and dances--modern dances, most of them were--kept going for weeks on end. It was unheard of in the history of dance performances. Tamiris did her great suite, "How Long, Brethren?" and the other groups, Earl Robinson wrote the oratorio, "Ballad for Americans," as part of a play. I remember after the Project closed in New York and I had come back, I went to Bloomingdale's Department Store in the Dry Goods Department and the man who played the lead in that WPA theatre

SEGAL: production was selling yard goods!

SPORN: In Bloomingdale's?

SEGAL: In Bloomingdale's.

SPORN: After the Project had closed down? So that's what it came to. Did he ever get back into the theatre?

SEGAL: I don't know. But, you know the famous story of the little girl who says, "My uncle is an actor, but he's working now." (Laughter).

SPORN: So there was a kind of growth in the social awareness on the part of the group, even those who weren't particularly "left" in their consciousness. An awareness of the relationship between society and art.

SEGAL: It was beginning to grow. You see, the director, Verner Haldene, he was conscious of this. By the way, he said he was related to the famous British scientist, Haldane.

SPORN: J.B. Haldane, really? He doesn't spell his name the same way.

SEGAL: He spelled it with an "a."

SPORN: In Britain, it's spelled an "a."

SEGAL: Yes, but he spelled it with an "e."

SPORN: Well, Haldane, the famous biologist is not only famous as a biologist, but, of course, he's also famous as a leftist.

SEGAL: Right.

SPORN: But, Haldene says he's related to . . .

SEGAL: I believe he did. Yes. Then, there was Jimmy Doll, who was the scenic and costume designer. He died since then. What happened to him--he was a very creative man. He came to New York after the Project closed and he got a job . . . Well, even out there, he got a job as a, what do you call it? A fast cook?

SPORN: Fast food place?

SEGAL: A fast food place to be a cook.

SPORN: A short-order cook.

SEGAL: When he came to New York, he got a job at the Montifiore Hospital.

SPORN: In the Bronx?

SEGAL: In New York. He was the chief chef there. I kept in touch with him and with Haldene. He quit that job. He told me he could not bear to see the waste of food. Barrels full of the best food were just thrown away. He just couldn't stand it. He had some moral fiber, this man, and he quit that job.

SPORN: Now, James Doll, I've been trying to locate him and you tell me he's dead.

SPORN: James Doll used to work with the Contemporary Theatre. He conducted a class for the Contemporary Theatre on the history of the drama.

SEGAL: James Doll? On the history of the drama?

SPORN: D-O-L-L.

SEGAL: D-O-L-L. Yes.

SPORN: Yes, there's no question about it, I have some of the material.

SEGAL: A history of the drama, maybe.

SPORN: At one point, Charlotte Shapiro tells it that, at one point, she and a number of other people, I guess her husband, who is now dead, of course, went to New York and some conference, I guess, of New Theatre people around the country. They saw a performance of Newsboy which was so professionally performed, that when they came back to Detroit, they decided that in addition to putting on these plays of social content, they wanted to do it with technical perfection. So, they started a whole series of classes. In fact, she mentioned that you taught some classes in body movement, and James Doll taught a class in the history of drama, and all of this was designed to improve the craftsmanship of the people in the Contemporary Theatre.

SEGAL: Did she tell you who did the Newsboy here in New York?

SPORN: She mentioned . . . I have to look up . . .

SEGAL: It was the Workers' Laboratory Theatre.

SPORN: That's where they saw it.

SEGAL: It wasn't a professional group, it was a semi-professional group.

SPORN: No, but she said they did it so well . . .

SEGAL: Written by V.J. Jerome. Does that name mean anything to you?

SPORN: Oh, yes. V.J. Jerome, Lantern for Jeremy. But not only that, I know his son very well. Freddie Jerome. Do you know Freddie Jerome? I know Alice Jerome.

SEGAL: Sure. Not only that, I can tell you stories. Did you ever read this one?

SPORN: No, that one I didn't read.

SEGAL: Oh, that's such a beautiful book. He was a very dear friend, a very close friend. I went to visit Jerome when he was dying at the New York University Hospital. He knew something terrible was happening to him. When I was in Chicago for a performance we put on of the "Black and White" dance there, someone said, "Do you want to go to a party tonight?" and I said, "Okay." They took us to a party for Alice, who was leaving to to to New York to marry V.J.

SPORN: Well, she ended up in Chicago.

SEGAL: I know. I introduced V.J. to Rose Pastor Stokes, who was his wife before Alice. He was a great man.

SPORN: I was interested in Doll because I'm trying to locate anybody I can who's connected. Anyway. (Pause. Searching through materials). Well, I can't put my fingers on it right now, but I have it in my notes. I'm absolutely sure of what I'm saying, that Doll used to conduct these classes. At any rate . . . Yes. Here. "Labor Stage Presents Musical Drama." This was The Cradle Will Rock. Then, down at the bottom: "In connection with the theatre's production of plays, classes of both the dramatic and technical sides of the theatre are offered. Louie Harmon of New York is director of the theatre this season and head of the dramatic school. The costumes and settings are being designed by James Doll, formerly of the play production staff and now art director of the Federal Theatre in Detroit. Doll has designed the costumes for the student stage production of The Way of the World, is teaching a course in the history of the theatre for the Contemporary School. Piano scores played by Carl Miller." I don't know if you know him, and so on. So, you see, this is about the Contemporary Theatre Production of The Cradle Will Rock.

SEGAL: Who played the piano?

SPORN: Carl Miller.

SEGAL: Yes, I remember him.

SPORN: Anyway, I just wanted to see who Doll was and what he would have . . . So, he's dead, there's no way of . . .

SEGAL: You know that Arthur Miller's first play, They Too Arise, was done at Ann Arbor.

SPORN: By?

SEGAL: By the college group. No, not by the college group. We did it.

SPORN: The Federal Theatre.

SEGAL: We did it, yes. I played the ingenue in it.

SPORN: So, the Federal Theatre did Arthur Miller's first play.

SEGAL: That's right. They Too Arise.

SPORN: I see. But, Arthur Miller was not in the Federal Theatre Project?

SEGAL: No, he was connected with the University.

SPORN: One other question. What about the people who regarded themselves as more left, such as yourself? You were conscious that this theatre would broaden the base of people in touch with art. You were in support of that broadening of the base. Did you have some feelings that art could be a very useful way of presenting the social problems of a society?

SEGAL: Oh, I knew it was. I mean, the two plays that we did, the two outstanding plays, and, also, Paths of Glory, the anti-war play, was very meaningful. We did other very interesting plays like Cradle Song, which was beautiful, and Lysistrata, another anti-war play we did. But, there is no doubt in my mind that art cannot only enhance the lyric beauty of life through landscapes and music and poetry--lyric poetry--but through art, people can be reached to help them understand their own lives more, to raise their consciousness of their relationship to each other, and to see some direction in life, instead of what we have today--people, suicides. There is just no direction. Tragic. I can't bear to sit and watch a television set when I go to my sister's house. I mean, to me, the commercial interruptions are intellectual violence, in the worst sense. When I think that people can stand it and they keep looking at them, it's . . . When we were in Europe in 1965, we were in Poland, I remember. We were driving with a guide to Auschwitz, the former concentration camp. We talked about culture in our countries. We explained to him about the radio programs, about the TV programs being interrupted by those commercials, regardless of whether we were listening to a Beethoven symphony or what, there were commercials, with very few exceptions, of course. He just couldn't believe it. He just could not believe that such a thing could happen. We take it for granted. Well, I don't take it for granted. I protest against it, and in the poems I've written and the things I've done, I've tried to express my protest against such living. I think the arts have a great, great function in life which were given a period of blossoming during the Federal Theatre Project days. The arts, the theatre. There's no doubt about it. Music. I meet people . . . The artists themselves suddenly found self-respect, that they could earn a living through their chosen work.

SPORN: Rather than sell yard goods in Bloomingdale's.

SEGAL: That's right. I mean, there was the respect for it. There was a beautiful comraderie among the people. They had something in common which was a collective thing, it wasn't just an individual expression. There's so little of that. For instance, I'll tell you something that had nothing to do with the Project, but which is an example of what is so rare. I could never live without a piano. So, I had a piano, a beautiful, little old Steinway that took me four years to pay for. It was secondhand. Finally, it broke down, it just couldn't function anymore. So, I went to get another one, in exchange for whatever I would get for this little antique. I picked one of two pianos that were available, but I didn't like the finish. I told the man I wanted an ebony finish instead of the one that it had. He said, "Fine." I gave him the deposit. Several weeks went by and I didn't hear from him. Finally, I called him and I said, "What's happening with my piano?" He said, "Well, Miss Segal, I have a story to tell you. I don't know what to say. My man who's been with me for twenty years--a skilled, wonderful workman, an Italian man--he took the varnish off the piano that you picked and he discovered that it was a beautiful, natural walnut. Would you like a walnut piano?"

SPORN: Rather than an ebony finish?

SEGAL: Rather than an ebony. I said, "No, I want an ebony finish." He said, "But he refuses to paint over it and he threatens to leave me. What am I going to do?" "Ah," I said, "that man is beautiful. I love him. I'll take the other piano that is ebony." I had the greatest respect for this man who had a relationship to the wood that he loved; that he wouldn't cover over. Well, that's rare, you see. That's a very rare thing in our society. Now, on the Project, you found elements of love like that towards the work. That's the cream of living, isn't it?

SPORN: Can you give me a precise example of those elements of love toward the work?

SEGAL: Well, you take a play like Cradle Song, for instance. It was such a beautiful, lovely thing. It was the conflict of this young girl--between choosing life out of the nunnery or staying in the nunnery. That whole experience for me and the others, too, in the play--there was a love there that found expression. The theatre as a collective, offers that experience. Anybody who's been a dancer, especially where the voice isn't required, where there's just movement, there's just contact, bodily contact, that's one of the glories of living. It has been for me, since the early

SEGAL: days. I know I've been a very fortunate person because I've been able to do the work that I love. Even when I worked in an office, which I did, that was just a transition to the evening when I did my dancing.

SPORN: You were a dancer, but you were working. Let me ask you this question. When you were in the Project, did you have any discussions with the members of the group about politics, about how politics might affect what they were doing as actors and directors?

SEGAL: No, I never had such discussions, but what I did do, I did manage to sell about twelve Daily Workers on the Project.

