

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
RUTH WHITWORTH
OF THE
FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

INTERVIEWED BY
PAUL SPORN
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LAKE ORION, MICHIGAN

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Oral history of Ruth Whitworth of the Michigan Federal Theatre Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, on November 19, 1979, in Lake Orion.

SPORN: Miss Whitworth, could you tell me how you got involved in the theatre in the first place?

WHITWORTH: In theatre itself -- in general?

SPORN: Yes, in theatre in general.

WHITWORTH: When I was sixteen years old, I went out on the road; a lady -- an actress took me out. She came into the little town where I lived, in Hudson Falls, New York. She came with some little company that became broke, and my mother took her in and helped her along, until she could get another job. Then, she went out on the road, and she sent back for me, and started me in little companies around the country, and that's how I started. In fact, I had my seventeenth birthday on the road, and I have been in theatre ever since, in one form or another. Never anything very big, but . . .

SPORN: Were those sort of road companies?

WHITWORTH: Yes, and stock. I married a theatre man who produced companies for the old Chautauquas,

SPORN: In New York state?

WHITWORTH: All over the country, the Chautauqua companies, and also Lyceum . . . Those were mostly for colleges on their extension work. Do you know what a Chautauqua Company was at that time?

SPORN: Yes, I do.

WHITWORTH: They were very good for that period of time when there was very little entertainment around the country.

SPORN: You're speaking of what years now?

WHITWORTH: Oh, don't ask me years, I have no idea. (LAUGHS)

SPORN: Well, in the twenties, in the thirties?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: The end of the twenties, the beginning of the thirties?

WHITWORTH: Somewhere in there. Because dates . . . I'll tell you, don't insist on dates, I don't live in the past, I never have lived in the past. I don't live in the future, I live in the present,

SPORN: That's great.

WHITWORTH: Hoping for the future, but . . . I never go back into the past, that's why I'm so, kind of static on . . .

SPORN: Well, at any rate, you do remember that you toured the Chautauqua companies?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: You wound up at the University of Wisconsin theatre.

WHITWORTH: On one of their extension courses. How did you know about that?

SPORN: My research uncovered some material. I also know that you were in one of the theatre groups in Battle Creek, Michigan for a while.

WHITWORTH: Yes, well, that was with my husband's stock.

SPORN: Oh, that was his. He was the director of it?

WHITWORTH: Well, he was the owner of it.

SPORN: I see.

WHITWORTH: You see, he'd take out a tent theatre . . . I'll show you my son's thesis that he wrote on tent theatres, for his doctorate Ph.D. at U.C.L.A. You'll have time to see it afterward, to just look it through. I have it right here, I think.

SPORN: On tent theatre?

WHITWORTH: Yes, well, on old theatre in general. He is a "bug" on that.

SPORN: So, you say, this was done in a tent?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: And, where did you tour? You toured around the general area of Battle Creek? How far afield?

WHITWORTH: Oh, all over Michigan.

SPORN: Did you hit Detroit, for example?

WHITWORTH: Somewhere in Detroit, I don't recall now just where.

SPORN: Did you go as far as the Upper Peninsula?

WHITWORTH: I don't believe quite that far north.

SPORN: Lansing?

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes. Well, his home was in Vermontville, which is right close to Lansing and Charlotte, and that section in there.

SPORN: But, the theatre itself; the group sort of located in Battle Creek? Was that the home base, or not?

WHITWORTH: Well, really the home base was Vermontville. You see, his home was there and his mother lived there, and he worked out of Vermontville. Really, that was what you'd call home base. When the season was over, back we'd go to Vermontville.

SPORN: How long a season would you say?

WHITWORTH: Well, the summer season would be from May until August. As long as it was nice. And then, of course, he always had his winter work and

WHITWORTH: the Lyceum work. He really specialized more in the Chautauqua and Lyceum, . And his own company that he had in tent,

SPORN: So, the Lyceum was something you did during the winter time?

WHITWORTH: Yes. We worked for the University of Wisconsin, and we worked for the University of Minnesota, and then we worked for a Chautauqua company out of Bloomington, Illinois.

SPORN: Who determined what plays would be put on?

WHITWORTH: Oh, he did. And he wrote a lot of them.

SPORN: He? His own plays?

WHITWORTH: A lot of his own. A lot of them.

SPORN: So, he did original plays, his plays, or others as well?

WHITWORTH: For Chautauqua, he used to do one of his that he'd write for it, and he was a very good writer. Then, he sold the show to them, you see.

SPORN: When you say "sold the shows", the company and everything went along with it? He sold it as a sort of package?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: Now, what kind of plays did you do in the tent theatre, in the stock companies?

WHITWORTH: Just plays with comedians, and things like that. But, they were really legitimate plays, He payed royalties, and received the rights to use them.

SPORN: Do you remember any of the plays?

WHITWORTH: Oh, dear me.

SPORN: Well, would you say they were classics? Did you do Shakespeare? Did you do Ibsen? Did you do Moliere?

WHITWORTH: No. Now, for instance, we used to do Van Dyke's House of Rimmon, the biblical drama, in Chautauqua. We didn't do any Shakespeare, that I recall.

SPORN: Ibsen?

WHITWORTH: Yes, I think we did Hedda Gabler one year.

SPORN: For the Lyceum?

WHITWORTH: Yes, that's for the Lyceum. The Chautauqua was more rural. He did more of his own plays, and the biblical,

SPORN: So, you got into the Federal Theatre in Des Moines, Iowa. What were you doing out in Des Moines, Iowa?

WHITWORTH: Well, I was in stock,

SPORN: In Des Moines?

WHITWORTH: Yes. I was in stock in Des Moines in the old Majestic theatre there, And I can't recall how this Federal Theatre and all got mixed up with that.

SPORN: Well, one of the early regional directors in the Midwest was a man by the name of E.C. Mabie, who was at the University of Iowa in the drama department there. It may very well be that he had something to do with setting up a Des Moines unit.

WHITWORTH: Mr. Haldene, our director in Detroit, lived in Des Moines. His home was Des Moines . . .

SPORN: Oh, you met Mr. Haldene out in Des Moines?

WHITWORTH: No. I didn't meet him until I came to Detroit.

SPORN: But, he is from Des Moines anyway?

