

**Oral History Interview of
Jonathan Marks**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
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Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Jonathan Marks as he discuss working in the world of theater. He describes the people and plays he's worked with, and the finer details of being a dramaturg.

Length of Interview: 02:28:05

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

This is the fifteenth of August 2017. Andy Wilkinson here with Jonathan Marks, and Thelma and Louise.

Jonathan Marks (JM):

The chiweenies.

AW:

Chiweenies, the usual spelling in case anyone would like to know. After we had such a great visit the last time there were still so many things that were going along in my head that—one obvious one is that—and you may have covered all the people you would like to cover in this regard, but I really found it interesting your observations of particular actors and folks that you've worked with. Especially the case with Winkler and Streep where you had direct connections with them. In the case of Streep where others had a mistaken view of her capabilities, whereas you saw them right away. I wonder are there other examples? They don't have to be famous people, but are there other examples of what it takes to recognize ability in an actor or director or for that matter a set designer, costumer?

JM:

I don't really remember what I said, but if I bragged to you about recognizing Meryl Streep right away, which I did.

AW:

I would say it's an observation, not necessarily a brag.

JM:

Well, I could take a counter example, which is students I had that I did not recognize right away. One of them was Angela Bassett. Now in my defense, she was in my history class.

AW:

So you didn't get to see her.

JM:

So I did not get to see her act. I did not get the sense from her of what a fine actress she is just by the way she sat in history class. It was not a very interactive class. So her I missed entirely. Another one I missed was Tony Shalhoub. I missed him on the basis of seeing a moment in rehearsal that struck me the wrong way. I had not seen him much. Later on, when I not only saw him much, but actually was acting with him, and touring with him, it was obvious what a fine actor he is.

AW:

Just for a moment on him because I've watched him on TV, and so I'm familiar with those characters. He strikes me as being someone who totally inhabits a character. Anything that he's been in, you cannot imagine another person taking on that role afterwards.

JM:

He does an actors work. He creates the whole character, yeah.

AW:

To the point that when I was looking at the credits on some of those things I was sure that he had either come up with the role or was one of the writers, and I was shocked to see that was not the case.

JM:

No, no. He is a transformative actor, and well—as Meryl is, and for so long in America we were valuing highly actors who had kind of a limited range but we just loved what they did in their range.

AW:

Like Jimmy Stewart for instance.

JM:

Jimmy Stewart for instance.

AW:

And John Wayne.

JM:

John Wayne would be the supreme example.

AW:

Yeah because in every movie he is John Wayne.

JM:

Right. I've learned not to denigrate that because it is quite a challenge to turn a camera on you, and say now just be yourself.

AW:

Yeah I would think that may be the harder thing.

JM:

Right. Of course, the truth is that wasn't himself that was a created persona. One of my favorite stories, and I don't tell it accurately probably, but Kirk Douglas talks about a conversation that he had in a bar with John Wayne. The underlying facts of it were that Kirk Douglas was a created personality as was John Wayne. Kirk Douglas was—it's in the book *The [Ragman's] Son* because he was the son of a itinerate immigrant, Jewish, ragpicker. He created for himself a very non-Jewish, regular American personality. So they were in a bar and John Wayne was getting very blustery about something, and Kirk Douglas says, "Who do you think you are? John Wayne?" [AW laughs] which I find that hilarious because they're these two personas talking to each other, and one of them is reminding—remember we're people too. We're just people.

AW:

Does he record what Wayne's response to that was?

JM:

I don't know. It's not easy to create that persona but it's comforting to the audience when the persona is there and doesn't violate itself.

AW:

Probably comforting to the people who put the money into those pictures.

JM:

Right. Oh, exactly, they know what they're paying for.

AW:

And they know what the audience wants, et cetera.

JM:

We came to value that throughout our sort of representational life that is in movies, and TV, and on stage, and so forth. People like Henry Winkler, and Meryl Streep, and Tony a little bit later, create a different kind of expectation. Its, Oh they're so different, they can be different people, they can transform, and of course, that's what acting is about I think.

AW:

Is there as much of the creative persona filling the role on sort of a predictable basis on stage as there is on television and screen?

JM:

Less so because the—I think the era of the stage star has gone. I don't think there are people who are revered stage actors who do not make their mark with a ____ [00:08:30] through some other medium.

AW:

Yeah, right.

JM:

I'm wondering if there's a sort of an exception in Lin [Manual] Miranda, but his show is such a phenomenon that it gets all kinds of asterisks.

AW:

Now in that kind of show like—Oh, gosh, I'm think that-- I think of him as sort of a cross between like a dramatic stand up. The fellow who did swimming to Cambodia, and he had that—

JM:

Oh Spalding Gray.

AW:

Yes. That is an interesting sort of concoction of a dramatic piece but with a personality that drives it at least in my thinking. At least through the personality you get into whatever else is going on in the piece.

JM:

Yeah. It's a concoctive personality, but it's concocted out of the raw materials of himself.

AW:

Yeah. Right.

JM:

I don't think he looks elsewhere. That belly button is very interesting to him, it's engrossing. You know at a conference once I shared a suite with him.

AW:

Really?

JM:

Yes. So it just seemed natural when at four in the morning the fire alarm went off, rousting us all. You'd see Spalding Gray sitting there smoking a cigarette and you'd think, this is the universe response to Spalding Gray is here, this is how it happens.

AW:

What about the people who really are what they are, and I think of Barry Corbin's quote of one of his heroes in the acting business, and that was Ben Johnson. Ben Johnson said, "I'm not worth a damn as an actor but I am the very best Ben Johnson they've got."

JM:

Exactly.

AW:

So would Audie Murphy—would that be in that same sort of—because he was a war hero, and so he came out and there he was, he was Audie Murphy.

JM:

I guess so, I shouldn't talk about his acting because I never really—I don't have a firm grasp on him. I know who he was, I know he got an Oscar basically for being who he was. We have a long history of people playing themselves in movies. Muhammad Ali played himself in a movie just as Jack Johnson played himself on the stage. It's a historical thing. Ben Johnson could be that character in front of the camera, and when he says I'm not much of an actor he means, I can't transform into anyone else. That's what our—Stanislavski's method was created to train stage actors. It got sort of transmogrified in America and became Strasberg's method. Did I say Stanislavski's method? I meant his system, its—it's a translational problem but system is the word that we've attached to it, and then Strasberg attached method to his. That was meant to revolutionize American stage acting, and what it really did was revolutionize world movie acting. It was very self-oriented, not to become the other, but to plump themselves. So that did become dominant. You can kind of trace moments when we began to move away from that, but that was so dominant as to be tyrannical in all media.

AW:

Is it right for me to sort of compare Strasberg's inner directed, inner plumbing as an opposite or at least something qualitatively different than the transformative?

JM:

Yes. I don't know if I told you but in San Francisco where I'm going in a couple of days, when I was teaching at ACT the head of acting there close to reprimanded me for using Meryl Streep as an example of good acting.

AW:

No, I don't think you mentioned that. I think we were talking about earlier in her career.