SPORN: To the people on the Project.

SEGAL: To the people on the Project. They had, I must say, as much respect for me as I would wish them to have and they stuck with me. They knew my thinking and they felt an affinity. There's no doubt. More to me than they did to some of these top people who were--betrayed them, really. So, it was a good experience, except we stopped too soon. I had to leave the Project and go back to New York because my husband had been in an accident, a car accident, and for various reasons, I had to go back to New York. So that, that part of my life, I've always looked upon as a very, very rich part. I knew when I got back to New York, I wouldn't have the connection with the unions that I had before. There wouldn't be the connection between art and work and workers. Also, for instance, the Woolworth girls went out on strike when I was in Detroit. I wrote a play, Billion Dollar Babies Sit Down. It's here somewhere.

SPORN: You have the manuscript?

SEGAL: Yes, I have the script somewhere.

SPORN: Was it ever performed?

SEGAL: Never performed.

SPORN: Never performed by anyone?

SEGAL: No.

SPORN: But you have the script?

SEGAL: I have the script. Then, there were the cigarmakers, they were sitting down. My father was a cigarmaker.

SPORN: In New York?

SEGAL: In New York. He never made more than probably twelve dollars a week all his life and my mother had to work all her life. Well, so the cigarmakers were special to me, you know. They sat down. We went into that place and brought a performing group.

SPORN: Which performing group did you bring in there?

SEGAL: We brought some of the people from the Project.

SPORN: But it wasn't the Project.

SEGAL: No, I don't think so.

SPORN: It was just that some of the people from the Project . . . So, what did you do there?

SEGAL: What did we do there? I don't recall exactly what, but we did something for them, I know it.

SPORN: Something theatrical?

SEGAL: Yes, something theatrical.

SPORN: Like a skit or a sketch or . . .

SEGAL: Yes, probably part of our vaudeville thing. Because the workers of the Project were perfectly willing to go and do it.

SPORN: Yes, but it wasn't a Project sponsored thing.

SEGAL: I don't think so.

SPORN: Was it sponsored by the Contemporary Theatre? Charlotte tells me that they did a lot of that. For example, the Contemporary Theatre people went into the sit-down strike. The Contemporary Theatre people were invited to entertain the sit-down strikers. They went right into the Flint plant, Fisher Body One. Were you involved in that?

SEGAL: No, I wasn't.

SPORN: But you must have been there at that time.

SEGAL: I was there. Sure, that was when all the organizing took place, but I didn't act in the Contemporary Theatre. You see, the New Dance Group of Detroit was connected with the Contemporary Theatre and I did choreograph some of the things for them.

SPORN: That's what I understand.

SEGAL: Right. There was the state legislator, Stanley Novak, who was in the cigar factory and when the police or whoever came, he jumped out of the window and he broke his heel and he still limps. But, sure, I felt especially warm toward the cigarmakers. About cigarmakers--we went to Cuba at Christmastime in 1960. It was our official Luna de Miel-Honeymoon. We were there before diplomatic relations were broken. It was a large group, about four hundred people. After two weeks, they went back to New York and we stayed. We went with several people from other countries to visit many places. One of them was the leading cigar factory in Havana. It was a big factory with several tiers, sort of, and

SEGAL: you could look down from those tiers to the floors below. At one point, we were asked whether anyone wanted to speak through the microphone, which could be heard throughout the factory and I said I would because I speak a little Spanish. I told them that my father was a cigarmaker and how happy he would have been to know there's such a place, not too far from home, where the workers own the factory. They listened attentively. Instead of applauding, they clattered the little knives that they used to chop the cigars. It was beautiful. A highpoint in our trip.

SPORN: Coming back to the 1930's when the Detroit cigarmakers went on strike, you went there and did something theatrical, but you can't remember exactly what. When the Woolworth girls . . . Did you go to them and do something theatrical?

SEGAL: Yes. Sure. I spoke with them and . . .

SPORN: Aside from speaking, aside from direct political discussion, did you do anything theatrical?

SEGAL: Yes, it was never political discussions. It was always . . .

SPORN: Through the theatre?

SEGAL: Yes, you see, they . . . The script is somewhere. I have it somewhere.

SPORN: The play you wrote.

SEGAL: Yes, it was a play. Also, I wrote a poem--it's one of these things--as a member of the Women's Auxiliary.

SPORN: UAW?

SEGAL: The UAW and I conducted singing, as you see. That picture with the two people, one of them is me. That was in Monroe. So, it was always the connection. I knew that when I got back to New York, that would be lost, and it was. The Projects were all gone. I wasn't able to speak to the unions, as a representative of a theatrical group.

SPORN: But aside form selling The Daily Worker to the people on the Project, which was simply a political act, but wasn't necessarily . . . You didn't relate it in any way to the work of the Federal Theatre Project?

SEGAL: No. By the way, this Johnny Matthews, who became the stool pigeon, he was the first one to buy the paper.

SPORN: That's the way many stool pigeons operate.

SEGAL: Well, it was just deterioration. He was an individualist, he just thought of himself. He just didn't connect up at all like so many of the others did. But, the Project was a mischmasch of people. As I said, these two old-timers who wouldn't change their exits and entrances because they'd

SEGAL: done it that way for eighteen years, all their lives--probably thirty-eight years. But the younger people--there were younger people on the Project that we became friendly with, Hy and I, who began to understand a little more than their own personal problems. The connection between them and the others. So, Detroit I always think of with great love. I'm still in touch with quite a few of the people.

SPORN: Well, Charlotte Shapiro, by the way, told me three times, if she told me once, that I must be sure to give you her regards--her fondest regards. She wanted to be sure that I didn't forget that. So, anyway, I pass them on to you.

SEGAL: Thank you. I remember Charlotte in many ways. Some personal things. Marc Blitzstein was in Detroit, too. You know they did The Cradle Will Rock. I don't think he was too happy with that production?

SPORN: Marc Blitzstein wasn't too happy?

SEGAL: I don't think so.

SPORN: When I was on the West Coast, I interviewed Minna Gossman. She's from Detroit, but she lives on the West Coast now. She used to be married to a man by the name of Maury Merlin, who was in the Federal Arts Project in Detroit.

SEGAL: Minna?

SPORN: Minna Merlin or Minna Lenahan.

SEGAL: Of course I know Minna.

SPORN: She's a marvelous person.

SEGAL: She came East and she was the Sports Director one summer in the camp where I worked. I knew her father. I knew the whole family. After her husband died, there was an exhibition she arranged of his work. She remarried.

SPORN: She remarried Laurie Gossman, whom I met. She was telling me that the Contemporary Theatre people, they went to union halls, as well, and they had written skits and sketches and parodies of popular songs and would put those on. They did that, in fact, in Flint. So, it was sort of an entertainment in all that.

SEGAL: There was one. (Sings). "The lady in red, she's a little bit crazy in the back of her head." That was a parody on . . .

SPORN: . . . on "The Lady in Red."

SEGAL: On "The Lady in Red?"

SPORN: There is a song called "The Lady in Red." I think it's, if I'm not

SPORN: mistaken, a George Gershwin song.

SEGAL: Oh? I don't remember.

SPORN: I've been trying to find out from her and others where I could get hold of that material. Nobody seems to have it.

SEGAL: That song?

SPORN: The parodies, the manuscripts of those sketches and skits. Now, Leo Mogill, I don't know if you know him. Leo Mogill? He used to be in the Contemporary Theatre and he . . .

SEGAL: You mean Charlotte doesn't have that, "The Lady in Red?"

SPORN: She said she thought she did. She looked through her papers and couldn't come up with it. She's still checking it out, but so far I don't have any of it. But, he gave me a number of skits and, really, they aren't very good, you know, but they're quickie kind of things.

SEGAL: They're what?

SPORN: They're not necessarily very good, but he gave me some things. Now, some of them, of course, are also--"Lonesome Train"--they're not so much from the original things. Did you know an Arthur Clifford?

SEGAL: He's just the person I was thinking of. The crippled man.

SPORN: Right. He wrote a couple of plays. He wrote two parodies.

SEGAL: I think he wrote "The Lady in Red." Is he still alive?

SPORN: No, I understand he's dead, but he wrote two musical satires. One called Hoodwinked which was about the Black Legion and another on the 1937 elections in Detroit.

SEGAL: Did you know him at all?

SPORN: No, I never met him, but I just know about his work.

SEGAL: I thought of him just the other day. The upper part of his body was normal--big head, big hands--and the rest of him was all . . . But, he drove a car. He had a special car. He was married to a very normal, very attractive young lady. I thought of him just the other day because I got an invitation to a wedding between a young man whose life was changed in one minute. He's a survivor of the holocaust in Poland. Then he went to Israel. He was riding a motorcycle, he fell, had brain damage, and he's crippled on one side and he's getting married. I understand his fiance is a lovely, attractive person. So I couldn't help but think of Arthur Clifford.

SPORN: I understand they had some children. In fact, Louie Falstein told me that he was married and that as far as he remembers . . . No, I think Lou

SPORN: Falstein asked me whether he had any children and I believe that someone told me he did have children.

SEGAL: What are you planning to do with all of this?

SPORN: Well, a number of things. First of all, I'm trying to get the flavor of some of the things you've been saying. The excitement of what you felt, the connection you had with the unions, as a new audience for the Project plays. The fact that the people involved in the Project had self respect, that they could practice what they loved to practice instead of doing something else out of economic necessity. All of these things are what I'm trying to recapture. What it meant from the standpoint of broadening the culture, understanding your own culture and so on. I am certainly going to write several articles on this. In addition, I'm going to develop a course for graduate students on the federal support of the arts in the 1930's. I've already done some courses on working class literature and on . . . I did a graduate seminar on the left-wing journalism of the 1930's. A study of New Masses, Anvil, Dynamo, Partisan Review . . .

SEGAL: Do you have the Masses and Mainstream book by Joe North?

SPORN: Oh, yes. I used that, in fact, as one of the texts for my class. I used a number of other books as a text. We did a study of the works. The stories, the poems, and the criticism. Those were the three divisions.

SEGAL: There was a book of poems, too. Proletarian Literature.

SPORN: Well, there was a book called Proletarian Literature which came out in the 1930's. So, I planned to do some courses here. We're also planning to do an exhibit of the Art Project works produced by Detroit people. I want, if I can get, enough manuscript material. The exhibition will also include a display of these manuscripts. Furthermore, we would like to put on, at the same time the exhibit is running, a couple of the performances of the Federal Theatre and run this for two months or so.