WHITWORTH: Yes, he was from Des Moines. I think he was in New York at that time and came to Detroit from New York.

SPORN: He was director of the Alabama unit, then he came to Detroit, not as director, but as one of the assistant directors, and then, ultimately, he became director for the last two or three years of it. He was the director for the bulk of the years of the Detroit Federal Theatre.

WHITWORTH: Well, he was the director when I was there.

SPORN: Yes. Now, you were brought in from Des Moines, I guess that . . . Do you know if the Des Moines outfit had fallen apart?

WHITWORTH: I think -- I don't recall, but I kind of think it had, I had the feeling that it had. Because I was given the choice of one or two different projects, I chose to come to Detroit.

SPORN: Right. Now, I have here the various plays that you were in once you came to Detroit; Arms and the Man, that's the Shaw play; Pursuit of Happiness; The Locked Room; One-Third Of A Nation; and Merry Wives. I have five plays.

WHITWORTH: Locked Room? I can't even remember what that was, (LAUGHTER)

SPORN: I'll remind you of it in a moment, Arms and the Man, of course, was a George Bernard Shaw play, and that was March 1938, and it was directed by Verner Haldene, and it was performed at the Cinema Theatre, as well as elsewhere. You played the part of . . . In Arms and the

SPORN: Man, I have you listed as playing the part of Louka, as L-O-U-K-A,

WHITWORTH: I probably did. I've done both of the parts, but I probably did that. Do you have a girl named Peggy . . .

SPORN: Fenn?

WHITWORTH: . . . Fenn. I think she played the part of the lead in Arms and the Man . . .

SPORN: Alma Brock.

WHITWORTH: . . . And I played the maid or something . . .

SPORN: Here. Take a look at the playbill and you'll see who the cast of characters. It seems to me that you came here at the same time that another actor came here, Ray Rawlings?

WHITWORTH: I think Ray was here when I came.

SPORN: Was he here already? Perhaps so.

WHITWORTH: Yes, he was from New York, Alma Brock, Oh, yes.

SPORN: She played it. I don't have Peggy Fenn listed there as the lead, but Alma Brock is.

WHITWORTH: Well, maybe Alma played the lead. Maybe it was Alma, not Peggy.

SPORN: And you played Louka.

WHITWORTH: Yes, right. Ray Rawlings, he was from New York, David Carnes, yes. I remember the name, but I don't place him. Oh, J, Richard Gamble, yes, Eddie Masson, yes.

SPORN: Now, the next play you were in was The Pursuit of Happiness, and in that you played Prudence Kirkland.

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: This was a play about . . .

WHITWORTH: Bundling.

SPORN: Right. You remembered, you see. At first, you didn't even remember the play.

WHITWORTH: Oh, I worked in that several times. (LAUGHS)

SPORN: Yes, it's about bundling and about . . . But, it's really about . . .

WHITWORTH: Revolutionary.

SPORN: . . . The Revolutionary period, and the meaning of democracy, and how some one how is not part of the revolutionary American Revolution but, comes from Europe and takes the whole concept of democracy very seriously and . . .

WHITWORTH: Oh, Max, the male lead, came from Austria, yes.

SPORN: And so on and so forth. Yes, right. Now, Prudence Kirkland, I take it, was the lead role.

WHITWORTH: Yes. She was the daughter of the family.

SPORN: And Ray Rawlings played the male lead, Max Christmann. That, too, was directed by Verner Haldene, and the settings and the costumes were designed by James Doll.

WHITWORTH: James Doll, yes, yes.

SPORN: Alright. You remember him?

WHITWORTH: Yes. I don't know how many of these people are from Detroit.

SPORN: Well, James Doll is from this area, in fact, had been at Ann Arbor, went to school there, the University of Michigan, for quite some time. He was the stage designer, set designer, costume designer.

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: And so on. Now, in addition to that, you were in The Locked Room.

WHITWORTH: Can't remember what it was all about.

SPORN: Okay, I'll tell you. It's a mystery comedy. These are my notes to myself, but it hardly struck me as a comedy, and the "mystery is pretty stupid." Those are my comments. "The murdered man has been shot, stabbed, and poisoned. The door to his study locked from inside. This is never explained. The insurance inspector, Ned Parker, is finally found to be guilty. The comedy revolves around Ryan, a dumb cop, who proves not to be dumb after all." So, that's the general outline of the play.

WHITWORTH: I don't remember it. It didn't impress me very much. (LAUGHING)

SPORN: I didn't think it was a very good play. By the way, Herbert Ashton wrote the play.

WHITWORTH: Locked Room?

SPORN: Yes.

WHITWORTH: He wrote Brothers. We did Brothers in Des Moines.

SPORN: But, it says here The Locked Room by Herbert Ashton, so . . .

WHITWORTH: Maybe he did.

SPORN: Now, that played at the Beacon Theatre on Grand River and Grand Boulevard, and you played the part of Mary Burgess, Peggy Fenn played the part of Josephine Burgess. Okay?

WHITWORTH: I haven't the slightest remembrance.

SPORN: Now comes One-Third of a Nation, of course. That's a play by Arthur

SPORN: Arent, by the Living Newspaper Division of the Play Bureau Service, and that was performed in October, 1938. This was obviously a very, very ambitious . . .

WHITWORTH: It was a very, very good . . . Very interesting, very different.

SPORN: And you played various parts . . .

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: . . . As did everyone else. I have you here . . . (PAUSE). Let's see, where your name first appears . . .

WHITWORTH: It seems I opened scene one . . .

SPORN: Ruth Whitworth, you played scene one, the part of something just called "a woman", and it was a fire escape.

WHITWORTH: Yes, I went up the fire escape.

SPORN: And then, you played a tenant in a strike scene, tenant strike and so on.

WHITWORTH: They were all over the place.

SPORN: Everybody was in it. Here, you were tenants, You were in the first group with Robert H. Cosgrove, Charles Bell, Ruth Whitworth, and Edward Masson, and there was a second group of tenants -- Chester Adams, Mary L'Herminier, Edith Segal. Do you remember Edith Segal?

WHITWORTH: I have a faint remembrance of her . . .

SPORN: She did the choreography for a lot of the plays.

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes.

SPORN: And then, later on, you played another part. This was a play that was done quite regularly with most of the people.