JM:

Because he used it as an example of bad acting. He used Meryl Streep as the prime example on how not to act.

AW:

Really? What was—?

JM:

This was when she was an established movie star.

AW:

Yeah. How come?

JM:

I think because—I think his thing was largely that she was so good at accents, she's such a parrot in terms of I can sound like you. That is a skill that he does not stress nor master. His British accent was not that good, though he was called upon to use it upon occasion. It's not something that he valued very highly in himself or others. That kind of transformation was not of interest to him. More of interest was the self.

AW:

Just as a consumer, the self-driven actors and all that was associated with it just wore me out, and the first time I saw it and recognized it for that it was intriguing, but after a while it was like the transformative actors were the ones that really attracted me just as a viewer. I guess if anything to see what are they going to be now, you know, how they are going to pull this off.

JM:

Susan Strasberg, Lee Strasberg's daughter, wrote a book in which she talked about a boyfriend of hers who was in the studio who worried that he'd never be a great actor. She said, "Why?" He said, "Because I'm not sick." [AW laughs] We can say wore you out, it wore them out. It wore them out studying themselves so obsessively. Though he—well I don't know what kind of acting training Spalding Gray had, if any, but he ended up jumping off the Stanton Island Ferry. Nobody really knows the reason why, I don't think.

AW:

When you talk about wearing out themselves as well. I wonder if there's a parallel to what I see in something I at least have a lot more familiarity with—I was about to say that I know more

about, but I'm not sure that would be appropriate, and that is the contemporary folk musicians, the singer songwriter. There was a time when those of us who were attracted to it were attracted as much to the broadening of themes as we were to anything. In other words, when he got there he wrote about his travels but he also wrote about the people that he came in contact with, the issues. It was always on the side of the down trodden and the ignored. The contemporary status is, people are really writing very inward about their emotional travails, their failed loves, but it's always directed towards the person. Is that too much of a stretch to compare that—I think of the old kind of writing about bigger things than the person is much more on that transformative idea that you look at a bigger picture and how do you write to that bigger picture, as opposed to just dealing with your own experiences.

JM:

I'm just not really sure how to relate to that. Yes, I can see that—Woody Guthrie wrote songs because that's how he could express what he saw. Harry Belafonte, you remember was here, and I got a good glimpse of him, had a nice talk with him. I was surprised the extent to which it was always about the political. He created his popular image in order to have a platform for the political—do you remember a singer called Josh White?

AW:

Um-hm.

JM:

Is he sort of faded away in consciousness?

AW:

Yeah.

JM:

He was such a person.

AW:

Um-hm. I mean aficionado's of the music and music history certainly are cognoscente, but I would guess you would scratch a lot of contemporary folk singers, and they would have no connection or understanding or memory of Josh White.

JM:

Well, I crossed paths with him as a very young lad and was surprised to see there was such a thing in the world.

AW:

How did you come across him? In the audience as an audience member?

JM:

Well, that too but my older sister, she's eight years older, Mary Lou, she has departed now. She was very interested in something called fellowship house in Cincinnati, which was an organization—I can only examine it from this distance of time and space, which was a fairly early part of the integrationist project. It was bringing black and white people together. He was part of the program. I think she brought one of her boyfriend's Jerry Ruben.

AW:

Really?

JM:

Yes. He was the sports editor of the newspaper.

AW:

Jerry Ruben was the sports editor?

JM:

Of the high school newspaper, yes. Then he became the editor and chief. But his interests were basically sports. Mary Lou radicalized.

AW:

Really? Your sister radicalized Jerry Ruben? That's a great story.

JM:

He said so in a book. She became a Goldwater republican. She—I don't know what happened. The rest of her life she was a Goldwater republican, gold water had been dead for decades but she was still kind of in that vain. He went spiraling off into the other direction.

AW:

How interesting.

JM:

But I remember her bringing Jerry to Fellowship House. I liked him too.

AW:

I never disliked him, but just the idea of—knowing what a nice personal connection—but the idea of him being a sports guy is what's surprising. That's another thing, probably not for a

discussion about acting but some political pundits whose views I completely disagree are excellent sports analyst, and this seems to be completely apolitical when it comes to that.

JM:

George Will is good on baseball.

AW:

Yes, George Will, and I don't know about his politics but Roger Angel for the New Yorker is also one of the best writers on baseball, maybe its baseball that attracts intellectual writing more so than something else.

JM:

Yeah my sports are the two intellectual sports, mainly baseball and boxing.

AW:

There you go. How come boxing?

JM:

Well—

AW:

Did you box yourself?

JM:

No. My father liked the fights. When we splurged and got a television set, that was one of the few things that could get him in front of the television set was the Friday night boxing. Was it Friday night?

AW:

When we got our first television set—let's make sure there's not an emergency, no. When we got our first television set and we got our first television set when Lubbock got its first television station, so everybody was waiting for that. The first thing I remember seeing on television, boxing. The people in the neighborhood would come down because we had one of the first ones on the block, not for long, but they would come down, and they would come down for boxing. It wasn't just the men, women would come down, people would bring covered dishes, it was an event, no pun intended. It had a social character to it.

JM:

It was, it was a live event and you could see it better than baseball. Television got into baseball pretty early, but the challenge was always figuring out where the ball was.

AW:

Yeah and if you knew—if you were watching the infield action which is what they tended to focus on, they still do on television, you had no idea what was happening defensively to the outfield until the ball was hit, and you saw someone catch it, magically, because you never did see the moving around it. So yes I see what you mean. The other thing that I recall from the fifties is that people knew who the boxers were, it was common coin in discussion of sports. Maybe more so than baseball since where we live in the fifties, we didn't have a baseball team, we had the local farm team, the Lubbock Hubbers and so you would see people up and down from the bigs.

JM:

For a second there I understood farm team in a different meaning.

AW:

Oh. No, we could've had a farm team, but there was a lot of amateur baseball around here but that was a thing of another order than watching the majors.

JM:

Ezzard Charles trained on my high school track.

AW:

Who did I'm sorry?

JM:

Ezzard Charles. He was a champion for a brief moment, I think it was heavyweight champion.

AW:

Oh I'm not that familiar with—

JM:

Ezzard. E-double z-a-r-d. So yeah, I was familiar with fighters.

AW:

That's a long way off of acting, well maybe not so far off of acting. The other thing that was certainly acting is that people also loved, when it began to be available on TV, wrestling, which even to a child was clearly a theatrical more than an actual contest. Nevertheless, it was quite popular.

JM:

I remember the Mohawk haircut was a shocker for me, a thing to behold. Let's see there was Gorgeous George, isn't he president now, Gorgeous George?

AW:

I think so.