SEGAL: Who would do that?

SPORN: We could get the Speech and Drama Department of Wayne State University to do it. The Institute of Arts, which is working with me on this project, they're doing the art side of it, the visual arts. They would put on the exhibition. On top of that, we would like this to travel so it would reach a larger audience than just people who walk into a museum. The first play I ever saw, I was telling Louie Falstein, as a young teenager, was put on by the Federal Theatre Project up in the

SPORN: Bronx. I lived in the Bronx then. You know Crotona Park in the Bronx?

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: Okay. There was a place there in Crotona Park where the grass sloped up like a hill. There was a level part down below there. So, during the summer evenings, the Federal Theatre Project used to put on their plays in the vans, these large vans that a truck would haul in. They'd drop down the sides of it and there was the stage. The people would line up on the sloping, grassy hill. By the thousands. No charge. So, what could you do in the Depression years? Cheapest form of entertainment. You could spend a couple, three hours. Those hot nights you were out under the stars, you know, with the cool air. I saw Murder in the Cathedral by T.S. Eliot. The first play I ever saw in my life. I was a child then. I wonder, did they ever do that in Detroit, that kind of thing?

SEGAL: The nearest thing we did was at Belle Isle.

SPORN: An outdoor thing?

SEGAL: Outdoors. Belle Isle.

SPORN: So, you did have something of that sort.

SEGAL: We did Dr. Faustus there. Do you know that play?

SPORN: Are you talking about the Marlowe play?

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: Sure, I know it very well.

SEGAL: I was in that. I was the "Devil-wife."

SPORN: What we would like to do is reenact that. Maybe do something out on Belle Isle or take it to a small, little town outside of Detroit and then do it. Take it to a union group and do it. These are some of the things we are planning to do. This information that you have supplied is very good. Let me ask you a few other questions. Peggy Fenn. Do you know of any way I could get in touch with her?

SEGAL: The last time I saw her was many years ago in New York.

SPORN: She lived in New York then?

SEGAL: She lived in New York. She was very friendly. The best thing is always to look in the phone book.

SPORN: Right. Of course, one of the troubles of looking in the New York phone book is that even an odd name you're going to find many of, like my name which is a very unusual name. There are a lot of Sporns in the New York phone book, not as many as there are Carnes and Smiths, but there are

SPORN: plenty of Sporns. But I can do that. Now, another series of questions. At one time, there was a journal called New Writers that was put out. Louie Falstein was on the editorial staff. Kimon Friar, whom I noticed is a member of the Federal Theatre Project, used to be on the . . .

SEGAL: What?

SPORN: Kimon Friar?

SEGAL: Kimon Friar, oh, sure. A Greek.

SPORN: Right. In fact, he became a translator of Kazantzakis' books. He was on this New Writers. Does New Writers mean anything to you?

SEGAL: No, not particularly.

SPORN: Maxine Finsterwald was on it. She lives here and she goes by the name of Maxine Wood and I've been trying to locate her.

SEGAL: I have her address.

SPORN: I have her address and her phone number, but I just have not been able to get her in.

SEGAL: She wrote On Whitman Avenue. Her first play. Very interesting.

SPORN: Right, I would like to see her while I'm in New York because she was connected with the Federal Writers' Project. Do you have any names in mind about people who were in the Federal Writers' Project?

SEGAL: No, Lou Falls would know better, I wouldn't.

SPORN: He was very helpful.

SEGAL: You mean, in Detroit?

SPORN: In Detroit. This is, at the moment, focused on Detroit and Michigan. How these things worked in Detroit and Michigan. Now, the other question that I . . .

SEGAL: Oh, I wanted to tell you another thing that just came to my mind. When the "Black Macbeth" came to Detroit from New York, they were traveling, there was a friend of mine, a dancer. She'd been in one of my groups in New York before I left. She was one of the three witches. They came into the Lafayette Theatre, where we had been playing, and they took it over. Opening night, there was a party, a big party was planned for the company in their hotel on the black side of town. I met this friend of mine and we were going to the party. She was very thirsty and she wanted a drink, you know, soda or whatever--orange drink, coffee. I said, "Okay, we'll go," to this place which we frequented. In the front they served the coffee and in the back there was a bar. We sat there and sat there and nobody came up to wait on us. Finally, there was a bartender, well,

SEGAL: he wasn't going to wait on us. Then, a woman popped her head out from the back, the waitress, and she looked and she jumped back in. Then he, the bartender, finally said, "We don't serve Negroes here." So, we went out. I said, "Let's go into this hot dog place." Here she was, a whole evening of the witches, you know. So, we go into this place and she said, "I want an orange drink." He said, "You want to take it out?" She said, "No, I want to drink it here." He said, "We don't serve Negroes." We got on the streetcar and rode about a half hour before we got to her hotel where she'd get a drink of water. That story, I've never forgotten and repeated it hundreds of times. It struck me so personally. What it means to be thirsty and not get a drink. Detroit in the thirties, the fourth largest city in the U.S.A. Oh, they got rave review in all the papers the next day, it was a big hit, with witches and everything. How about that? I remember, too, I'll never forget, I finally got on the welfare. I had to ride on the bus, pay ten cents car fare, to get my welfare check. It was pitch dark at six o'clock in the morning. I got five or seven dollars. I was so nervous. I didn't ask for anything except food money. I had clothes to wear and a pair of shoes. First thing I did was go to the grocery and spend the five dollars. Some of these experiences are reflected in my poems. There's that white book. Is that underneath there? Didn't I give you Poems and Songs For Dreamers Who Dare?

SPORN: Here it is.

SEGAL: There are many things reflected here. "Success." "He reached the well-earned goal/in poverty's despair/and remembered without prompting/the folks still climbing there." In the other book, Take My Hand, are the poems "Extra-curricular" and "Education for Free." "To truly learn the value of a buck/a guy must have the questionable luck/of having spent the last of his last one/and not know where the next is coming from." Did you ever have that experience? I'll give you these books--you can take them home and give them a glance.

SPORN: You're giving them to me?

SEGAL: Why not?

SPORN: Very good. I appreciate it. In fact, now I'll ask for your autograph.

SEGAL: Okay. I've written this thing that will appear in Jewish Affairs this week. It's a monthly. "Challenge of the Beast Reborn." It's about the KKK in Chicago. It's called a poem-essay. It contains quotes from

SEGAL: The New York Times, what they said, and excerpts of my poems.

SPORN: I have been in demonstrations against the Nazis in Detroit. They opened up a bookstore there. We drove them out of two of them and now they've opened up another one.

SEGAL: In Detroit? Yes, I've read about that.

SPORN: We're about to drive them out of that one. It's a shameful situation that's happened.

END OF SIDE B. TAPE 1.

BEGINNING OF SIDE A. TAPE 2.

SEGAL: I was hoping to get it printed in Jewish Affairs and Jewish Currents, if you know the difference. You do?

SPORN: Yes, I think I do.

SEGAL: Anyway, then I got an answer from Jewish Affairs. "All of us here, including Herbert"--which means Herbert Aptheker--"think your poem essay is excellent and deeply moving and we will print it in the August-September issue." I've also submitted it to Freedomways. I don't know whether they'll take it. But the latest thing I've done are new words to the Beethoven chorale, the Ninth Symphony.

SPORN: You've actually done new words for the entire . . .

SEGAL: The chorale.

SPORN: I say, the entire chorale? Listen, it's a big, long piece.

SEGAL: No, just, you know . . . (Hums the music).

SPORN: Oh, that part. The freedom part.

SEGAL: Yes, that part. It's called "Ode to Life," what Schiller calls his "Ode to Joy." The first line is reminiscent, but I added "red," which Schiller didn't have. That's where the similarity ends. There are three verses. "Ode to Life."

(Sings): *Black and White, Red, Brown and Yellow,
Jew and Gentile, all are one.
All know love and all know sorrow,
Color myths and lies be done.
Like the flowers in a garden,
Each one's beauty we proclaim.
In the universal garden,
Each is different, yet the same.
**Children need a world of promise,
Learning with their heads and hands.

SEGAL: Sharing dances, songs, and stories,
With the young of other lands.
All are born to seek fulfillment,
Greet in peace the birth of day.
Know the joy of fearless living,
Finding friends along the way.
***We who toil for "bread and roses,"
We who cherish human worth,
Linked as one, we march with courage,
Toward a humane life on earth.
All know love and all know sorrow,
Color myths and lies be done.
Black and White, Red, Brown and Yellow,
Jew and Gentile, all are one.

SPORN: Very nice.

SEGAL: Well, we're going to sing it Sunday at the wedding party. We're making song sheets so people can keep them.

SPORN: Listen, before I forget, there was one question I wanted to ask you. Two, in a certain sense. Did you ever find a conflict between your political beliefs and your artistic practices?

SEGAL: Never. I've been one of the fortunate ones. I've never had that problem. I don't think there need be a problem. I mean, I don't think there's a dichotomy between what you think and what you feel. A person, I think, is one whole being and if I _understand_ something, it means, also, I can _feel_ it. So when it comes out of me in some creative form, it's a unified thing, there's no conflict. My problem is to make sure that the poem or the dance, that has in it a social theme, should be worthy of the content, be artistically beautiful. That's the challenge because, heaven knows, it's easy enough to run off phrases and, what's the word? Cliches. In the poem "Ode to Life" which I just read to you, the thoughts are all thoughts that have been said before, but I've tried to find other ways of saying them. I worked hard on that poem. The end result sounds simple. Everybody seems to like it. But, that's the challenge.

SPORN: The reason I ask that question is that many people--many artists, let me put it that way--both artists who at one point or another had connection with the left or may still have connection with the left, and those who would be more liberal, but certainly in the thirties were attracted to

SPORN: the left--a number of them have felt there's some kind of problem it creates for the artist in two senses. One, some writers, some artists in the past felt that the left made demands on them of a political nature which pulled them away from their art. They had to go on picket lines and this, that, and the other thing. They could understand that many of these things were of such urgent character that it was hard to say, "Well, who am I to say I'd rather sit home and write a poem than go walk on this picket line"--let's say--"to save the Rosenbergs." But still, they have felt, on the overall, that it took away a lot of time. Another conflict they felt was that the left, in demanding that they have a certain kind of politics in the work, did not take into account the aesthetic character of the work. Now, I'm not saying this is the truth, but that's the way some people felt. I think in some instances that did happen, this kind of conflict. I'm not saying that as a matter of the nature of politics that it needs to happen. I, myself, believe that if understood properly, a political understanding can enhance the aesthetic quality of the work. I'm not saying that out of hand a political understanding does enhance the character of the work, I'm just saying, if understood properly, it can do that. Let me give you an example. When I was out on the West Coast, I interviewed Albert Maltz. Do you know Albert Maltz?