WHITWORTH: Well, it was a large production made up of short scenes.

SPORN: Peggy Fenn played Mrs. Buttonkooper? Then, you played in "Rent Strike". You were the first woman -- Ruth Whitworth; Sylvia Rollins was the second woman; Edith Segal, the third woman; Eeda Von Buelow, Helen DuBois, Marie Curtis, and so on and so forth. Anyway, that was a very ambitious play, quite obviously. A famous play, and then, finally there was the . . . (PAUSE)

WHITWORTH: That's the first scene there, isn't it?

SPORN: With the two black men?

WHITWORTH: Oh, no that isn't the one. Oh, they did a beautiful job, I remember those two black men,

SPORN: Anyway, the next play you were in and that was the last play, was

- SPORN: Merry Wives of Windsor. The opening day was February 6, but also, it was a play you were doing when the Federal Theatre Project was finally shut down, June 30, 1939, and you played the part of Ann Page. Okay?
- WHITWORTH: Yes. Some of these people that were from Detroit, there must be ways you can get hold of them.
- SPORN: Oh, I've interviewed some of these other people, too, you see. I've interviewed, for example, Edith Segal, who now lives in New York. I've interviewed Albert Oriucci. He was a young man at that time.
- WHITWORTH: I don't remember him.
- SPORN: He played Peter Simple, servant to Slender. He wanted to be a singer he tells me, rather than an actor. And a number of other people. So, that's your career in the Federal Theatre Project here in Detroit. You were interviewed by a Mr. Saul Held, of the United Automobile Workers' newspaper, on October 15, 1938. This was, I guess, during the showing of One-Third of a Nation, and the interview write-up of that says, "Ruth Whitworth was born in Hudson Falls, New York. Deeply fascinated by acting since her childhood, Ruth finally plunged into the craft and soon became a full-fledged trouper. In tank towns and metropolises she has played for many a moon with stock companies. She has played in so many and diverse types of plays that she happily refers to them with the collectively 'everything'. The prerequisite for any good acting, confided Ruth, after a little urging from yours truly, is intelligence. The actor or actress, she continued, 'must live' in order to comprehend the emotional nature of the characters they are called upon to be."
- WHITWORTH: That's right.
- SPORN: "And the theatre, Ruth added, is certainly the place to learn about life -- the tough way, poverty and all the rest. A full measure of the worst and finest in this little world is to be found in concentrated form in the theatre. It's only the technique of acting that can be acquired, that is providing you have as prerequisites intelligence and knowledge of life." And then finally you said . . .
(PAUSE) Well, that's what you said, that, in other words, there were three things you thought that were important to being a fine actor in the theatre, and that is technique, but you felt that could

- SPORN: be acquired; intelligence; and knowledge of life, and those are something you have to learn along the way.
- WHITWORTH: Well, I still have to. (LAUGHS)
- SPORN: So, that I thought was a rather interesting comment. It was interesting to me, not only as a statement by itself, but the Federal Theatre Project -- Hallie Flanagan, those people who were in charge, the top people in charge, and who formulated some of the basic principles for the Federal Theatre Project -- had a grand vision of the theatre. (SECTION DELETED BY R.W.) But, Hallie Flanagan was quite disappointed, you see, that there weren't stronger plays, more dramatic, dealing with timely issues.
- WHITWORTH: I agree with her myself and I did at the time, I know. (LAUGHS) Because I think they were trying to make a government theatre of it like some of the countries overseas who have the regular government theatre, and it would have been marvelous if they could have. But, that would definitely need to be the stronger socialized plays with social content. I remember I agreed with her at the time.
- SPORN: There were also political influences from conservative elements in our society, who were not too happy with the Federal Theatre. And also from the left wing, who wanted to see certainly much more socially oriented plays, plays about the working class of people, and so on and so forth. Did any of that manifest itself as far as you know?
- WHITWORTH: Yes. I didn't recall it, but as it comes back to me now, we did know that that was the aim. I did know that. I don't know that I knew from a trouble standpoint . . . That they were having trouble over that, but I didn't know that those were the aims. Better stuff. Not only the socialized stuff, but better productions, better shows, I know that that was wanted. Mr. Haldene and Mr. Ashton, they were minded that way. There was no trouble as far as the directors were concerned with Mrs. Flanagan. They liked her, they were very fond of her, and they appreciated her desires and her work. And she did a lot of work on it. And, of course, I guess, it was through her intervention that the government took it over, the government okayed it. She must have had to fight for it in Washington.
- SPORN: Actually, they were going to set it up, and they brought her in to be the director, and they had to convince her to leave her job at, I believe it was at Vassar at that time, or was it Smith? I think

SPORN: she was at Smith.

WHITWORTH: Oh, I thought it was more or less her efforts.

SPORN: Well, she was very interested in that kind of theatre. She had established her reputation with that kind of theatre. She had had a grant from, I believe, it was Guggenheim, to study the Russian theatre, all of the state theatres that you referred to. So, she knew all about that, but she had a job I believe at Smith College at that time. where she was running the theatre program there, and so on. And they called her in. By the way, she's from Iowa. She went to Grinnell College, Harry Hopkins, who was head of the W.P.A., was from Iowa. So, they brought her in. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave her job, but they finally convinced her and once she became director, of course, she was very committed to seeing it grow, and she did want to see it eventually evolve from a relief program into a permanent federal theatre. She didn't want it located in Washington. She wanted to be decentralized and all over the country. So, you were aware of some of the problems, but you weren't directly involved?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Now, at one time, there was a great todo. Somebody by the name of Matthews charged the theatre with being dominated by the Communist Party and there was a big fuss about it.

WHITWORTH: Here?

SPORN: Yes. It made the papers, and the Common Council took it up, and so on and so forth.

WHITWORTH: Doesn't ring a bell. Was that while I was here?

SPORN: I would think so. Yes, 1938, while you were here.

WHITWORTH: Well, possibly I knew about it at the time, but it didn't register in my memory. I don't remember a thing about it, but, of course, I'll take your word for it. It probably happened, and whether I know anything about it, I don't know. Must be . . .

SPORN: Oh, yes. It was a very famous event.

WHITWORTH: There was no "Party business", that I know about, or any Communism, or anything in the theatre that I ever knew anything about. There wasn't.