JM:

I think so. It was—yeah we are in the world now of we used to have boxers as president, and now we've got wrestler. I did a course once, I called it current theater in the community. This would've been in about 1980 and it was—we went out and saw community theater productions, but also we had a different track where we talked about how what we do, theater, was bleeding over into the life of the community and it's politics, and how politicians were becoming actors. At this point we had long had presidents who were part time actors, and we were just going about hiring a professional in Ronald Reagan. The things we looked at in that course became true. I remember giving them a squib about this Australian body builder who said he wanted to be president of the United States—Austrian, did I say Australian? Austrian body builder. And that was obviously a ridiculous thing that was never going to happen, but there was some strange power in this course—especially in that there were—some students put together a production for Community Theater during the time of the course, and it was in a church basement. So it was people in our class and other people, the play was called *Getting Out* by Marsha Norman and I guess this must've been '81, I don't know. It's about a dual personality, and she's played by different actresses. One of the actresses was a girl in our class and for the other one they got a girl who had been in some movies, a freshman who had been in some movies. She'd never done any stage work but this was a chance. So I was kind of an advisor to this production. It was on two weekends, the first weekend it went very nice, a bunch of people came down to the church basement, and they did a good job doing the play. Then in between the two weekends some ding dong who had fallen in love with the girl who was in our little play went and shot the president of the United States.

AW:

Really?

JM:

Yes. The second weekend was very different from the first. Then they had these satellite trucks because you couldn't just put your cell phone up and show it to the world, it was a big technological adventure. So the streets were crowded with satellite trucks and the security, the number of guns that showed up for the second run of the show was extraordinary, also a lot of audience.

AW:

So it was widely known that she was the girlfriend?

JM:

She wasn't the girlfriend he was just obsessed with her.

AW:

Okay, so that was known to all the press, that's why they picked up—

JM:

Right because he said, he shot the president to impress Jodie Foster. She knew who he was because he pestered her. During rehearsals he even came up and stood at the foot of her dormitory and tried to get in.

AW:

It's a wonder he didn't shoot her.

JM:

Huh?

AW:

It's a wonder he didn't shoot her.

JM:

It is. But she had serious security for the rest of her time at Yale.

AW:

How did she translate to the stage?

JM:

Not terribly well. Not terribly well. I don't think she's had any stage experience since then. She's obviously a good actress, a very good actress.

AW:

It's a different thing though. I think I shared with you when I had to wind up being a director, it was something I never sought nor wished for, but had to direct this play that I wrote on behalf of Red Steagall and he got all of his friends from the movies and television to be the cast. He brought them in. Only one of them had stage experience and that was Barry Corbin who had started off in stage, the rest of them were all movie people. The thing that made me feel good as a neophyte director was that they were more frightened than I was because they didn't know

stage. This is how green I was, I was shocked, I just assumed that if you could act, you could act, and it wouldn't matter in what form. They were—I was really completely taken aback by the notion that they were frightened on being in front of people live.

JM:

I've seen Pacino a number of times on stage, and he can be very good and he can be very, very bad. He just does not—he has never stopped being interested in the stage but the ethos that makes him so interesting on film makes his very erratic on stage I think.

AW:

We had one of those movie guys that did a brilliant job, and the rest were kind of as you expected. They did their parts in bits and pieces, which is what they did in their regular life. Not necessarily bits and pieces in any organized way, they just knew the bit or the piece. The thing that I noticed was on stage, if the bit or piece didn't come at the appropriate time they couldn't connect the arc of what they were doing and fill in the gap. The only one that was good at that was Barry and he would fill in gaps that didn't even exist from time to time. I guess it does—it's just a very different—different kind of thing.

JM:

When it doesn't happen the way it should they want to have another take.

AW:

Exactly.

JM:

Their instinct is, okay let's do that again.

AW:

Thinking about it or trying to get back to a thing that I would like to hear you talk a little bit more about is as a dramaturg—

JM:

I got to get back to Jodie for a minute. Jodie Foster—there's one more thing. I said she's a very good actress. On the second opening night, the security knew who I was and sort of let me permeate their barrier going in and out. After the show I went up to her, she was totally alone, we were totally alone in this room because of the strange security and I said how much I'd admired what she had done out there that night because—actually there was a shooter who had come to the play, but when he saw all the heat around him he thought better of it. He had scrolled on his hotel mirror "I have come to fulfill John Hinckley's destiny" and he had a gun in his pocket but he never brought it out. It was that kind of intention. She didn't know that at the time but there

was obviously—it was the focal point of the universe for that moment. I said to her, “I really admired what you did tonight.” She looked up to me with those baby blue eyes or whatever they are—I think they are, and she said, “Oh I was so nervous, my mother was out there.” [AW laughs] I thought, This is either the stupidest young lady I have ever met, or the most self-possessed person I have ever met. It turned out to be the other, it turned out to be the second. She is extraordinary, her focus is incredible I would never want to get in her way. She’s a very nice person, I always—I used to talk to her in the library once a night every night. I was doing some heavy research and she was always there.

AW:

With regard to her, I’m struck by the fact that she’s one of those who has branched out into doing other things in movies.

JM:

She’s a very capable person.

AW:

Yeah and seems very adept at whatever it is she chooses to do.

JM:

Yes.

AW:

Has she had the same fascination for the theater even though she hasn’t done it?

JM:

I don’t think so, I don’t think so. I think that’s wise on her part, mostly because she knows that she’s still nut bait. There’s always going to be someone out there who wants to fulfill John Hinckley’s destiny. So I think she has to be very wary about showing herself in public.

AW:

There’s also something to be said for if you’re a great sprinter why don’t you want to be a pole-vaulter too, you know if you’re really good at something—

JM:

They are quite different. People tend to equate music and theater as the arts—among the arts and so naturally they understand each other, naturally you can flow easily from one to another, but it’s not so. Very different ethos. When I was serving as dean I noticed this—it was talking with people in the system we were getting them to spend a great deal of money on the 3D art building because the facilities were health hazards, proven health hazards. It was getting into the scandal,

loss of accreditation range, and so they had to go into a facility that was clean and they spent money on hospital grade clean, operating room clean. So it was lots of money spent on the jewelry makers at Texas Tech. So if you would talk about, “Well we need more theater facilities,” they said, “You people are never satisfied, your students have this—we just spent all this money on your students.” This is like 1 percent of our students will get into that building. The arts are wonderfully segregated among themselves, self-segregated. Wondrously is the better word.

AW:

They speak different languages for one thing. Again from my own limited experience, I found that if I had, as I often do, write things with music in them I found it easier to find people who could sing, and then find someone who could teach them to get through the play than it was the other way around. Not to denigrate acting it was just that there was—on the scene there was a natural facility that was required for a part that kind of voids the phrasing, those kinds of things that are very—and you certainly don’t do those—you can’t really remake that person. It seemed like at least when the actors had someone to work with—or those people had someone to work with they could—maybe what I’m getting at is that there’s a certain amount of acting in singing and they could build on that into the physicality of the role. Does that make some sense?

JM:

I understand that—we have two different programs on campus that do musical theater. One does musical theater and the other does musical theater.

AW:

Right.

JM:

They’re totally different approaches, totally different entities. One has—this is more in the music school it’s, we get the singers, we get the people that can sing the roles, and then you know they can act it because anyone can act.

AW:

Well, they also don’t pick, let us say things that are written to be well acted.