SEGAL: Oh, yes. Very well.

SPORN: He told me about an experience. He had written a play, Peace on Earth, you probably remember that.

SEGAL: He wrote Peace on Earth?

SPORN: He and George Sklar collaborated. I interviewed George Sklar, too, he's a very lovely man. It's an anti-war play. The chief character is a pacifist. So, somewhere in the play, the pacifist, who happens to be the chief character, says, "All wars are bad," or words to that effect. Well, Albert Maltz tells me that that brought a lot of criticism. So, they said, "You know, it's not true that all wars are bad, there are some just wars" and I happen to believe that. In fact, I happen to believe in revolutionary violence. But, here there was a question, a conflict. The character was a pacifist, and pacifists do believe that all wars are bad. So, the criticism was being made about a statement that was quite appropriate to the character, but which may have been politically wrong, but still appropriate to the character. So, Maltz

SPORN: cited this as a kind of, not that anybody insisted he change the play, and he didn't change the play, it went the way it was, but it was something that somebody was trying, perhaps very honestly, to be helpful and to improve the play.

SEGAL: Do you want my opinion of the situation? A person who is politically aware and who is trying to write a play to foster the idea of peace, must be very selective in who he chooses for a main character because he's speaking his deepest thoughts about that main character. If he's going to pick a pacifist for his main character, then it isn't a typical, true situation of the objective truth. The exploiters, the fascists are violent, and, unfortunately, cannot be halted by pacifists. So the fault isn't that he was criticized, the fault is his selection--that there wasn't clarity to start with on the part of the playwright. A person who is a revolutionary, aggressive artist has to pick, has to be very selective in what to pick, what to describe. Sure a pacifist is against all wars. You can have united fronts with pacifists up to a point and you can write a play about <u>that</u>, but if you're going to make a pacifist your hero, you're going to get into trouble with history. You see, with a mature person who's taken a position in life, there can't be a conflict. You talk about the time element, going on a picket line becoming more important than writing a poem or a play or a song or painting a picture. I don't see it that way. For the Rosenbergs, picket lines were a question of life or death. And if you were going to write about them, such participation could only deepen your understanding, your feelings, and help your artistic creation. You decide what's number one, that's the everyday problem. What's number one? You take care of number one first. Every June, the Rosenberg tragedy comes up. They were executed on June 19, 1953. I've been involved from the very beginning. On June 19th of this year, I recited one of my Rosenberg poems at the Union Square commemoration. I was introduced by Robbie Meeropol, one of the Rosenberg sons, as "the poet laureate of the working class." Two years ago, I sold four thousand dollars worth of tickets for the Rosenberg-Carnegie Hall commemoration. What happened was . . . I had a terrific attack of sciatica--first time in my life I was confined to bed for several weeks. My phone and card file was placed by my bed and I got to work calling up people and I sold the tickets just lying there. Not just individual tickets, but in tens, fifteens. Ten dollar tickets, box seats at fifty. Fortunately, I was well by the time of the

SEGAL: meeting and recited my poem "Lean Hard Upon the Memory of the Two." As I was introduced, I was presented with a bouquet of American Beauties. I said, "My sciatica blossomed into a bouquet of American Beauties." The bouquet was a tribute for all the Rosenberg poems and songs I had written and also for the great amount of tickets I sold. Conflict? I don't find any at all. I've been very fortunate because I see my non-artistic activity and my artistic activity--my poems, songs, and dances--as part of a unified me. Happiness, I feel, is to have a good understanding with yourself as to what's important to you. Then you won't have the conflicts you referred to. When I came into the movement, I was already a professional dancer and had my Neighborhood Playhouse background. Stopping to work during a cross-country hitch hike, I was in Chicago in the twenties when Lenin died. And I quickly found myself creating a memorial dance for him. It consisted of two parts--a funeral march and then a dance of revolution. I told my idea to a man called Manny Gomez, who was at the national C.P. office--which was in Chicago at that time--and he said it was a wonderful idea, and to go ahead with it. And so I got to work with the pianist Rudolf Von Lebich, a grand old man who had published the first American Workers Song Book with piano accompaniment. Recently, I discovered that Von Lebich played the funeral march at the memorial service for Joe Hill in 1915 in Chicago. My costume for this dance was a red tunic over which was draped a black scarf. First, I was the mourner. In the second part, I lifted the black scarf, discarded it, and became Lenin. The message was clear--not to mourn--and everything that implies. As Joe Hill said--his last words "Do Not Mourn, Organize!" I remember Von Lebich crying as he watched me rehearse . . . We came to Ashland Auditorium early to rehearse on stage. There was this man, Arny Swaback, who was to chair the meeting. I told him that I was to dance on the program. He looked at me as though I were crazy. He said, "What? A dance at the memorial meeting for Lenin? Are you out of your mind? Over my dead body." But it didn't faze me. He said, "You'll have to get Foster's or Ruthenberg's permission." It was like asking Lenin to turn over in his grave, or so he thought. So we waited. Then Ruthenberg, Charles Ruthenberg--do you know who he was?--came along. I explained the situation. Oh, yes. Manny Gomez, who had enthusiastically approved the idea, was out of town speaking at another Lenin Memorial Meeting. Ruthenberg put his hand on

SEGAL: my shoulder as I looked up to this six-footer and he said, "Comrade, if you feel you have something to contribute to this meeting, go right ahead." And, of course, that's what I did. I knew from the start that it was right. By the way, I'm always willing to go down, but go down fighting. But in this I just knew I was right. Fortunately, Ruthenberg--I don't know whether he was a great art lover or not--but he told me to go ahead and dance. We were received with honor. And that became yes, roots. When I came back to New York, my plan was to establish a Pioneer, a children's dance group. And I did organize it. They were young teenagers. For the next Lenin Memorial Meeting, held at Central Plaza, on East 67th Street, I developed my Chicago presentation into four parts: dance of revolution, funeral march, construction of the first socialist state and, finally, celebration, which I did with these youngsters. It was a sensation. Then I was asked by Will Weinstone to develop this work with adults for the next Lenin Memorial Meeting to be held at Madison Square Garden--this dance about which Swabach had said, "Over my dead body." The nucleus for this adult group was several members of the Artef, a Jewish Workers' Theatre, a semi-professional group that was studying movement with Michael Fokine, plus about forty other individuals that I recruited. There was a man by the name of Ed Massey who had written a script for the occasion and eventually we blended his realistic scenes with the dance sequences. The music I chose for the Dance of Revolution was "The Ride of the Walkyries" which we rehearsed with a record. One of our friends was a bass player with the professional National Symphony Orchestra. We couldn't afford to pay them for a rehearsal, but they came to the Garden and we went on without a rehearsal, which miraculously turned out perfectly. They played the "Walkyrie" exactly like the record. The old Garden on 50th Street held 18,000 and the place was jammed. That performance was referred to, in articles by A.B. Magil and Moiseye Olgin, as the "beginning of proletarian culture in this country." One of them wrote, referring to the "great event": . . . here is our own Edith Segal, now she is transformed . . ." No, there was no conflict, there is absolutely no conflict--the mind, the heart, the art are one. I went on to do scores of things. When I got to Camp Kinderland, I created many, many dances on Jewish themes, to Jewish songs; part of the program to continue and preserve secular Jewish culture. Just to mention a few of these dances: to the "Chant

SEGAL: of the Rabbi" of Berditchev, sung by Paul Robeson; the Morano song "Zog Marahn," about the Jews during the Spanish inquisition; the "Warsaw Ghetto Dance," and many joyous dances. We also did other things. I created a dance to Beethoven's second movement of the 4th Piano Concerto, and it was called "Little Rock." Its theme was the struggle of a black student to enter a white school. I mean, it just seemed to come as part of me and there was no conflict. The challenge was to make my dances artistically good enough to be worthy of the content. Then, of course, I've done humourous things, light things, crazy things--like my dances for "The Little Tin Box." Just the other night, I sang and danced my version of the old English ballad "It's the Syme the 'Ol World Over, It's the Poor What Gets the Blyme." So, I've been one of the very fortunate people. There's never been any conflict between my work and my thinking. I don't believe there need be if you're a well-rounded, mature person.

SPORN: About your books . . . You say your husband does the illustrations?

SEGAL: Yes. Most of them in the adult books come from our annual New Year's cards, which include a poem by me and his illustration, reciprocally enhancing each other's work. As you see in this book here, this poem and drawing of Angela Davis, when she was imprisoned, came from one of our cards. Sam's drawing of Angela, by the way, has received wide usage in the world-wide struggle to save her life. His drawing was reproduced on the cover of magazines and posters in the United States--on the cover of Freedomways, a quarterly devoted to black liberation struggles; in the German Democratic Republic in the art magazine Bildende Kunst; in an African magazine and in a large poster in India.

SPORN: I've seen them.

SEGAL: Here in my book, Poems and Songs for Dreamers Who Dare, is a song I wrote for Angela--this one here. When Angela was in prison it was sung at a Teachers' Action Committe concert by a fine young Puerto Rican, a singer, who was accompanied by two guitarists. I also recited my "Letter to Angela." After the concert, which they recorded, the Teachers' Action Committee put out a long-playing record which starts with my song, by the way, and finishes with me reciting, "Letter to Angela." You know, of course, that Angela was later acquitted. Oh, yes. Sam's illustrations for Come with Me: Poems for the Young, poems, guessing poems, and dance poems, and my latest book The Greatest Wonder, also for young people . . . His illustrations for these . . . he picked the poems he wanted to illustrate. You will notice his drawings are interracial.

END OF SIDE A. TAPE 2.

Interview II

INTERVIEW II

Oral history of Edith Segal of the Michigan Federal Theatre Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, in Brooklyn, New York, November 13, 1979.