SPORN: What can you tell me about Peggy Fenn? Did you know her? Do you know where she is now?

WHITWORTH: No, I haven't the slightest idea. I saw Peggy Fenn in Pennsylvania at a summer stock, when my son was there. She was a member of the summer

WHITWORTH: stock, when my son was there. She was a member of the summer stock at the Mountain Playhouse.

SPORN: How long ago was that?

WHITWORTH: Oh my, that was quite some time ago. That was ten to fifteen years ago.

SPORN: Oh, not terribly long ago. In the sixties then?

WHITWORTH: Probably. My son, it was before he went out to . . .

SPORN: California? (PAUSE IN TAPE) Okay, so what can you tell me about Peggy Fenn?

WHITWORTH: Well, I don't know. She's just another member of the company.

SPORN: How was she as a performer?

WHITWORTH: Very good, very good performer.

SPORN: She had a lot of experience. She was with the Bonstelle Theatre thirty years ago.

WHITWORTH: She was a very attractive girl. Blond. But, where she is, I wouldn't have any idea.

SPORN: Who were you close to on the project?

WHITWORTH: Oh, you don't have time to be too close to anyone.

SPORN: Oh, really? You mean the nature of the theatre, or what?

WHITWORTH: Well, I guess so.

SPORN: Or, it was just that particular situation?

WHITWORTH: No, no. There was no "situation". As I remember, it was a very pleasurable experience, especially here in Detroit. I liked it. It was more on a good solid basis here. Or, I thought it was on a good solid basis here in Detroit. But, I don't know. (TAPE STOPPED AND RESTARTED) Let's go to Mary, what was that French name?

SPORN: L'Herminier?

WHITWORTH: Yes, Mary L'Herminier. She used to live in . . . Out toward Highland Park in Detroit, and I used to go to her house quite often, for dinner or something. But, I don't know. I was more friendly with the men, than I was the women. (LAUGHING) They were more on my level. You know, the directors and that. (LAUGHS)

SPORN: Your level? Meaning more professional?

WHITWORTH: What I meant -- I don't mean level, that was a nasty remark. I didn't mean that. It was more, my thinking was in the directing line, and the studying of producing, and stuff like that, I guess.

SPORN: Did you discuss the theatre with those people?

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes.

SPORN: Did you talk about improving your techniques, your craft as a theatrical

SPORN: artist, and so on? Do you recall the nature of those discussions?
Not at all?

WHITWORTH: (LAUGHING) No.

SPORN: Were you looking forward then to a continued career in the theatre?

WHITWORTH: Well, of course theatre has always been my life, I've always lived it, until I started "Little Theatre". I loved that because that was pure directing.

SPORN: When you say "Little Theatre" what do you mean? This would be when? Like in the forties, and fifties, and sixties?

WHITWORTH: When did I start in "Little Theatre"? (PAUSE) Dates are absolutely . . .

SPORN: Well, roughly speaking. Was it before World War II, or after World War II?

WHITWORTH: It was after. I was in Wyandotte thirteen years as resident director.

SPORN: That was a professional job?

WHITWORTH: Well, my amateurs were professionals.

SPORN: What about you? It was a professional job for you, you were getting paid for it?

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I did "Little Theatre" for about twenty years.

SPORN: You started out as a trouper, travelling around in little travelling shows, you were very young, and then finally you wound up with the Lyceum, Chatauqua, and also stock companies, and finally, the Federal Theatre Project, and after the Federal Theatre Project, you became a director in "Little Theatre". How does the Federal Theatre stack up in relationship to those? What would you say? Were they fairly much the same sort of experience?

WHITWORTH: To what?

SPORN: Well, obviously, these were not Broadway things, these were more regional.

WHITWORTH: You mean the "Little Theatre"? Oh, yes, but in "Little Theatre" we did the very best shows . . .

(END OF TAPE SIDE A. BEGINNING OF TAPE SIDE B)

SPORN: Camelot and Mame. In other words, sort of the Broadway musical sort of thing. Did you do any straight dramas?

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes, everything.

SPORN: Again what? Broadway things, or what?

WHITWORTH: Well, all Broadway shows. You see, when I started out in Wyandotte, I was teaching dramatics and theatre. I had come home from the road and was at my daughter's home. I was just worn out, and I started teaching at Roth and Berdun's school in Detroit. That was when the soldiers came home from the army . . .

SPORN: What was the name of the school?

WHITWORTH: Roth and Berdun. It's extinct now. But, you know, that GI Bill? Well, I had a whole studio full of soldiers coming home that I taught. Really, what it was, was for rehabilitation. Psychological. They studied acting, and one or two have gone out and done something, but, really, it was for rehabilitation. One of the students studying there was from Wyandotte. We got to talking about "Little Theatre", and I said that I'd like to take over "Little Theatre". So, one of the dancing teachers had a studio in Wyandotte. We got together, and we started a steering committee of townspeople, the influential people, and I taught at his studio for a year, getting the people ready. And, we started the second year with full-fledged productions, and I was there for thirteen years as resident director, and we did everything from Broadway, you know.

SPORN: How would you say the quality of the Federal Theatre Project compared to that?

WHITWORTH: Well, as far as the quality is concerned, in the "Little Theatre", probably the quality of acting was better, because . . . I could teach them. My productions were professional productions, always.

SPORN: What would you say the Federal Theatre contributed to your abilities later on?

WHITWORTH: Well, everything you do contributes. You grow, or you should, in everything you do. I'll tell you what contributed to my thinking in staging, was Living Newspaper, because I adore that stylized kind of anything that's off beat. In fact, I've done shows with not a thing on the stage except just a little set here, a little piece there, and a little piece there. Mostly imaginative stuff instead.

SPORN: Had you encountered any of that technique before Living Theatre or Living Newspaper?

WHITWORTH: Not before. That was my first encounter with a stylized type of set-

WHITWORTH: ting. Mr. Haldene was very good in directing that. He stylizing of the different scenes and all was very good,

SPORN: What about the content of Living Theatre? One-Third of a Nation, which is all about . . .

WHITWORTH: Well, of course, I like that kind of stuff . . .

SPORN: . . . Housing, and so on, did you feel it was dramatic? Did you feel you were involved in important work?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: . . . That was not only good theatre, but would have an impact?