JM:

Sometimes they do. It can all benefit from being well acted.

AW:

Well, they would all benefit from it but—

JM:

Yeah I know what you're—

AW:

A good actor would be wasted on musical Texas. Let me just say—if I may make that observation.

JM:

Then again one might be surprised at what a good actor could do because sometimes that happens. There are people who can make something out of a nothing role. Our approach has always been kind of, if you can act it, then we'll cast you, and if you can sing okay, if you can sing well enough. Two different kind of criteria, neither of them quite right.

AW:

Although the things I've been involved with on either side—I actually did music direction for one of the plays that the theater—school of dance, theater dance did the Steinbeck play, sets music—

JM:

The Grapes of Wrath.

AW:

Yeah we actually threw out the music that went with it and we used Woody Guthrie. But it was such a stunning performance on the stage, and the set was remarkable. Fred did an incredible stage, and it was my first working with Andrea Bilkey, and she actually created brown light, which I thought was maybe the only time I've ever seen that. But the elevation of the piece with those theatrical elements was you know light years above the *Oklahoma* sort of style thing. I know there are audience that they want to go see *Oklahoma* because they like to see the elbows flying on stage and that sort of thing, but oh well, that's just an observation.

JM:

We're now working towards sort of a middle ground where it's musically not just adept but excellent and also theatrically, but basically they have to act and have good voices. It doesn't easily go together, it doesn't automatically go together.

AW:

Yeah well and also, I think the good voices thing is over emphasized on the musical theater side. Although this is a movie one of my favorite musicals as a movie is *Paint Your Wagon* and Lee Marvin singing his song "I was born under a Wandering Star," you know and his gravely off key sort of almost evasive voice is a highlight of the whole piece. It's not—you couldn't say he had a

good voice by any stretch of the imagination, but he sung it perfectly, you know? So if there is an aspect to that side of the performance that's not dependent upon, necessarily on the natural gifts.

JM:

Then there are these impels of Rex Harrison in *My fair lady* and Richard Burton in *Camelot* where some people have bet upon the actor with limited singing abilities can still—Orville Brynner, can still carry the role and carry the enterprise better than anyone else. Those are examples where that has paid off. We didn't really have to be that much of a singer—

AW:

Some of our favorite singers don't sing—I mean, they're not great vocalists but they're great singers. I think on the pop music scene a Chris Christopherson, a Johnny Cash, a Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, you wouldn't say these people have good voices but they are terrific singers you know and their phrasing especially and their delivery. Now when you do get the people with the brilliant voices like a Merle Haggard, or a Frank Sinatra or a Mel Torme, who are also so good at phrasing and having their say about the song. But there are a lot of people who get by just fine only being able to do the structure of the song and the way it's delivered without the thing we would think would be a required chop. Does that happen in acting? That people without—who understand the role and what the actor is to do can transcend a limited set of personal skills for the stage? Are they not that divisible?

JM:

I don't think I understand the question.

AW:

Well, you can take—let's think about Johnny Cash who sings rarely on the note, but has a sense of the musicality of the piece and in particularly his phrasing and then honesty of which he delivers it that more than make up—in fact if you tried to have Pavarotti sing that same song it would not work. So is there a place on the stage or the screen where the persons understanding—and maybe that gets back to—I have such a limited knowledge to this, but I think of like a James Dean who is very young and it seems to me that his—if you isolated one little part of him in giant, often times it was—to me, if you just watched that you went, “Oh this is too much,” or this is a little bit too much chewing the scenery. But when you watch the whole movie you saw this arch of his performance that, seemed to me, came only from someone—unless there was—of course, it was a good director, but there was some understanding of what that character was that seemed to supersede any individual part of it. Is that maybe a little bit better way to explain what I'm thinking about?

JM:

Well, I'm still not sure I understand—I'm still not sure I have an answer, but I have a little flicker of one which is—I think we talked about when Brando first appeared. The first time he was on Broadway was he played the delivery boy. He just you know brought the stuff in and he said, "Here's your stuff," and I don't think there was too much more to the part. But he did it in such a way that people thought, Well there's this play going on, and somehow someone has wondered in and thinks that he's supposed to deliver some stuff to this—it's a theater, how did this person get in? Because he was so absorbed in the reality of the life of that delivery boy in a way that audiences were not used to seeing on the stage and it certainly didn't fit in with everything else that's going on. Which is why I remember that quote from James Quinn, the top actor of the country when David Garrick came along and he said, "If that young fellow is right then I and my fellows have all been wrong," which proved to be the case. It was—he came in and just proved everyone else on stage wrong because he came in with a totally different level of belief and absorption in the role that nobody had ever seen before.

AW:

That's a great description, belief and absorption. Would that lead one to think that whether one was a transformative actor or one was a method actor, or one was—whatever you call it, but these are only ways of getting a person to believe.

JM:

The method acting is so concerned with truth. There's a corrective that needs to be applied, which is, Picasso saying that art is the beautiful lie that leads to the truth. It's all lying, it's not truth, its artifice, its make believe. But if you can raise that level of artifice to truth, if you can be guided by truth in your lies you create a damn good lie, a truthful lie. So even in the transformative acting, the nugget of truthfulness, even drawing upon the self to draw a very different character, that's all there and that will help you. It's not that method acting is so wrong it's that it's so incomplete.

AW:

That it's incomplete—the method?

JM:

Yes. It works within its range, which is what the motion pictures of the world for so many years, and still, that's where most of it dwells, that range is there. There are things that it can't do. It cannot transform, it cannot—it's not so good at confabulation and making up creatures that had not previously been seen, which is among the things that movies can do and that theater can do. The actor's studio was meant originally to have a producing wing, and the few times when they have ventured into that they've decided well let's not do that anymore. [AW laughs] It was not a good showcase for the success of the studio. They would tend to do Chekhov because so much of

their work focusses on Chekhov, and they couldn't put a play together, they could put scenes together. It was out of—even when they have restricted their range, it was out of their range. Their range was Chekhov scenes, everything was geared to doing Chekhov scenes. They couldn't do a Chekhov play, much less a Shakespeare play, much less anything else. A Rod Serling play maybe, a Paddy Chayefsky.

AW:

Why a Chayefsky different than Chekhov in plays verses scenes?

JM:

He wrote for the realistic theater.

AW:

Yeah. Okay.

JM:

Or the realistic film.

AW:

So he had already created the thing that they were equipped to—

JM:

Yeah he was one of theirs. He understood them, they understood him.

AW:

Is this—I think this is a little bit, not a little bit, but I think this is right on the mark of the other thing I wanted to talk about. How much time do we have?

JM:

I have until—I have until—I have plenty of time.

AW:

About 2:30. Oh, you sure?

JM:

Yeah.

AW:

Because I knew you had something to do.

JM:

But that's at four.

AW:

Oh, okay, I thought you had to be done in time for something else. Sorry. One of the things I wanted to get you to talk about today was, as a dramaturg what is the process that you go through when you're working with a particular—I would assume with a particular production. How does that begin? What are the things that you do? How do you start—how do you know when you're done?