SPORN: . . . an interview with Edith Segal for my project on the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Arts Project. The date is November 13, 1979 and we are in Edith Segal's apartment in Brooklyn. Edith, in this particular interview, there are two or three things that I am interested in finding out about. One thing has to do with the early conflicts in the Federal Theatre Project, particularly between Louie Nims and William Beyer, the director before Verner Haldene. The other is information about a living newspaper drama on the auto industry. There is some evidence that there were plans to do a living newspaper on auto, and you may know something about that, you may remember something about that. The other thing is, there was this anti-Communist red baiting attack of the Federal Theatre Project by Matthews and a number of other people. I'd like to find out a little more about that now that we have some more information. Okay? So, first let's begin with William Beyer. Were you in the company when William Beyer was the director?

SEGAL: I guess he was the director in the beginning. I knew William Beyer from the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York.

SPORN: Yes, he comes from New York. He was not originally from Detroit, but he was a director there. He took his own play there, I Confess. Directed it for the Detroit group and then stayed on, I think, through It Can't Happen Here.

SEGAL: Well, he did not direct any of the plays I was in. You referred to some conflict, I don't know of any such, so I can't comment on that.

SPORN: Just let me see if we're recording.

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SEGAL: Do you have material on Anna Christie?

SPORN: Yes.

SEGAL: That picture was from Anna Christie that you just saw.

SPORN: Yes, I see it. I don't have this picture,

SEGAL: Oh, it's beautiful.

SPORN: Yes, it's a beautiful picture. This is Hy Fireman?

SEGAL: No, no.

SPORN: Oh, Hy Fireman took the picture.

SEGAL: That's right.

SPORN: Who is that?

SEGAL: That's . . . Well, it's on the program somewhere, that's easy to find.

SPORN: Yes. I'd be particularly interested in that picture because I know that they don't have it down at George Mason and they would like to complete their file. So, I wonder what we can do about it?

SEGAL: Well, we can get a picture made.

SPORN: Yes, we'll have to do that.

SEGAL: Okay, we can do that.

SPORN: In fact, if you would make two pictures of that size--you see, we're planning an exhibition, and we would like to have this as documentary material that we would put in the exhibition in the Detroit Institute of Arts and elsewhere in Michigan.

SEGAL: Right. Do you want to go on with the question? There's other stuff here in the file.

SPORN: We'll come to that in a moment. But, you don't remember too much about William Beyer. You weren't there then.

SEGAL: I was there. I know that I spoke to him about getting on the Project because he knew me as a dancer from the Playhouse. I recall, sort of, that he said that he wasn't too happy. That, I do recall, and that's about it. The first name is a blank to me.

SPORN: I have a note here that Hallie Flanagan recommended you for the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit.

SEGAL: That's right.

SPORN: You knew her in New York?

SEGAL: Shall I give you the background?

SPORN: Please.

SEGAL: Before I went out to Detroit, there was what was called a Theatre Spartakiade in New York--amateur groups--and Hallie Flanagan was one of the judges. A dance that I created called "Black and White"--the first dance, I'm very sure, that was ever created with a black and white theme, a dance which I originally created for myself and a black young woman. Subsequently, I made it for two men, black and white. That dance was included on the Spartakiade Program, but it was not in the competition because it was the only dance. However, when the program was finished, Hallie Flanagan told me that if it were in the competition, she would be for giving it the first prize. Well, of course, I didn't

SEGAL: forget that. The time came when I went out to Detroit to work with various dance groups there and organize a Midwest section of the Workers' Dance League at the great sum of five dollars a week and I lived with a friend in Detroit. When that job--can I call it that?--came to an end, I was out of work, but I wanted for certain personal reasons to stay in Detroit. The only way I could, would be to get on the Theatre Project. There was just one Theatre Project there. In order to get on the Project, I'd either have to get in on the supervisory category, which I couldn't because it was filled up, and the other was to get on as an actress. There was no category for dancers. Well, I couldn't get on as an actress unless I was on the welfare. I certainly was a candidate for welfare because I just didn't have any money after the five dollars per week job was over. I was living with a friend whose husband was out of town and so, I applied to the welfare. They asked me whether I had applied to the Jewish agency for housework and things like that. Well, subsequently I got on the welfare and I think I got the magnificent sum of seven dollars a week for food. I didn't ask for more because I had some clothes to wear. But, what I wanted was to get on the Project and it seems I couldn't get on the Project as there were no openings. I remembered what Hallie Flanagan had told me after the program that I referred to, so I decided to go back to New York and see Hallie Flanagan, which I did. She remembered the dance, "Black and White," which I had choreographed. She gave me a letter of recommendation and even with that letter, I had difficulty, but subsequently I got on. I shall never forget those days. Finally, I got on the Project as an actress, as a dancer, and as a choreographer. In addition to that, I also went to the unions when we did Let Freedom Ring and One-Third of a Nation, and I spoke before the various groups and got them to take bookings for the theatre, and that was a highpoint, I think, in the Project because for the first time, these workers, who had never been to the theatre, came. I remember at one of the performances, our stage manager was sitting in the audience, as he often did, to overhear remarks of the people. One-Third of a Nation, as you may know, started with a fire scene, then came a flashback. The play ended with a repeat of the first scene. At that point, our stage manager overheard the conversation between two people who were sitting behind him. One of them said to the other, "Well, let's go, this is where we came in," thinking it was like a movie, and would start all over again. I went

SEGAL: off the track there about Hallie Flanagan, but that's an additional . . .

SPORN: No, that's very interesting because another thing I want to know about is this--the Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan and others, as well, were very interested in creating a new audience for the theatre, such as the ones you've mentioned--people who had never been exposed to the theatre very much. They were very interested in reaching working men and other people of that sort. So that was one thing that the administrative staff, at least down in Washington, had very much in mind in the Federal Theatre Project. In conjunction with that, they did audience surveys. At each play, they asked each particular local group to do an audience survey and then send them the reports to the national office. Do you remember anything of that sort? Were surveys of the audience taken? Were questionnaires handed out for the audience to fill out?

SEGAL: I really don't recall that.

SPORN: You don't.

SEGAL: No.

SPORN: Alright. Now, you say you went to the unions to solicit . . .

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SPORN: You went to the unions to solicit audiences for support of the Federal Theatre Project. What unions did you go to? Do you remember?

SEGAL: Well, I went to several auto locals.

SPORN: The auto.

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: Did you, sort of, go to some leaders of the auto union and tell them you would like to appear before the local union and push the Federal Theatre Project?

SEGAL: I don't recall exactly how it came about. I did know Walter Reuther because his wife, who was killed with him in the plane accident, was connected with the Rebel Arts Dance Group in Detroit. It was one of the groups we were in contact with at that time. So, through her, I got to speak to Walter Reuther, who was very interested. Then, there was a man by the name of Lloyd something--the President of one of the locals who was very sympathetic to the idea and I spoke before his local.

SPORN: Before I forget, you said you were in a competition where you had done a dance and you called that the . . . ?

SEGAL: A Spartakiade.

SPORN: Would you spell it? I want to be sure I have the right spelling.

SEGAL: S-P-A-R-T-A-K-I-A-D-E, I think.

SPORN: S-P-A-R-T-A-K-I-A-D-E, and that was the Spartakiade what?

SEGAL: That's what it was called, Spartakiade, a theatre festival and competition.

SPORN: Just Spartakiade?

SEGAL: Spartakiade. I think it comes from the German.

SPORN: I know what it comes from. It wasn't something like the Spartakiade Theatre League or anything of that sort? It was just Spartakiade.

SEGAL: I think it was the Workers' Theatre League. The Spartakiade of the Workers' Theatre League.

SPORN: The Spartakiade of the Workers' Theatre League.

SEGAL: I probably have a program here somewhere.

SPORN: Okay. So you don't remember that you had any contact with any of the union leaders that helped you to . . .

SEGAL: Well, I said I may have . . .

SPORN: Yes, but you don't remember the names if you did.

SEGAL: Well, I mentioned Walter Reuther and Lloyd something.

SPORN: I just wondered if there were any particular people there who were more cooperative than others, so that in documenting the history of it, we could say that certain people were much more open-minded to the theatre than other people. If you don't recall, you don't recall.

SEGAL: Just Reuther and Lloyd.

SPORN: Okay. Now, you said that you came to Detroit to work with the New Dance Group. This is who?

SEGAL: Like the New Dance Group in New York, it was a modern dance group that did anti-war themes and peace themes, and dances with social content.

SPORN: You came here to help them.

SEGAL: To work with them. We did an anti-lynch dance that I directed called "Southern Holiday," but that's a whole other thing.

SPORN: Well, it's background material though. They were the local people in Detroit interested in the dance. They paid you five dollars a week to help them develop this dance group.

SEGAL: No. The New Dance Group was developed. I got the other dance groups together--the Ann Arbor Dance Group, from the college; the Wayne University Dance Group; the Rebel Arts, which was a socialist group Walter Reuther's wife was connected with. I have a program here that we put on at the Museum of Modern Art, and I think John Martin came to speak,

SEGAL: he was the dance critic of The New York Times, at the time.

SPORN: Well, we'll go through your documents at the end. I'll go through and tell you what kinds of documents I could use for duplicating and so on, and so forth. When the New Dance Group no longer had five dollars a week that they could pay you, you wanted to get on the Federal Theatre Project and you said because you wanted to stay in Detroit. Why did you want to stay in Detroit?

SEGAL: Well, I met the man there that I married subsequently. That was the reason.

SPORN: It's a good reason.

SEGAL: Yes. (Laughter). Those few years became three of the most important years in my life. Although there have been other very important years, they continue to be very important up to this moment because I got away from New York where the cultural activity was not connected, it didn't have roots like it turned out to have in Detroit. I was able to go to speak before these locals and get them to come to the theatre which was doing plays that were part of their lives. Not only did I speak, but I acted, and danced, and choreographed in those plays, so that my theatrical life began to have real roots.

SPORN: So you wanted your professional work, which was the theatre--as dance, as actress, as choreographe--to play some part in your political life as well.