WHITWORTH: No, no. Not too much of that, (LAUGHING) No, I don't recall that I did it because of my viewpoint. It was always theatre, (LAUGHS) I was not in that type of thinking at all. But, I liked the weight of it, the beauty of it, and I did think it was beautiful. Beauty in a dramatic way, I guess. I remember the first scene, going up outside that fire escape and it was a very strong scene that she had up there, and it was good. I loved it.

SPORN: Who's she?

WHITWORTH: Me, (LAUGHING)

SPORN: Oh, you.

WHITWORTH: Well, my character.

SPORN: And that was the scene these two black men were in, too?

WHITWORTH: No, no, no. The two black men, I forget what scene they were in. They were not in the scene that I was in. But, they were very good, I remember.

SPORN: They appeared in an episode entitled "Harlem", which exposed the practice of occupying a "hot bed", where one bed was occupied by three different people in eight hour shifts.

WHITWORTH: I guess that was it. But, no, it wasn't so much the socialistic content that bemused me. It was the play itself, the drama of it, and the staging. It was different, you see.

SPORN: So, that particular play, you feel, contributed a great deal to your skills as a director later on?

WHITWORTH: Yes. Outside of that, I wouldn't say it was any different than just any other theatre.

SPORN: Just more experience. I see. You don't feel that your association with Haldene or with any of the other people somehow or other help-

SPORN: ed you? In any specific way?

WHITWORTH: Well, I'm sure it helped because, after all, at that time, I wasn't as old as I am now. (LAUGHING) I mean, I was in a growing period. Sure, I'm sure it did, because isn't anything that you do, if you are serious about it, that you don't grow in? And Mr. Haldene was as excellent director, I thought. Yes, we'll say his group work had helped me a lot in my group pictures, like in musicals and things like that.

SPORN: What specifically did he do with his groups that seemed unusual to you?

WHITWORTH: The pictures.

SPORN: What, he kind of composed a picture?

WHITWORTH: The only thing that you can learn is that it's a good picture, but then you have to form your own pictures. But, I always thought of him when I was working with a group, and I used in my directing a lot of friezing work, where you'd open up with a frieze, a picture, and a frieze, which is always very good, you know. I'll tell you what I think happened. Mr. Haldene's work, on those groups, made me become aware of it.

SPORN: I see.

WHITWORTH: Because it was so good! I probably could've worked with a lot of directors in those things and maybe not become aware of the beauty that can be made out of pictures.

SPORN: What do you call a picture?

WHITWORTH: Well, you take maybe fifty people on a stage, and there's a mob scene, or any kind of scene that these people are all being used. Then, there'll come a time when you want the picture of them, but it's got to be done in a beautiful way, so that it's a beautiful picture -- balanced, and everyone has a little bit of different movement or pose, so when it comes out, it's just like a painting.

SPORN: Oh, where everything is in it's right place. It's a composition, where the space and the forms are related to each other in some harmonious way.

WHITWORTH: I've always called it "picture", but maybe that isn't . . . (LAUGHS)

SPORN: It's a good word, I just wanted to make sure I understood you correctly.

WHITWORTH: And those are so valuable. Now, I remember, Guys And Dolls, I have produced twenty-five musicals, but that was my first one. There was such a beautiful opening scene, I mean, of different movements put in, that's what I'm trying to say. You wanted to know what good I got out of Federal Theatre? I think becoming aware of group work, in a nutshell. Because, I did have a director that really knew how to do that.

SPORN: Now, in June of 1939, and even before that, the Federal Theatre Project came under attack by Congress, and there were a number of . . . Again, it made the news headlines . . .

WHITWORTH: It's kind of coming back.

SPORN: I'll recall for you for a moment. So, in June of 1939 -- June 30, that was the closing day of the Federal Theatre Project -- but it had been under attack for at least six months. It actually had been under attack throughout it's entire life-time, but there was an intensified attack against it for the last six months of it's life, and that took several forms. The politicians were never happy with the Federal Theatre Project, at least some of them. They felt, first, that it was too pro-New Deal. They thought also that it was a way of delivering left wing propaganda. So, they attacked it for that. They thought it was dominated by Communists, and so they attacked it for that reason. They thought that it was a silly thing to spend Government money on, just entertainment. They felt that many of the plays dealt with moral issues that were against the general acceptable moral principals of this country. They would be too permissive, too open about sex and things of that sort.

WHITWORTH: Well, now, we didn't have that. At that time, that was steered away from. Any sex angle, we never had that at all in any of our shows, that I can recall.

SPORN: It's clear that none of the shows anywhere had it. One would have to reach far out and say, "Oh, look, a man and woman on the stage are holding hands, isn't that terrible?" There wasn't anything that was so . . . Certainly, compared by today's standards, nothing at all. And, by any standards of that day, it wouldn't have been so offensive, but it was attacked for that. Same thing, you know, on the political attacks. Frequently people would say, "We don't know what you're

- SPORN: talking about. What's in this play that's objectional from a political point of view?" But, yet it was attacked for those reasons, and there were Congressional hearings on it.
- WHITWORTH: Yes, it does come back to me now. I had forgotten all about that. It's such a past issue with me.
- SPORN: And you see there was a lot of activity. For example, there was an attempt to . . . Once this happened, Hallie Flanagan and the others attempted to organize support for the Theatre, because they could see that the appropriation would be withdrawn if they didn't. So, even here, there were all sorts of people to sign petitions in the Detroit area to save the Federal Theatre Project and, obviously, people locally were involved in organizing that support. Do you remember any of that?
- WHITWORTH: Not . . . It rings a slight bell back there, but I don't think it was made too pronounced, as far as I was concerned. But, as I recall, we had pretty good audiences. They turned out very well, as I recall.
- SPORN: You recall a good attendance?
- WHITWORTH: I would've said so.
- SPORN: Oh, the theatre had support in that sense. People came to it. Generally speaking, responded very favorably.
- WHITWORTH: It does ring a bell -- something about the Congressional dispute over it and that. It does. But, as I say, it didn't bother me too much, I guess, or I would've remembered it more clearly.
- SPORN: Now, you mentioned audiences, that you drew fairly decent audiences, as you recall?
- WHITWORTH: As I think back, we did.
- SPORN: At one point, in the interest of finding out what the audience saw in these plays, how the audience felt about the quality of the Federal Theatre Project, and in an attempt to stimulate a new audience, the Project itself tried to do audience surveys, and get the opinion of audiences, find out what they liked or disliked about a particular production, and what kinds of things they would like to see. Do you remember any of that sort of thing being done in the Detroit Federal Theatre Project?
- WHITWORTH: No, I don't. I really don't. I wish there was someone else you

WHITWORTH: could talk to about it, that would know more about those things than I do. But, I really don't, I don't recall any . . .