JM:

Well, you're never done. I was practicing dramaturgy in the early phases of its existence in America. I believed, and still believe, that a dramaturg should be someone who can translate the intellectual side of theater for the practitioners, and can understand the practice enough to kind of filter the intellectual side. I do not believe the dramaturg should be the polar intellectual who is in a certain hostile environment of the practitioners. I think he should be able to speak both languages.

AW:

Not in opposition to but in—

JM:

Right in concert with the professionals, the theater people. Because they don't basically understand the language or the perspectives of the purely intellectual, and the intellectuals don't necessarily understand the theater at all. There's been this antipathy between the two realms, so that it is not uncommon that the Shakespeare professor on campus will never go see a Shakespeare play because they ruin it all the time. So to put it on stage except in his ideal production, is to ruin it, is to get it wrong and _____ [01:03:58]. Well that's not a healthy situation. And also—

AW:

It sort of leaves out the audience for one thing.

JM:

Oh yeah. To this straw man intellectual I'm creating, the audience is the reader, which is singular.

AW:

Yeah not the audience, which is plural.

JM:

Right, it's me. It's me and how I read the play, and I am going to train others to read it the same way. But it's hopeless to try to train actors to speak in my way, and they insist upon doing all that other stuff too, like dressing up and—

AW:

Moving around.

JM:

Yeah. Similarly, in the theater it's often been the most dismissive word is, "Oh that's intellectual." What is intellectual in this stereotypical theater I'm speaking of, which is a rhetorical device, but also exists in fact. Once you brand something as intellectual it's gone, it's vanished, it is treated as a pollution, that's not healthy. So the dramaturg is the doctor who comes along to cure that.

AW:

Cures it. Is the doctor also a bit of a mediator?

JM:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

AW:

So as a dramaturg, do you take the—ultimately do you take the perspective of the person sitting in the third row watching this? Seems to me that that's the only place that the mediation comes about.

JM:

Well, I do that as a dramaturg, I do that as a director. What's hard—it's an intelligent person in the third row.

AW:

Yes, I don't mean you draft people off the streets. Not only an intelligent, but an interested person in the third row.

JM:

Right. But that person is not quite as sharp as you had hoped that person to be so I'm always—clarify.

AW:

They may not always be as interested as you'd like for them to be.

JM:

Make it a little easier for this person to get, clarify. That's what I try to do. It's difficult when you're too close to a piece as a director tends to be, to see it as for the first time. So that's one of the things I try to do both as a dramaturg and as a director.

AW:

I keep trying to make analogies so I can place this within my own sphere of experience, but I spent—I write, but I also spend a fair amount of time as an editor. As you describe what a dramaturg is doing, I think that's also a good description of what an editor should be doing.

JM:

And I don't know if its coincidental, but among the skills that I stressed when I taught dramaturgy was—or when I teach dramaturgy that literal editing is part of the job because there is, in the best of theaters, a pre component, in the worst too. But in the worst a press agent can handle it all and you don't care about quality. In a good theater, the dramaturg should take as his province the stuff the theater prints about the play should be literate, interesting, and well edited, everything should be spelled right.

AW:

And it should be chosen for its getting to the gist of the thing as well, right?

JM:

Yes, oh yeah, it should be apposite to the production without explaining exactly. When I went from Harvard to American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, my job there—they didn't have a dramaturg's position, they had a sort of press guy with literary bend or something, who did part of their—some of their dramaturgical tasks. But they hired me as literary editor or—I think, publications director, I was publications director. So it was that side of my dramaturgical identity that was employed to deal with the print stuff. I was not hired to deal with—to be in rehearsal halls, they didn't want dramaturgs there.

AW:

It wasn't just a catch all that allow you to do all that, it was specific to—

JM:

Right.

AW:

So does that have something to do with that particular place or the appreciation of this role in theater?

JM:

It had to do, I think, with that particular place but that particular place was not so idiosyncratic in that respect. In that it still had that sort of, Oh we don't like intellectuals here. This head of acting who is quickly becoming my straw man, this head of acting at ACT he would say, if—I guess I kind of dabbled—I insinuated myself into a few circumstances where I had to do a plays production, how it actually happened. But he would say, "Don't give me anything to read, give me pictures, I don't want to read anything I just want to look at pictures." Not a stupid man, but if the literary medium was somehow a threat. The intellectual was somehow a threat, the graphic would do.

AW:

You said that wasn't an unusual thing to happen in theater across the nation, so it wouldn't have anything to do with the proximity of the film world because that's certainly a place where the script—pictures would be better than words.

JM:

You know maybe, it maybe—it didn't start out that way, but by the time I go there, yeah. The film world was making its intrusions into the minds of the theater people. It was the—when we got down to it, that's where we could make our money. It was not singularly devoted to theater in that respect. They did a play called *End of the World with Symposium to Follow* by Arthur Kopit. It was a play that I had worked on with the author, and it's about a playwright who's been hired to do a magazine article about the mutually ensured destruction. So he goes to interview the generals and the leading thinkers, and like a national security advisor. The director of this production in California said, "This guy is so powerful, is dealing with such huge forces, think of him—think of Hollywood agent. This person is that powerful." I thought, Oye, oh my goodness where am I?

AW:

At least you could see there was plenty of ground left to be plowed for your profession.

JM:

Yes, but they did not want me plowing it, they did not want me at all plowing it. – Which lead to one of my worst moments, my worst moments because I did get too involved in the dramaturgical side there because I knew the play. They had—this place, this theater had become kind of an acting cult under its previous artistic director, who had only recently departed. They had followed him—he was the guru and they were followers, so when he took drugs they took

drugs. When he stopped smoking they all stopped smoking, and religiously. The main character, this playwright detective is a chain smoker, and so they decided to enroll him, this character, in a twelve point program.

AW:

As part of the play?

JM:

As part of the play. They gave him a Walkman with his smoke cessation doctor in his year, and they wrote dialogue for him, which they played over the speaker. I went to the artistic director and I said, "You really can't do this, you've changed the play and he would not like this at all." The artistic director said, "Well, I don't see this as a big problem, I'll call him up and ask him." Okay, this is a first year new employee talking to the boss, and he's going to make a phone call that will have his production canceled. I said, "I wouldn't do that," because I didn't want to stop the production, but it turned out to be a bad decision, because he did hear about it, and he came out furious, threatening to stop the play while it was playing. It was very harry, very ugly. He eventually withdrew that threat out of deference to me.

AW:

So you actually did carry out your role dramaturgy in terms of being a mediator. Even though it was difficult.

JM:

I did, I did, but I wish I hadn't. I wish I had just stayed away from that.

AW:

You mean let it go on, or get it stopped at the beginning?

JM:

I wish I had not seen a rehearsal, because I couldn't see a rehearsal and not saying anything. And yet having said something, I couldn't say, "Yes, everything has to be turned topsy turvy because I say so," which is the position I was instantly in. So I guess I made the wrong decision, but seeing things in the end.

AW:

Yeah, well it's hard to say whether that was the wrong decision or not. It may have been a difficult decision but.