SEGAL: Yes. It was a perfect combination. It was very satisfying. It wasn't just political, it was artistic expression and it was a social consciousness. Don't forget it was at the time when the UAW was changing the face of Detroit. When I came there, it was an open shop town, and by the time I left, it was a union town. Every day when I awoke, I read the papers and looked at the list of shops that were on strike, or sitting in. It was going to the picket lines and participating in them. One picket line that I'll never forget was on a very stormy morning after a snowfall, and the streets were all icy. The picket line was there at seven o'clock in the morning in front of GM, I believe. The picket line was in front of their administration building and the point was to prevent office workers from going into the building because the shop itself was closed down. So a picket line formed--I don't know the size of it exactly, maybe it was seventy-five feet in length, but it was an oval. It wasn't just marching around back and forth, but

SEGAL: because of the frost--it was way below zero--we stood with our legs apart and each one had their arms around the person in front of them. It was a solid, human flank.

SPORN: A chain.

SEGAL: Well, a chain is a link, but this wasn't linked. We were part of each other, you know. There was no separation and we moved, instead of walking forward with each foot, we moved from side to side as we moved forward. We were physically connected with each other. It was like a dance in a way. It was solid. So, we kept warm and we made the line impenetrable. I remember, right near us there were several big vans, police vans, you know, those big ones that carry horses, and ambulances. But nothing happened to make those things necessary. I'll never forget that picket line on the ice. There were many other picket lines. We went to Flint. Those were very exciting days. I drove out with someone to the Ford Plant at River Rouge when they were trying to organize it. Ford said they'd never organize his plant. It was after the other shops were organized. We went out there this one day and it was during the change of shifts. As you may know, there is a high fence around the plant and over the fence, at one point, are flights of steps. When one shift was going in, another shift was going out. Above, there was a plane that the UAW had rented and a loud speaker on the plane. It was flying very low over this change of shifts, and the voice was saying, "Ford workers, join the UAW. Ford workers, join the UAW." It was a new kind of thing. The plane flying over head and the shifts going in and out. That was the day that Frankenstein was beat up.

SPORN: On the overpass? At Gate 4.

SEGAL: At another part, on Miller Road, I think it was, that he was beat up.

SPORN: Oh.

SEGAL: Later, we went to his local. I'm pretty sure that was the day. We went to the local, we saw Frankenstein with the bloody shirt, they sure beat him up. I mean, these were all powerful experiences, you know, that gave deep meaning to a play like Let Freedom Ring, which had to do with the struggle of workers in the South who were trying to organize a union. I had the part of one of their representative.

SPORN: One of the union representatives.

SEGAL: Yes, one of the union representatives in the play. It was all for real, as we say. By the way, I don't know if you knew that Frankenstein, who

SEGAL: was beat up that day, was stooled on by his very close friend, who was his next door neighbor. Yes, the guy turned out to be a stool pigeon. I don't know if you know that. Well. . . .

SPORN: Who was it?

SEGAL: I forget his name. You know, the tendency is to forget the names of people you don't like. (Laughs). But that name is in the record.

SPORN: Those may be the names we don't want to forget. (Laughter). It would be dangerous to forget the names of the people you don't like.

SEGAL: Then, there were the Woolworth girls who struck. I wrote a little play. It was never performed, but I wrote it. It was called A Million Dollar Baby . . . Let's see, I have it somewhere. I was about the strikers and the young woman who inherited the Woolworth millions, who was she?

SPORN: Oh, Barbara Hutton.

SEGAL: Barbara Hutton, yes. I forget the name of the play, but A Million Dollar Baby something, which I wrote with the help of the girls who were on a sit down strike. I remember going there one night.

SPORN: Do you have a manuscript of that?

SEGAL: Yes, I do.

SPORN: Well, tell me more about that. With the help of the young women who were on strike. In what way did they help you?

SEGAL: Well, I mean, I talked to them. I got it right from them, you see, because I was never a Woolworth saleslady. I mean, do you wonder that every day there was a new experience.

SPORN: You wrote this play, what did you hope to do with the play?

SEGAL: Well, I don't know. I just wrote it because I had to write it. I write things when I have to write them.

SPORN: You feel compelled to. But afterward, did you think maybe the Federal Theatre Project would put it on?

SEGAL: No, I really didn't think that.

SPORN: Did you think the Contemporary Theatre would put it on?

SEGAL: I didn't think anything. I really didn't. I don't know. It's a good question, but I didn't.

SPORN: Arthur Clifford. He also seemed to be interested in writing topical plays and wrote a few musical plays. One was about the Black Legion. You mentioned the Black Legion earlier. And, one about the elections in 1937 or 1938, I can't remember which. There was a coalition of labor people and other progressive minded people who ran a slate of candidates

SPORN: for office and, apparently, a lot of the progressive people thought that it had a very good chance of getting this labor, liberal, progressive coalition group elected. He wrote a little musical play about that. Do you remember Arthur Clifford? I know I asked you this in the first interview, but I'm very interested in locating more information about him because he's a very intriguing man. A very talented man.

SEGAL: I only remember a few lines of a song that he wrote, it was a parody of one of the popular songs. He wrote (sings), "She's a lady in red, a little bit crazy in the back of her head." That was an ironic statement. Arthur Clifford, of course, he was a remarkable man because outside of his head, which was normal size, and his hands, which were tremendous, the rest of his body was completely deformed. He was like a puppet, but he had a car that he could drive and he drove, this man with the big hands and big head. He married a lovely, very pretty young woman who dedicated her life to him. I don't know what happened to Arthur.

SPORN: Do you know her name?

SEGAL: No. I'm sure that Hy would remember.

SPORN: I draw a blank on it all the time. Everyone tells me the same story about this beautiful young girl who dedicated her life to him and I draw a blank on the name. I can follow his trail up to a point and then it ends and that's it. If I could recover the manuscripts of those plays, it would be marvelous.

SEGAL: Well, I will suggest later some names that you might contact.

SPORN: Do it now.

SEGAL: Well, there's Charlotte Shapiro.

SPORN: I spoke to her.

SEGAL: There is Eleanor Maki, who lives in the Midwest, whose address I have.

SPORN: She lives in Arizona, I think.

TAPE STOPPED AND RESTARTED.

SPORN: I want to come back and ask you another kind of question. Okay, so, you wanted to stay there because this was an exciting period of time and you wanted to somehow or other bring your work in the arts integrated with your political activities and your political beliefs. From what you tell me, this competition you were in, "Black and White," it seemed to be that it was a way of incorporating political beliefs into your art work.

SEGAL: Oh, I did, but the point was to connect it with the organized rank and file people. The working people.

SPORN: In other words, with working class people.

SEGAL: I mean, we performed before worker audiences all the time.

SPORN: Even in New York?

SEGAL: Even in New York.

KAMEN: I'm thinking of that interview, that news report, by one of the establishment critics, who saw some of the dance performance that you were in.

SEGAL: I know what you mean.

KAMEN: Do you know what I'm talking about.

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: "Black and White," is it in terms of . . .

KAMEN: This was a glowing thing coming from a source that surprised me.

SEGAL: There were several, I think. "Black and White" was done at a great many places including a place called the Bronx Coliseum, which was the next in size to Madison Square Garden.

SPORN: I remember it very well.

SEGAL: Angelo Herndon, who was quite a figure, I don't know whether that name means anything to you.

SPORN: It certainly does.

SEGAL: He made a comment about that dance that was printed in the, then New Theatre magazine, which I have somewhere, about the importance of that dance. Then, before that even, I think, in one of the old newspapers in New York, in the dance column, Lucille Marsh, the dance critic, wrote--I have that somewhere, too--about a performance that we gave at Madison Square Garden by a group of amateur dancers that I got together. She started, I think, by saying, "If anyone doubts that the dance is a living art today, let them drop in at Madison Square Garden and see these men and women . . ." I don't want to spoil the quote and I'll show it to you.

SPORN: Well, give the gist of it anyway.

SEGAL: Well, she said something about, "their movements were primitive, but powerful." In other words, she was moved by this thing, you see. We had several performances at the old Garden. I collected people and had as a nucleus, a group that I myself . . .

SPORN: But, now, when you say "primitive" and "powerful," it would refer, of course, to the techniques employed by . . .

SEGAL: Modern dance techniques.

SPORN: Yes, but also, the content was political.

SEGAL: Oh, yes.

SPORN: So, "primitive" and "powerful" could also refer to political content or a combination of the two.

KAMEN: I would say about Edith's work, the hallmark of it, and I'm thinking of her poetry in this connection, also, is that it's amazing at how much emotion can be carried through her utilization of very simple means.

You wouldn't believe that it's all hidden in the simple means that she employs, but the net effect is one of great power and emotion stirring. Incidentally, in that connection, Ben Levine makes reference to that.

SEGAL: Well, that had to do with my poetry, it had nothing to do with Detroit.

SPORN: Okay. So, then, it wasn't so much that you would be able to integrate a kind of political content with the techniques of the dance and theatre, but Detroit represented a way of bringing this into contact with working class people, more so than you could do in New York City.

SEGAL: Yes, and Detroit was blossoming at the time. People getting to know each other and organizing. Another great incident I remember was FDR, President Roosevelt, coming to Detroit. All the unions participated in a powerful parade. That day I was up in the office of Maurice Sugar, UAW attorney, and his office was high up on Cadillac Square so we could look out the window and see this wonderful demonstration. Also, there was . . .

SPORN: On labor day?

SEGAL: No. It was a parade for FDR when he came to Detroit. I'm pretty sure that was the occasion. In addition to Maurice and myself, there was a man in his office from the then, LaFollette Committee that was investigating the use of stool pigeons in the shops. We looked out the window as we were watching the parade. There were thousands and thousands of men and women--the Women's Auxiliaries--with banners of their various locals. It was a new kind of thing, this social consciousness among the workers. By the way, Maurice Sugar had written some beautiful songs. He always had a little notebook in his pocket. He wrote the famous song, "Soup." Do you remember that song?

SPORN: All of that's available in Detroit. His songs and so on. In fact, I think someone is going to publish an anthology of his songs and of other things that he wrote.

SEGAL: I'll tell you this, when we were in the Soviet Union in 1965, we visited a school where they teach English as a second language. Before we were officially introduced, the teacher had the pupils in this high school sing a song in English. And, what do you think it was? It was the

SEGAL: "Soup Song" that Maurice had written. I asked him whether they knew who wrote the song and they didn't. I told them about it. Then, they recited one of my poems. When I got back, I wrote to Maurice Sugar and I told him that they sang his song and recited my poems. He wrote back and said, jokingly, "It just shows what good taste they had." (Laughter).