SPORN: Now, you've remembered enough things, and you've been able to fill me in on a number of things. They're very important, some of these things that you've been telling me.

WHITWORTH: Well, I hope so. (LAUGHING)

SPORN: Oh, yes.

WHITWORTH: Well, I'm glad, because I was so afraid that you'd be terribly let down.

SPORN: Do you remember Hy Fireman?

WHITWORTH: Oh, Hy Fireman. Yes, I . . .

SPORN: Besides acting, he did a lot of photography. He took pictures of the performances.

WHITWORTH: The name is absolutely . . . I know I know him, but I just don't place him in my mind.

SPORN: He's still alive, by the way, and living in the area.

WHITWORTH: Oh, is he?

SPORN: Yes, Tell you what I'll do one of these days, is get you all together to a little party.

WHITWORTH: That would be fun.

SPORN: Then you can meet each other after all these many years. Maybe what we can do, if you're still around when I'm producing these plays, you can perform in them. How would you like that? Have you acted lately?

WHITWORTH: Oh, I don't know. I've put that so far back of me now, you know. The last part I played was . . . My son and I had a summer stock in Grand Ledge. I did a couple of, a few little parts then. I was directing up there and I don't like to direct and act both. But, in the "Little Theatre", I never, never played a part, because I wanted the others to do the acting, you know. But, I would like to see some of the . . .

SPORN: Oh, well, if I can get them all together, maybe, we'll have a big party here. It's hard. First of all, a number of people have died. And then, a lot of people have gone elsewhere. There are some out in California, some in New York, some in Florida, some I don't know about. They may be alive, they may be dead, they may be elsewhere.

SPORN: And I'm in the process of hunting them down, you see.

WHITWORTH: Now there's a "Wright". I can't think of what his first name was. He was in . . . He's done quite a bit in radio, I think, after . . .

SPORN: Yes, he's still around, I understand.

WHITWORTH: Is he still around?

SPORN: Yes, and I have to get to him.

WHITWORTH: Well, I know he did quite a bit in radio.

SPORN: Then, there's a man by the name of Marianucci.

WHITWORTH: That name is unfamiliar.

SPORN: Well, the best place to look would be in this cast here, because, here. We have -- Oh, some of the regulars in the company like Chester Adams.

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes, well Chester. He's out in Dearborn.

SPORN: He is alive and in Dearborn?

WHITWORTH: Yes, in Dearborn.

SPORN: You know that?

WHITWORTH: Yes. Well, he was the last time I played Dearborn. (LAUGHING)

SPORN: Peter Cuba?

WHITWORTH: I don't know.

SPORN: These are the regulars. Alfred Fernelius?

WHITWORTH: They weren't actors, they must've been . . .

SPORN: Mary L'Herminier? Is she still around?

WHITWORTH: I don't know whether she is or not.

SPORN: Elynor Knight?

WHITWORTH: Now, wait a minute, Elynor Knight. Yes. Now who is she? The name is familiar, but I just can't place her.

SPORN: Charlotte Christie? Sylvia Rollins? Helen Butterfield?

WHITWORTH: I think those were a lot of, maybe, just extras, and . . .

SPORN: Well, what they did was ask for volunteers, because they needed so many people. Now, Helen DuBois?

WHITWORTH: No, I don't . . .

SPORN: Now, Oxley Taylor was a regular in the company.

WHITWORTH: Oxley Taylor. Yes.

SPORN: A, Courtney White? He was a regular. He's dead. He was an old man. Some people said he was one of the more experienced members of the company.

WHITWORTH: Yes, he was. He taught me how to knit.

SPORN: (LAUGHTER)

WHITWORTH: He was on the road with the horror play, "Dracula". And he had a nervous breakdown from it. I remember this, you know, because I thought it was so funny; a man knitting. But the Doctor had suggested that he take up knitting, for his nerves. He was a most beautiful knitter and he taught me to knit during rehearsal.

SPORN: Still know how?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: Eeda Von Buelow?

WHITWORTH: No, I don't know.

SPORN: Edith Segal? Now, she played a very important part in the Company. She not only acted, but frequently did choreography. She did it for Merry Wives of Windsor, Doctor Faustus, and so on. Charles Bell?

WHITWORTH: Oh, Charlie Bell -- yes -- he was a local.

SPORN: Do you know if he's around yet?

WHITWORTH: No, I don't.

SPORN: Robert H. Cosgrove? He was a regular.

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: Michael R. Switzler?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Marie Curtis?

WHITWORTH: Yes. I think she was a character woman.

SPORN: Mrs. William Faversham? Now, she was a volunteer for this. I think, or maybe for other performances.

WHITWORTH: Well, she's from New York.

SPORN: Oh, you think she was brought into the company? From New York?

WHITWORTH: I think so.

SPORN: Oh, well, maybe so. Okay. Now, was she a younger woman?

WHITWORTH: No, she was an older woman.

SPORN: J. Francis O'Reilly?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: David Carnes?

WHITWORTH: David Carnes . . .

SPORN: You mentioned him before.

WHITWORTH: I think so.

SPORN: But, you don't know if he's around now?

WHITWORTH: No, I don't know whether he's from Detroit or not.

SPORN: Stuart Macintosh?

WHITWORTH: Oh, the name's familiar, but I don't recall him.

SPORN: Rubert Hatfield?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Nancy Ross?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Pat Donnelly?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Fredrick W. Kirk?

WHITWORTH: I think a lot of those were subs, extras.

SPORN: I think maybe, yes. Fredrick M. Ferman? Freeman, I mean. Albert W. Robbins? Betty Ann Horton, Ed Crose, Shirl McCann, Francis Clark, J. Richard Gamble. He was a regular.