JM:

It was ethically challenging and I'm not sure I met the challenge, but it was a moment.

AW:

And a good Segway, if one is a mediator bringing the intellectual to the practical, the practical to the intellect. When you—not just in the situation where you by happenstance are in a rehearsal and see something that needs to be dealt with, when it's your official role to begin with, where do you start?

JM:

We have discovered that the dramaturg is most effective in circumstances where he's in at the start.

AW:

Yeah, I mean even in as the start, what part of this do you start with? Do you start with the intellectual side?

JM:

Oh—

Tova Marks (TM):

Howdy.

AW:

Hi Tova. How are you?

TM:

How are you?

AW:

I'm doing well thank you. Are you?

TM:

Getting older every minute.

AW:

I know it, but as I say I've been in for tests of one thing, and as soon as they finish up this test they want to test something else. I think well the—

TM:

We're still here.

AW:

Yeah the bad news is I'm wearing out, the good news is I'm wearing out, I'm not gone.

TM:

It's hard to accept, you know why? I figured it out.

AW:

Oh good.

TM:

The six year old is still inside you, that doesn't go away.

AW:

Yes. No, and increasingly angry with the seventy year old on the outside.

TM:

Yes, but you also get to make your own joy because it trumps the other stuff.

AW:

Yes well put.

TM:

Are you in a private conversation?

AW:

No.

TM:

Okay, then I'm going to sit over there and listen.

AW:

We would love it and you are welcome to chime in.

TM:

Oh boy. Did you hear that?

JM:

You're being recorded Cal.

TM:

Oh, I'm sorry.

AW:

No that's—

JM:

That's the point.

AW:

That's the whole point. So when you do chime in speak up. [Laughter]

TM:

Okay. I sing well, or I did sing well. Coloratura soprano, so I can project, I just didn't think I needed to.

AW:

Oh good, in fact while your—it's a good thing that you're in here watching because I told Johnathan the more I learn about you the more I think we really need to do the same thing with you.

TM:

You need to do the what?

AW:

The same thing with you. Do an oral history recording of you and your story.

TM:

I've had the adoring throngs. [Laughs] I don't need it anymore.

AW:

We promise not to adore or throng either way. So you started at the beginning of a production—what do you begin with?

JM:

Well, you begin with becoming familiar with the script and the stuff that the script suggested be good to know, be good to think about. Then arming yourself with lots of background, then you just talk. You talk to the director, you talk to the playwright, and you kind of talk normally, and just kind of say, "Here are what I think about this strengths, here's what I love about it, here's what I have questions about. I love to explore some further," and you don't get to hifalutin about

it, you kind of try to talk where they are. Sometimes they're hifalutin and then we've got problems.

AW:

You mention that as if you only work with pieces where the playwright is still around and able to enter into a conversation.

JM:

Oh no. Oh no. The artistic director of the Magic Theater in San Francisco was a former dramaturg, and I used to do programs with her in which she would [dog barks 01:24:13] talk about—see now Louise is barking at Tova, she doesn't just bark at you.

TM:

Because I never sit in this chair, they're creatures of habit.

JM:

She would be the—she would say that she was the living playwright dramaturg and I was the dead playwright dramaturg. [AW laughs] So I established a reputation as being more comfortable dealing with dead playwrights. Actually, I could've worked with both.

AW:

It seems like, in some ways, more interesting and more fruitful to deal with the dead playwrights. There's a piece there that, in some ways, can't be altered except in its practice now. So you have a more demanding and more important role in some ways, I would think, when you're working with the piece that's been chiseled into a rock.

JM:

Everything that we're talking about leads me to say—I have to talk about a production of *Endgame*. It was I think in 1984 at American Repertory Theater, the director was JoAnne Akalaitis. *Endgame* is a play written chiseled in rock. I talked to its first director, a man named Roger Blin, and he said he kept trying to get the play to loosen up a little bit, but Sam would always say, "No, tighter, quieter, less." The play had been around for decades by then. She was, the director JoAnne Akalaitis, was planning to do sort of a new take on it. I was not involved in the early part of that production discussion, and so I was brought in at a certain moment to look at the set model. It was an abandoned subway station, and my thoughts flew in my head. It was, Beckett would not approve of that, but wait a minute he's not the set designer but he would not approve, he would assert that that is not what the play is. But I don't really know Beckett, I've communicated on a limited basis with him. JoAnne Akalaitis has met Beckett, Beckett refused to allow certain pieces that were written as pros to be translated into the theater, but he allowed her to do it. He wrote his agents a note on a napkin to allow her to do texts for nothing. She gets

liberties with Beckett that nobody else gets. So do I say, “Oh no you can’t do that,” or do I say, “That’s very interesting,” or, “That’ll cause a fuss,” or whatever I said it was not, “Oh, Beckett would not like you to do that,” because I thought they knew that, that would be a dumb thing to say. Well I didn’t, and Beckett got wind of it, but it was in rehearsal, and threatened to get an injection to shut us down.

AW:

So you were right, that wouldn’t satisfy him.

JM:

Oh, I had no doubt I was right about my presumption, but was I right in my decision not to voice it. I don’t know. Again it would be, oh no—even as an established drama—I had been there for a long time, to say, “Let’s rethink this whole production,” which is not something they like to do. But you know if I had said that, there would’ve been immediate ostracization. I would’ve been proved right and they still would’ve blamed me. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know what would’ve happened if I had voiced that, but I didn’t, and so we were in a pickle. We were in a big pickle. That was an interesting bit of negotiation going on.

AW:

How did it resolve?

JM:

It resolved with—it got very serious, and the Dramatist Guild weighed in, there was—it was interesting, John Guare the playwright originally volunteered to testify on our side, but he was president of Dramatist Guild and so they persuading him that the brother was right and he shouldn’t do that. So he withdrew that, and spoke for the other side. There was quite a bit of controversy, it looked like it would get very legal. Most theaters cannot begin to think of affording that kind of fight. This was a theater that operated under the legal aegis of Harvard University.

AW:

So they could afford the fight.

JM:

Yes. Furthermore, Laurence Tribe volunteered to be our lawyer.

AW:

That’s getting pretty high cotton.

JM:
Yeah.

AW:
Because of his attachment to the cause or to the institution?

JM:
To the first amendment.

AW:
For the first amendment.

JM:
Yeah, first amendment.

AW:
The first amendment it's okay to change an intellectual property of copywrited work based on the first amendment or—

JM:
Well, they had sent—they being it was Beckett's American agent who started all this. His name—oh his name just went out of my reach for a moment, but he was the publisher of Grove Press, who had been a tremendous voice in our culture for good and a tremendous first amendment advocate. But he was in the process of losing Grove Press, and he was just panicky, and he loved publicity. So that was a bad combination for us at that moment. Why can't I think of his name? He had sent a couple of agents, coworkers, to view our rehearsal at our invitation, and they had come up with a lengthy indictment, and that indictment included seeming to be a vehicle for promotion of miscegenation, a word that hasn't been heard in our claims very recently because we had a mixed race cast.