TAPE STOPPED AND RESTARTED.

SPORN: In a certain way, you're touching upon the relationship between the theatre and the working class, particularly the organized working clsss in the auto industry.

SEGAL: Not only that, but when we did Cradle Song, a beautiful play by the Spanish author, Martinez-Sierra, about an infant left at the door of a convent, and her growing up problems. We had an afternoon audience of all nuns. That was interesting, too, because nuns don't ususally go to living theatre. I don't even know if they go to movies. But here we were able to reach a couple of hundred nuns who came to our theatre.

SPORN: Now, when the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit began, it put on a whole number of plays. I Confess, I mentioned that before, the one by William Beyer, which is a sort of comedy. It has some social content to it, but it was a comedy. It put on some other things like Road to Rome by Robert Sherwood, which I read, by the way. It seemed to me it had some political message, too, particularly around the . . . It was a sort of anti-war, pro-peace play and also a play about the relationship of, the status of women within the Roman period, which could now be interpreted as a comment about the status of women in general. And they did other plays as well. Hallie Flanagan came to Detroit to see how things were going and she was a little unhappy. First, some of it was unhappiness with the way the bureaucratic things were developing because they weren't going as efficiently as they should have, but she was also unhappy over the kind of plays that were put on. She felt that, somehow or other, Detroit is such a dynamic place and so many dramatic things are going on there and I'm sure she had in mind the strife between working men and industrialists and so on, and so forth. She felt that, somehow or other, the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit should be able to reflect that dramatic, dynamic situation in the city of Detroit. Not necessarily, by showing plays that dealt with it, but, at least, by doing some kinds of plays that dealt with larger themes, more dramatic themes, dealing with more contemporary issues. She made that criticism in various

SPORN: reports and letters. In other words, there was some dissatisfaction, somehow the plays that were being done were just, sort of, rather light, trivial plays and that, somehow or other, Detroit was a place where much more could be done--many more exciting, creative, new things that were also related to the lives of ordinary people. She kept pressing for them. You, as a member of this Federal Theatre Project, with your views about how art ought to relate to working people, did you see? Do you know anything about that or did you have any notions about what you wanted that Federal Theatre Project to be like?

SEGAL: I wasn't in Detroit when Hallie Flanagan came there, that's number one. Secondly, I had nothing to do with the choice of plays. When the Project was, well, when John Matthews brought charges against the Project--that's a whole story in itself--but, he peddled his charges from the State Legislature, which rejected them, down to the City Council, which gave him a hearing. His main point was that we did plays like Let Freedom Ring--there were really just two--there was Let Freedom Ring and One-Third of a Nation, but he cited mostly Let Freedom Ring, in which he, himself, had a part as a union representative. He claimed that I was really the person who directed the Project and that my Regional Director was my "Charlie McCarthy."

SPORN: Meaning?

SEGAL: He said that I was the boss of the Project, which was ridiculous. I simply took advantage of the fact that there was such plays as Let Freedom Ring. When that was chosen, I told you what happened, I tried to get as big an audience for that as possible. In fact, the Regional Director, who was a speaker at the City Council hearings, pointed out that I saved the Project by getting these benefit performances from the organizations.

SPORN: So, in other words, you didn't engage in any attempt within to get them to do plays that would be . . .

SEGAL: I had no power and it wasn't my job.

SPORN: But when a play that you thought was important came along, you then tried to push it among union people, as much as possible.

SEGAL: Well, like Let Freedom Ring, it was a natural, and One-Third of a Nation, too. After all, I came from the lower East Side of New York, you know. We didn't exactly live in a slum house. It was one of the so-called better houses. But we didn't have a bathtub. We bathed in the washtubs

SEGAL: until they put a bathtub in, you know. It was all very familiar, so that, sure, I was for doing such a play. The way we produced it was different from the way they did it in New York because ours was all stylized. I had organized movement in it. It was choreographed. Just this past year, by the way, an off-off Broadway theatre group did One-Third of a Nation in New York which, of course, we went to see and they didn't have any of the treatment that I'd given it through movement, although the director was very much interested when I spoke to him afterward. But I welcomed such plays, naturally. And I loved the other things, too. I loved Dr. Faustus. I got audiences for that, too. I remember the man who subsequently became the Director of the Detroit Symphony, I forget his name, for a moment. We went together to look for music that would be appropriate as inter-scenic, and not only inter-scenic, but for certain scenes in Dr. Faustus. For the Helen of Troy scene, for the Devil-Wife Dance that I did, we chose the "Firebird Suite" by Stravinsky. We picked out sections of that, that fitted beautifully . . .

END OF TAPE. SIDE A.

BEGINNING OF TAPE. SIDE B.

SPORN: One more question along those lines. When the Project was about to be shut down in 1939, you were still with the Project, with Merry Wives of Windsor. What forms of protest were organized and so on?

SEGAL: Well, there was no separate action in Detroit, but we participated in the march to Washington to save the Project.

SPORN: Well, now, of course, maybe. I don't know, but, you know, saving the Project, there were many times when efforts to save the Project were organized because every year when a new appropriation bill would come up, there were attempts to trim the budget or to kill the Project and so on, you see. So, periodically there would be organized efforts to save the Project. In New York, a good deal of that was done by the Workers' Alliance and so on. In Detroit, it was done by the various people on the Project and others as well. Then there was this, in June of 1939, they killed the Project altogether. There were hearings, a great deal of red-baiting in Washington and so on, and so forth. Finally, they said, "No more appropriations for the Federal Theatre Project." There were some protests that came from here. There was a letter writing campaign that was organized from here. Now, I don't know if you remember any of that and maybe you had little to do with that.

SEGAL: You know, the Project was still on when I left Detroit. When I mentioned the march to Washington, it was when we were doing Dr. Faustus out on Belle Isle.

SPORN: See--that would be earlier and that would be one of those times when the appropriation was being cut.

SEGAL: There was a tremendous campaign, a march of automobiles that went to Washington and we had a whole incident connected with that.

KAMEN: Matthews?

SPORN: You told me something about this the last interview, I remember.

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORNL So I have a lot of that already.

SEGAL: Right. So that, I don't think that . . . No, if it was Dr. Faustus we were doing, then it wasn't when the Project was closing.

SPORN: If you were doing Merry Wives of Windsor and Dr. Faustus would have been done a year or year and a half earlier. According to my records, you were right up there to the very end, which would be June 1939.

SEGAL: Well, I don't think so.

SPORN: Okay. Now, you read that document . . . Oh, on the living newspaper. Here's some information I have on that. Apparently there was some talk here about doing a living newspaper and Louie Nims, who was the State Administrator of WPA . . .

SEGAL: In Detroit?

SPORN: For the whole State of Michigan. He was in Lansing, actually. Apparently, he had requested of Hallie Flanagan, of the Federal Theatre Project, that a living newspaper be done on the auto industry and Ellen S. Woodward, who was the Assistant Administrator down in Washington, wrote to Mr. Nims the following: "Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project, has informed me that it is not possible to lend a playwright to Detroit to assist the Federal Theatre Project's writers in compiling manuscripts for a living newspaper as requested by you in December. The National Service Bureau of New York City Theatre Project has attempted to locate a suitable person, but as no one was available, it was arranged that the research work for the living newspaper should be done by Detroit personnel and forwarded to the Play Division in New York City for dramatization." The letter is dated February 24, 1938. So, you see, there was some talk about doing that and talk that, somehow or other, the Detroit personnel, Federal Theatre Project people, should be used for that.

SPORN: Later on, on March 11--even earlier. March 11, 1937, not later on. There's a telegram to Hallie Flanagan by E.E. McCleish. "Friar--that's Kimon Friar--at Detroit arranging to produce quote Injunction Granted unquote says he is adding scenes from recent General Motors strike as finale stop feel you should carefully review new scenes to maintain factual status and avoid some very delicate Michigan personalities stop I feel that if General Motors is included steel corporations revolutionary decision should be included to give a new point to labor's long fight stop Muntz will report to you on Fechner's cooperation." It doesn't mean anything to you? Okay. But, you see, there was obviously something going on.

SEGAL: I know nothing about it.

SPORN: Okay, I've uncovered some information. Morris Watson. Does that name mean anything to you?

SEGAL: Didn't he write the first living newspaper? One-Third of a Nation.

SPORN: Well, he was involved with the living newspaper, yes. Now, he came to Detroit, he gave a lecture. When he was in Detroit, he was swamped with a whole bunch of requests, according to one source of information, from workers who were in the audience to do a living newspaper on the struggle between labor and . . .

SEGAL: I don't think he came there when I was there.

SPORN: This would be February 1937.

SEGAL: Well, I still don't recall. I believe I came to Detroit in the fall of 1937.

SPORN: What they wanted him to do was present the working class side, the labor side of the struggle. He was there in February 1937. So, he did, but not as part of the Federal Theatre Project, although he was a member of the Federal Theatre Project. He did it on his own, got it out very quickly, with a great deal of improvisation and much success. The interesting thing about it is that before it was scheduled to open, the strike was settled. This is about the Flint sit-down strikes. It was settled. So they put it on as a celebration, a victory celebration for the settling of the strike and that was the only performance. No further performances were given. The name of it is called Sit-Down.

SEGAL: I have no memory of it at all.

SPORN: Nothing at all? Some of this information, by the way, is reported in The Daily Worker of February 20, 1937.

SEGAL: It had that report?

SPORN: It had a report on this. Okay. You don't know anything about it, so what can we say? Now, is there anything more you want to add about the Matthews case? But this happened in July 3, 1938. This letter I showed to you and you also seemed to find a file there with all the newspaper clippings and so on, and so forth. Would there be anything else that you . . . ?

SEGAL: Well, I told you . . . Didn't I tell you all there was to tell on John Matthews?

SPORN: Yes, I guess so. I just wanted to know if there was anything else that you wanted to say about it.

SEGAL: You know he died a year or two ago.

SPORN: Who? Matthews?

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: Where was he? Detroit?

SEGAL: Yes. I think it was Hy fireman . . . It must have been Hy, who sent me a clipping about it.

SPORN: It's quite possible.

KAMEN: You know who he was the brother of, don't you?

SPORN: H.P. Matthews?

KAMEN: J.P. Matthews, the guy who ended up as special advisor-investigator for the Dies Committee.

SPORN: Yes, that was Matthews, but there was another Matthews, it seems to me, in the forties or early fifties . . .