WHITWORTH: Yes. He was a character man, yes.

SPORN: Don't remember anything about him?

WHITWORTH: Hes' probably dead.

SPORN: Edward Masson?

WHITWORTH: Eddie Masson? Now, he was a younger man. He was a regular member of the company.

SPORN: Yes, and you say he was younger?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: Douglas Wright?

WHITWORTH: Douglas Wright was the one, was a radio . . .

SPORN: Yes. He's supposed to be alive yet. William J. Williams? Hy Fireman?

WHITWORTH: That name is familiar, I just can not recall him . . .

SPORN: Francis Clark? (PAUSE) Phillip Bernown?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: Robert Young?

WHITWORTH: You know, a lot of those, they might have used . . . They had the little "Craft Theatres", like puppet shows, and projects like that, and a lot of them might've . . .

SPORN: No, there's no question about it, because, I know that the reports say that they brought in volunteer people for this particular performance because it requires so many people. So . . . I may have

SPORN: covered them all by now. (PAUSE) I guess I got them all. Now, you know, another thing . . . Did you know Kimon Friar?

WHITWORTH: No.

SPORN: No. He was a play reader. They had play readers here.

WHITWORTH: Oh?

SPORN: And . . .

WHITWORTH: Well, maybe that's the way they select them. I don't --

SPORN: Well, in part that was true, but also I wondered whether any local people were writing plays, that they might have submitted to the theatre for production. You don't know?

WHITWORTH: I don't know that. If there were any playwrights around in the country, I'm sure they did. (LAUGHTER) Around in this territory.

SPORN: Well, I just wondered about that, because there was talk about -- Well, for one thing, I know there was correspondence with Hallie Flanagan, some of the people here were interested in having a Living Newspaper done for the auto industry. Just as one had been done for housing, they wanted one done for . . . There's some indication that there was something of that sort started. Now, I'm trying to track down some of that to see if --

WHITWORTH: Now, what closed it? Was it just that they stopped Government subsidy?

SPORN: Oh, yes. Well, after this attack, it came under this sharp attack, political attack, as I say . . .

WHITWORTH: That was what closed it? I never knew that.

SPORN: . . . And, then they just withdrew the money. They withdrew the money, because they refused to appropriate any money for it, and all over the country on June 30, 1939, a play would be on, and it was the closing night. In fact, in many places they made a thing about . . . You know, for example, in New York, they had one of the puppet shows, they had puppet -- It was puppet theatre too, here in Detroit also, a man by the name of David Lano. I don't know if you knew him.

WHITWORTH: Who?

SPORN: David Lano?

WHITWORTH: The name strikes a bell.

SPORN: Yes, he was an older man. He'd come from a family who had a tradition of being puppeteers.

WHITWORTH: Well, they made them and all,

SPORN: Yes, he made them, his company made them, and put them on. Anyway, in New York, one of the puppet plays that they put on was a play called . . . Well, I don't know if it was puppet, it may have just been a children's play, with live actors -- Pinocchio.

WHITWORTH: Oh, yes.

SPORN: So, for the last performance in New York of the Pinocchio play, they ended up with a big sign saying "Here lies Pinocchio, killed by the Congress of the U.S.A." So, it was kind of touching,

WHITWORTH: Really, that must've been . . . Really more than I remember it. Maybe it didn't affect me so much, you know, I must've known about it.

SPORN: Well, I mean this was going on to organize support, and there were times when Congress threatened to cut appropriations, not completely cut the theatre off, but to considerably decrease the appropriations. I know that they sent a motorcade from here down to Washington. It was a nationally organized thing to save the Federal Theatre. And, that would've been about 1938. So, you don't remember that? Tell me something. What sort of scrapbooks does your son have?

WHITWORTH: You mean of this?

SPORN: Would it include material on this?

WHITWORTH: Well, it would include . . . I don't recall what else, there is in that scrapbook. He took it with him when he was here one summer, he took it back with him. And it would be, simply a program and maybe a newspaper write-up, or something like that on the show.

SPORN: But, it would include material from the Federal Theatre Project days?

WHITWORTH: Well it would . . . It was programs --

SPORN: Programs, plus newspapers?

WHITWORTH: Yes, and probably newspapers, probably a write-up, or something. Because, I was never a scrapbook keeper. I never kept scrapbooks, and I don't know how I happened to keep that one.

SPORN: There would be playbills and so on and so forth, and newspaper clippings?

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: That would be in it, for that period, and if I identified it as such to him, he would know? Because he's offered to reproduce what I want.

WHITWORTH: My son?

SPORN: Yes, in his letter he said . . . He said "My mother was an actress, et cetera. I'm not certain how much use her limited recollections might be. I have her scrapbook in my possession. If I know of your specific necessities, and if I have anything that might apply, I'm willing to have the material copied for you." So . . .

WHITWORTH: Well, if he wants to send you the scrapbook ←

SPORN: Well, no. He says, "I will not ship it out of my office," But, he will reproduce copies.

WHITWORTH: If you're ever out in California, be sure and stop and see him.

SPORN: Well, he says so, "If you are out this way, I'm certainly willing to allow you to see it,"

WHITWORTH: He's got everything, all . . . His office is just full. Of course, he goes in for the old, he likes to dig back, and . . .

SPORN: I'm sorry I didn't know about it. How long has he been out in San Bernadino?

WHITWORTH: Oh, he's been there . . .

SPORN: Five, six, seven, eight . . .

WHITWORTH: Oh, more than that, I think, because I think he's been professor, full professor that long. But, he went out there ← he and Marty were in New York, and . . .

SPORN: Marty's his wife?

WHITWORTH: Yes. Oh, she's a very . . . She traveled on the road with Kismet, and she's a ballet dancer, and very clever little actress. Very clever. And she teaches out in Riverside now, Riverside College.

SPORN: Wish I'd known because I was out on the West Coast a year and a half ago, and I could've visited then.

WHITWORTH: Oh, well be sure and -- because you and he would have a grand time.

SPORN: Well, I'll get back. Now, one final question that I do have, you say that way back, even then, way back in Federal Theatre Project days, you were very interested in directing?

WHITWORTH: I didn't know it at the time.

SPORN: Oh, you didn't know it.