AW:
And hence Laurence Tribe's interest.

JM:
I don't—no his interest came before that. The mixed race cast, Beckett's characters, it says that—it talks about Clov being red-faced, and we had Hamm played by a black actor and that was just not acceptable because his parents Nagg and Nell were white and black, not acceptable. It did not mention anything about rearranging texts, in fact some of the texts was rearranged so that stuff was said twice. But strangely enough they did not comment upon that. The one totally legitimate leg they had to stand on was forgotten in the midst of all the other stuff.

AW:

No mention the subway?

JM:

Oh, yes that was primary. There was also incidental music written by JoAnna's ex-husband Phil Glass, and that was an affront even though that had been approved, actually, the agent had approved that.

AW:

Was it typical Philip Glass music?

JM:

Yeah. --So we were kind of in loggerheads and the—part of my job was to create a sort of intellectual framework for the lawyers based on theatrical knowledge that was not theirs. They didn't know how things working in the theater, and part of it was what was routine and accepted within the theater community. If we were doing what was routine and accepted, then that would not violate the contract, if we were doing something out of the routine and accepted, that would be questionable. So I had to tell them sort of—I showed them all the other productions of *Endgame* that had been similarly violative that created no controversy, that they allowed. Their position, of course was, Well yeah, but you're big. When you get into court, you're dealing with what their interested in is your property, has your property been damaged. So a piece of theater becomes a property, a play becomes a property, and so how much money will you have lost by our actions. I likened it to, Okay we rented a car, we drove it around, we played music that the car company might not like on the radio, we returned the car in mint condition, but they're upset because the music we played. The property was not damaged, so back and forth, and back and forth. Finally, Liggett Knight the night before the court hearing, about four of us sat in the artistic director's office—Barney Rosette was the publisher of Grove press. It came back finally. We had a series of phone calls to Barney Rosette, and he would hang up and talk to Sam, and then we would call back. So we came up with a solution whereby we would not use Beckett's name in the advertising of the play—or maybe we wouldn't advertise, and we would print an insert in the program that would contain a statement by Beckett denouncing the production. [AW Laughs]

AW:

An anti-blurb.

JM:

Yes, calling it a travesty of his work with a rebuttal statement by the artistic director.

AW:

Did that increase your box office? Seems like it would.

JM:

Oh sure. It was not enough for the—oh I know, I remember—the stipulation was that we not advertise it with Beckett's name and the managing director's response was okay fine we just won't advertise, we won't need to. Eventually we needed to, and so we did it without the author's name, which I thought we shouldn't do and got upset about, but there it was.

AW:

How was the play received?

JM:

I think quite well. It's never been a very jolly play, it's never attracted a mob, idolatress groupies, but it was quite well received. It's just sort of—this is sort of a famous classical moment in playwright versus theater relations. There's a sort of myth that Beckett's assertions won, when actually it was just a negotiated settlement.

AW:

The fact that you still did the piece seems to counter that.

JM:

Right. But it's sort of locus classicus. It really started the playwrights getting much more assertive about their rights to control what happens on stage, not just the words that are used, but everything, including the race of the actors. That's still with us, it's still problematic.

AW:

Is it a reasonable assertion on part of the playwright?

JM:

I don't think so, no. I think that the playwright is the possessor of the words spoken. The words in italics are of lesser control over the event. They're called stage directions and there's some called the stage director. The stage director's job is not to realize the stage directions and leave it at that, because its' never sufficient, nor is it always right. As a director I believe that it is [sneezes] that it is important to pay attention to what the playwright says, but you cannot do what the playwright says so don't even think of that unless it fits your plan. But it is not as determinative as the words are, the words spoken. The casting, well that's just not their job. If they want to talk about the race of the actors, well I'm sorry that's nobody's job. But this is what they assert, and they fun drag [01:44:23] that it's the law. They put it in their contracts, and I think there is such a thing as a part of a contract that is unconstitutional.

AW:

Well, no contract, even signed and agreed to, can violate a law. In other words, if there's an existing law that supersedes that, that part of the contract is irrelevant. So they might assert that but—the thing that I'm curious about is—I think we discussed our first session that, again, my very limited experience I found as a writer, that first of all, I wasn't as nearly as important as I thought I was in the overall piece. Mostly that was because the director, and the actors, and the set designer, lighting designer, costumer, and everybody else brought something to it that was beyond my imagination when I was putting it down on paper. Why that is not universally recognized? It just seems to me that all you can do as a writer is get words down on paper—that's a lot of work.

JM:

Well, yes I think that's true as a general principal. I think there are possible exceptions, and by the way, paradoxically, I would include Beckett among them because if I were doing his work I would very much pay attention to his stage directions as kind of essential. At a certain point, of course—let me give some context before I say this. Beckett vowed that our theater would never do any of his plays again, that he would have nothing to do with any of us again, and that his plays would be done as he wanted them. Well, times change, and alas Mr. Beckett passed on, Barney Rosette lost Grove Press—oh while this was going on or soon after this was going on, I was in a class in which a green haired student proclaimed that Beckett was scum. I kind of re-altered the class to proclaiming Beckett's worthiness, his preeminence in fact.

AW:

Was that proclamation based on his work or on this controversy?

JM:

A little of both. Beckett refused to communicate with me anymore, but then he passed on. Barney Rosette lost Grove Press [coughs] and his properties went through a few different owners, and ended up with the family of this green haired student. The Getty family, who had made some money in oil, I hear.

AW:

As in J Paul Getty.

JM:

Yes. He was a grandson I think, maybe great grandson of J Paul. He was an agent with the agency now, so he may have been handling the Beckett account.

AW:

Has his opinion of Beckett changed?

JM:

I don't know. I don't know.

AW:

I'll bet it did.

JM:

Yes, so eventually that theater did *Endgame* again, despite Beckett's vows. People are doing his plays and reinterpreting them, they're not so picky as they used to be. He has become a dead playwright, and so more susceptible to this kind of work. Perhaps it was that we did that just a few years too early, I don't know, but it had been around as a bit of granite for decades already. It seems susceptible to reinterpretation, which goes back to before is that he had a history of disliking our productions of *Endgame* because we had done one previously directed by Andre Gregory, with a setting by Eugene Lee that was in a cage with a metal grail floor. It was an extraordinary production, and in stuff that was kind of audience—it went in for some kind of slap sticky stuff sometimes, or gross stuff, just—it was not as a slow plotting towards death, which is the way that Beckett kind of likes it. It seemed to be a somewhat popularized production, he didn't like that. So our second whack at it was the last straw. There was a question in there somewhere and I think I was answering it but I'm not sure.

AW:

No. so when things have organized themselves differently. and you as a dramaturg been involved at the outset of this particular piece. Just as a hypothetical, we of course, can't know because it strikes me that as a mediator once the die have been cast it's more difficult to mediate, whereas the outset of the mediator can raise the question or the issue as a question, then that becomes a very different thing.