SEGAL: That's the one, his brother.

SPORN: In New York City.

SEGAL: Yes. Consumers. He was with the Consumers Union.

SPORN: Who sold more Daily Workers than anybody else did and it was subsequently found out that he was . . .

SEGAL: I don't know if he ever sold Daily Workers.

SPORN: Well, the Matthews that I'm thinking of did.

SEGAL: Oh, by the way, this is wrong here, if I recall, that he sold Daily Workers.

SPORN: That's what . . . Who is it that wrote this report? Ashton?

SEGAL: Yes.

SPORN: That's what he said.

SEGAL: Matthews was the first guy to buy The Daily Worker from me. He was a

SEGAL: good friend of Maurice Sugar, the attorney for the UAW. Matthews was the, what is it called? Gentleman and scholar of the Project. So called.

SPORN: What do you think accounts for this red-baiting in the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit?

SEGAL: Well, it's like it was anywhere else. I mean, if we did plays like Let Freedom Ring, that was really what got them. It was a prelude to the MacCarthy period. That's really what it was. Anything that threatened the open shop there was going to be attacked. I mean, you had the Black Legion there. So it wasn't surprising that they cut to the theatre because the theatre has to do with emotions, the dramatization of peoples' lives and they didn't want that. They wanted escapist stuff.

SPORN: The names Arthur Ambrose, Matilda Schnittman, Robert Freeman, Irwin Klaus--these are people who were in the Federal Theatre Project in New York. They had what was called a Living Newspaper Bureau and they were collecting material and information. These four people did reports on auto labor conditions as kind of preliminary work for a living newspaper. (Pause). Now, there was a conflict, also, with Mr. Larned, who was one of the heads of the WPA here. There seemed to have been a running conflict between those who were heading up the WPA as WPA and those who were administering that special part of WPA, which were the art projects. Now, Larned once made certain demands on Hallie Flanagan. Apparently one of them was he wanted no loan personnnel. There were people brought in from other places, particularly New York, but other places, as well, to supplement the group for the purpose of improving its professional quality. Well, that got Larned upset because he wanted only local people. On the other hand, he was very upset because he felt that the group was largely a "ham" group. So he said, "We don't want any loan personnel, we don't want any ham acting," and, on the other hand, he said he didn't want any social plays.

SEGAL: He what?

SPORN: He didn't want any social plays. Those were three things that he wrote to Hallie Flanagan. These are the demands he makes for his continuous support of the Project. She wrote back saying that, first, the loan personnel were brought in, in order to prevent the second from happening, that is, ham acting. And then, third, she said there were only two social plays that really had been done. One-Third of a Nation and Let Freedom Ring. Other than that, there really weren't any social plays

SPORN: done. Do you remember anything about that conflict?

SEGAL: I know nothing about it.

SPORN: Okay. How about David Lano? Do you remember him? He was the head of the puppet part of it.

SEGAL: I don't know anything about him. I don't remember that name.

SPORN: He sent a letter to Senator Prentice Brown, in which he mentioned Detroit Federal Theatre Project, of which he was a part, very critically, particularly Edith Segal, "a paid propagandist who also"--and I'm quoting--"who also draws a salary from the government as an actress." And he identified you with the Workers' Alliance and then with the UAW and he said in quotation marks, "radical section."

SEGAL: The Puppet Theatre?

SPORN: He was a puppeteer. David Lano comes from an old family . . .

SEGAL: First of all, I don't remember any . . . We didn't have any Puppet Theatre in Detroit.

SPORN: Oh, yes.

SEGAL: I don't remember.

SPORN: Sure. Oh, yes. They did.

SEGAL: A Puppet Theatre?

KAMEN: Mostly for children?

SPORN: Yes, mostly for children.

SEGAL: Not to my . . .

SPORN: Oh, the records prove it. The documents prove it.

SEGAL: What does he say? I was a "paid propagandist."

SPORN: This is what he complained. That you were a "paid propagandist." That you were an organizer for the Workers' Alliance and also for the UAW, its "radical section."

SEGAL: (Laughs).

KAMEN: This was in a letter he wrote to a senator?

SPORN: He wrote this as a letter to . . . See, he, at that point, the Puppet Theatre had lasted for about a year, a year and a half. Again, . . .

SEGAL: When was that? What time? What year?

SPORN: This would be 1937, 1938. And then, you see, one of the things they cut back on when they . . .

SEGAL: How come I don't remember anything about it?

SPORN: Well, that's why I'm asking.

SEGAL: Maybe it was the year before.

SPORN: It may not have been made public, that's the point.

SEGAL: No, I mean about a Puppet Theatre.

SPORN: Oh, but there was a Puppet Theatre. There was a Puppet Theatre, no question about it. David is, he's now dead, of course, and he was no young man at that time. I would estimate, from what I could tell, even then, he was forty-five to fifty years of age. He comes from a family where, for about three generations, they had been puppeteers and going all the way back to Italy. They came and lived in Flint. They made their own puppets, they put on their own . . . They were professionals and he was one of those. He was one of the sons who went into that, but for a while there was no way to make a living out of it and, at that point, he became a member of . . . He went to work in the auto industry and he became a member of the UAW-AF of L, before it broke away, and he was on the staff there. Then when the Federal Theatre Project came into existence, he was brought onto the staff to do the puppet. They did about four or five puppet shows for children.

SEGAL: I have absolutely no recollection of a Puppet Theatre. I have no recollection of it.

SPORN: But then they cut him out because . . .

SEGAL: Maybe it was before I came.

SPORN: He mentions your name. It was not before you came.

SEGAL: That's crazy. I mean what he says about me is ridiculous.

SPORN: Well, that's beside the point, but he was . . . Now, at the same time . . . From what I gather, a couple of letters that I have read from him, he was obviously one of these, kind of, cantankerous persons who felt that there were people out there to attack him. Not necessarily for political reasons or anything, he was just one of these that, generally speaking . . .

SEGAL: "Paid propagandist." (Laughs).

SPORN: So, this sounds like, not so much as if you were part of some political attack, you know. It was just something . . . It became a handy device for him to counter what he felt was some personal attack against him. In other words, he was blaming you for his troubles with the Project, you see.

SEGAL: (Laughs).

SPORN: Apparently Peggy Fenn became involved in this. Not with Lano, with Matthews. At least, Ashton says so.

SEGAL: I told you. Peggy Fenn, you see, at this hearing, it all came about . . .

SEGAL: I don't know if I told you this in the first conversation . . .

SPORN: You may well have.

SEGAL: There was this march to Washington organized, I don't know if it was just from the Mideast, Midwest to the East, I don't know, but we raised money to send someone on this march and we got business people, people we knew and we raised the needed amount to send this person to Washington and the person who was elected to go was John Matthews. He had a little car. We were all very happy about this because we felt like a group. We sent him and he went off. He took his wife, I think, and some other woman was put in his car who was going from one of the other Projects. We were playing Dr. Faustus at Belle Isle and he was on his way, we thought, but he came back the first evening. It seems he cut out and he returned and he showed up at Belle Isle while we were playing Dr. Faustus and we said, "What gives?" He said he turned back because he didn't want to go in the line of march, he wanted the money given to him to gas up separately, he'd get there on his own. Hy Fireman and I, who knew Johnny quite well, we went to his house that night and we stayed up for hours trying to convince him to rejoin the march. I mean, here it was, he was elected delegate, the most advanced action the group ever took and, I remember, he was feeding these rabbits from his magic show, feeding them paper, and we couldn't convince him to go back. It was at that point that he broke with the Project, you see. Well, he didn't break, he was fired because he didn't show up at rehearsals--he never returned to the march, by the way--he didn't want to accept certain parts and so he was eventually fired. When he was fired, he got up this pile of charges that I told you about. Well, that was the beginning of a split in the Project. People who were on his side, there were very few, but there was Peggy Fenn and Nastfogel, and a couple of the other people. When we had this hearing at the city hall, that was the division, as you see by the newspaper clipping that I showed you.

SPORN: Well, why do you think Peggy Fenn and Nastfogel got involved in that?

SEGAL: I don't know, why does anybody get involved in anything? By the way, subsequently, I saw Peggy Fenn many years later in New York. She was very friendly, very nice. She was at some progressive meeting. I don't remember. But people . . .

SPORN: Is she still around? Is she still alive?

SEGAL: I don't know, you might look her up in the phone book.

SPORN: Why was she in New York? Did she live in New York?

SEGAL: She had moved to New York, I guess, but . . .

SPORN: How many years ago would you say you saw her?

SEGAL: Oh, I don't know. Twenty-five years ago, maybe.

SPORN: How many?

SEGAL: Well, I came from Detroit in 1939, so that . . .

SPORN: Did you say twenty-five years ago?

SEGAL: Probably.

SPORN: In New York?

SEGAL: I think so.

SPORN: And she was going by what name? Peggy Fenn?

SEGAL: As far as I know. She didn't say it was any different.

SPORN: I'd like to be able to locate her and interview her.

SEGAL: Well, she had a big background in Detroit. She was one of our stars, you know. Previously she was with some theatre there that started with a "B." A famous theatre in Detroit.

SPORN: The Bonstelle.

SEGAL: That's right. She was with that group. But, why did they side with Matthews? Why did Johnny Matthews come back? Who knows? That's how some people are.

SPORN: Well, some people are paid agents and some people are this, and some people are that, you know.

SEGAL: Well, you never could tell.

SPORN: It didn't strike me that she had . . . That those were the motivations--purely political motivations.

SEGAL: Could be.

SPORN: It seemed to me that there may be . . . I don't know, I'm just asking because there could have been other reasons. Jealousies, unhappiness about the way the Project was going because there was some conflict between an approach toward the Federal Theatre Project where the concentration would be on certain few stars, and an approach where it would try to train the whole group and bring up the level of all the people. This difference in approach is just from a theatrical point of view. She seemed to be more of a primadonna kind, I may be perfectly wrong about that, I don't know, because I can only tell . . .

SEGAL: It's hard to tell.

SPORN: I read material. I try to . . . They strike me a certain way, but

SPORN: whether my impression is really an accurate reflection of anything, I don't know.

SEGAL: I won't go into that question.

SPORN: Okay. Alright, I think we've covered all the different kinds of things.

SEGAL: Okay.

END OF TAPE. SIDE B.