WHITWORTH: I didn't know it at the time. But, anything along that line -- Now, like the staging, I loved it.

SPORN: You kind of watched carefully and studied it.

- WHITWORTH: Yes. Of course, at that time my life was acting. I lived it all the time, that was my whole life.
- SPORN: You really liked it.
- WHITWORTH: Oh, I loved -- I lived it, that's practically all I knew from when I went in when I was sixteen.
- SPORN: Did you ever have any ambitions of getting on Broadway?
- WHITWORTH: No, I never thought I was that good, you know. (LAUGHS)
- SPORN: But, you thought you were good enough to be able to make a living at it?
- WHITWORTH: Well, I did make a living for many, many years. But, no, I just, I don't know. I just lived along from one show to another. And I guess, just not much ambition. Well, I wasn't in the cards, or I would've been there, you know. But, the directing, that really got me. I just loved it.
- SPORN: Well, do you recall when a production was put on for example, Pursuit of Happiness was put on. What do you recall about the way the production was worked up? What did the director say to you, raise any questions about how it should be done?
- WHITWORTH: No, they didn't do it in that way then, like they do now. In those days, you played your part, and they gave you your business to do, and you played your part. I mean, you didn't get down and pull it apart, and go into that kind of -- Now, possibly, if Federal Theatre had -- I think that was the way it was headed. But in the old theatre, you were supposed to know how to act. I know the lady that started me on the road, I was only seventeen years old, she put a great big hat and dressed me up so I'd look a lot older than I was. In those days, unless you were a pro, and unless you cut it, you didn't get the part. Because in those days, there was no taking someone in because they look pretty, and putting them in like they do now.
- SPORN: Yes, right.
- WHITWORTH: In those days you cut it. And it was old theatre, and I've always been very grateful that I got my training in that type of theatre, because that's a past art. You don't get that kind of training any more. The young people of . . . And yet it's surprising how well some of them -- I know on T.V., they're surprising how well they do

WHITWORTH: do, And then others don't.

SPORN: So, you say what you did, you had a part there, and you read it, and came on the stage and you started acting. Then the director would tell you, well, he would like you to do a different way or what?

WHITWORTH: No, you mean at rehearsals?

SPORN: Yes, at rehearsals.

WHITWORTH: Well, there was . . . You laid out the business -- that's the way I direct. I visualize everything I have. I have everything laid out and all business before I go to a rehearsal. The pieces of business I usually . . . Amateurs, I give them training ahead of time, how to walk, and how to . . . That kind of stuff. But it's all laid out, and each piece of business that I give them is for a purpose. And it makes them act. You can give people business that makes them act and look like a pro. And that's the kind that I was raised in, that's the kind of theatre. They don't have it any more.

SPORN: But, specifically for the Federal Theatre Project, do you remember how they were getting up those performances?

WHITWORTH: That same way really. Because Mr. Haldene . . . I worked under him more than anybody else in Federal Theatre, but he was a pro director.

SPORN: Oh, no question of that. Let me read to you, just a little bit about -- for example, we'll take Merry Wives of Windsor. You were in that.

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: Director's Report. Now, there were production bulletins done up for each of these plays, which are now in George Mason University in the National Archives. The Director's Report in this particular instance for Merry Wives of Windsor, was prepared by Verner Haldene. Here's what he said. He decided to consider a Shakespeare play while One-Third of a Nation was playing. At the time, he knew that after One-Third of a Nation, the Detroit Federal Theatre Project would give up the Lafayette theatre, and go to a policy of spot booking, meaning they would play in high schools, colleges, churches, et cetera, and they would be sponsored in these productions by various different local groups. They decided on Merry Wives of Windsor, because "Not too technically involved, with regard to sets and the parts were more or less equally distributed, which is helpful to the inexperienced company." In other words, there was no one star-

SPORN: ring part, I'm paraphrasing Haldene. So, in selecting a play, he had certain problems. First of all, we're no longer going to be housed in a regular theatre, therefore, we're going to have problems if we have a very complex tech stage setting. So, he selected Merry Wives of Windsor because the sets were rather simple. He had a company relatively inexperienced, they were going to do a play so they did . . . He selected a play in which . . .

WHITWORTH: Well, they weren't inexperienced. Excuse me just a minute.

SPORN: Well, this is his view, and then let's see what Murrey says. "Then he cut out sub-plots, he divided the play into two parts, used incidental music to establish continuity. He used New Temple edition, the cutting ran two hours. He chose the play also because Falstaff figure was receiving a lot of attention at the time. He also felt that it was a good opportunity to write original prologue for the play." And I think, James Doll did the prologue for the play.

WHITWORTH: I think that was a little balcony scene with Queen Elizabeth.

SPORN: Yes, right, exactly so.

WHITWORTH: Done very nicely.

SPORN: Yes . . . "A prologue for the play to highlight the fact that Queen Elizabeth had commissioned the play. Then he had the cast treat the play lightly, with musical comedy quality, dignity of high comedy. not buffoonery."

WHITWORTH: Yes.

SPORN: He says "He had to warn the cast more than once about hockem. "I feel that it has served an additional purpose," this is a quote, "by making the actors particularly alert of good speech, comedy, timing, and projecting that inner glow of high comedy, which is so satisfying and stimulating when properly played." And that's from his report. Now, you see so he had some idea of his company. Now, were those kinds of things discussed with --

WHITWORTH: I think it was the Falstaff that he was referring to -- the low comedy. It was a little bit too much. But, naturally, he didn't mention who it was. Who played Falstaff in that? Let me think. Wasn't very clever, as I remember.

SPORN: Alfred Fernielius.

WHITWORTH: No, I don't . . . Trying to place him. Well, Mr. Haldene, I don't

WHITWORTH: know where he was trained, but he had had good training, he was a good director, very good director, I --

SPORN: Well, obviously, he thought these things through very thoroughly , . .

WHITWORTH: Yes, yes he did.

SPORN: . . . And took into account every singly problem that he might encounter. Well, is there anything else that you would think you might add?

WHITWORTH: No, you've drawn out more than I thought I remembered. (LAUGHING)

SPORN: Oh, well, good. I'm glad. I hope this hasn't been too trying for you?

WHITWORTH: Oh, it's been very delightful. I've enjoyed it very much.

SPORN: Good, I'm glad.

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