JM:

You know if I had—if I had persuaded them of something, that would've meant a very different production, it would've ended up being one of the most famous productions of the decade. I don't know, I think they probably were determined to go in that direction, I think my voice would've been heard and dismissed, but at least they would've been better prepared, less surprised, when the whirlwind came.

AW:

Yeah, and it does—in their defense if she had already been granted variances and privileges before, one would think that that would carry forward.

JM:

That's what I thought, in my brief moment of thinking. I guess if I had been involved before, and listened to before, maybe it would've gone in some other direction that was striking but acceptable, I don't know. I don't know it's—isn't that hypothetical thinking. I probably should've been involved before.

AW:

It also goes back to one of the questions I asked which was how do you know when you're done. You know if you don't know the starting point it's really difficult to know when you're done.

JM:

Well, this one is continuing, I think it continues to be an object of controversy.

AW:

Because of the precedent or the dominos that fell afterwards?

JM:

Yeah, I think so. I referred to it as a locus classicus, and I think it is, it's when you talk about the relationship between a director—the contention between directors and playwrights this production always comes up.

AW:

You know there's a parallel in the world of construction, and that is the position of the architect and the position of the builder. It's maybe more universally contentious at the outset between those two groups necessarily playwrights and directors. There's an excellent book by the fellow who's name has escaped at the very moment, who wrote about food, he's an editor for Harper's I think or Atlantic. But he wrote this wonderful memoir essay of building a study on his property for him to work out of, and he had a college roommate who was a successful architect at that point and had the local builder, handy man guy. And the discussion throughout with the client, writer, in the middle having to arbitrate between the intellectual and the practical sounds very much like what you just described.

JM:

Do you know what the one theater that Frank Lloyd Wright designed was?

AW:

No.

JM:

Dallas Theater Center.

AW:
Really?

JM:
Yes.

AW:
Does it work?

JM:
Here's the deal. They moved out of it, but after decades of being in it. He decided that one cool thing would be to have a theater without right angles. In keeping with that, the shop was below the stage, to get furniture on the stage from the shop there was a curving ramp from the basement up to the stage that you were supposed to push stuff up, push the furniture up. They immediately decided what they needed was an elevator, which tend to come in sort of boxy shapes with right angles. So they built an elevator to the basement, the ramp is there but there's also an elevator—I don't think they use the ramp very much. One day Wright decided to come visit his theater, and let them know, and they spent the whole day piling stuff up in front of the elevator because they did not want him to know that they had built an elevator because you can't run a theater without right angles. There was weather though and his plane couldn't land in Dallas or something like that, so he never did actually get to the theater that day.

AW:
There are some things on their face seem attractive, that when you go to do them don't quite pan out. The first time I ever did a performance, it wasn't theater, it was music but in the round you realized that your butt is always going to be toward somebody you know, there wasn't a good way to do that. You could never orient yourself in a way that made sense. You know the book I was mentioning about, I want to say it's not a room of one's own it's *A Place of One's Own*. One of the curious things was that the general resolution of the whole thing was summed up in the siding of the building on the property where the architects went in, the builder went in and the writer invited someone who did Feng Shui and all of them put the location of the building in the same place. So it's something of real because statement in any case life is right, whatever happens is really the—ultimately the correct thing whether you set out to make it that way or not. This is so enjoying to me to get to hear you talk about your work as a dramaturg because the integration of those two sides seems, to me, to be at least one of the places along with what the actor brings, what the director brings, and their individual approaches. But it seems to be an essential part of the creative process of getting the play to be what it's going to be.

JM:
For the last twenty-five years I've been doing a lot more directing than dramaturgy.

AW:

And why? Can you wrap the dramaturgy into the directing?

JM:

Yes, yes. I think I have—it is more fulfilling to be in the role of deciding what's to be done and what you can do. After listening to the input of a number of people including a dramaturg, and including my own dramaturgical side. I tend to work very collaboratively, but I guess I feel like I'm pretty good at knowing what the Feng Shui of a scene is and getting it kind of right. So I enjoy that. I do feel quite creative, and it really benefits me to do it very collaboratively. I have grown up kind of thinking of the director as an authoritarian figure because that's the sort of classical view of the director, if such a thing can be said to exist. But there's also a sort of a more collaborative way of doing it has developed, and I find myself more congenial to that. But as I do it the director makes the ultimate decision, but lots of people have their hands in it so that sometimes you don't know who the director is. You get as you say, everyone's creativity contributing to the whole.

AW:

I found that I was a lot smarter if I let other people be a part of it. Or maybe I just wasn't smart enough on my own to do it all.

JM:

People who are smart enough are usually pretending.

AW:

That would certainly be the case for me.

JM:

We have the example of the supreme Carleton who knows more than the generals, who knows more than everyone else about everything. And we see that though obviously lots of people are persuaded that's true, it's really just all bluff, and a lot of directors have managed to pull that pose off but I don't mostly try to do that.

AW:

Yeah, quite interesting. Barry Corbin tells a wonderful story about he and Tommy Lee Jones doing a scene in *No Country for Old Men* with the Coen brothers, and about how—the short version is they see the scene, the two of them sitting there side by side watching the scene being filmed, and at the conclusion of the scene they exclaim in the most incredible adjectives about how brilliant it was, about how excellent it was, how superlative it was. And then as soon as they nodded to each other back and forth talking about this and here Tommy Lee and Barry are thinking the Coen brothers love what we did. The first thing they said was let's do it again and

they did that for a day and a half. And then I said, "Well, what'd you think about that Barry?" And he said, "Well it was a good piece of directing because by the time they had gone through that they never said here's what's wrong, here's what I want, they just kept let's keep doing it." He at least—the actor I haven't talked to Tommy Lee Jones about it, but Barry thinks that they did a much better job at the end of that. I thought that was an interesting thing about the director creating a circumstance in which the actor was challenged but still wasn't instructed. Does that—

JM:

Yeah.

AW:

--Make sense.

JM:

Um-hm, um-hm, yeah it's good directing. I'm focusing on—a lot on my failures I noticed, but they're instructive.

AW:

Well we can—failures are understandable.

JM:

I'm about to tell you a new one. When I was an undergraduate people kept urging me to go see plays at the Loeb Drama Center at Harvard.

AW:

Loeb Drama Center.

JM:

Yes.

AW:

L-o-w-e?

JM:

L-o-e-b. Which is where I eventually worked for some number of years. But it seemed quite far away, and they said, "You've got to see these undergraduate actors Stockard Channing and Tommy Lee Jones. I thought, I'm not going to go all that way to see an actor named Tommy Lee anything, I mean come one. So that was stupid, and so I missed out on that.

AW:

I was going to say that we can understand our failures, it's very difficult to understand the success. How did that happen? And especially if your object is in understanding it so that you can replicate it. You can avoid the next failure by looking at the failure, but the success is difficult. Tommy Lee is and interesting—I know him only—I've never worked on obviously on stage or anything with him or anything, but I've been around him enough and he's more complicated than one would think.

JM:

Yeah?

AW:

He's rough and gruff and all that sort of thing. I watched him at a reception one night at the cowboy hall of fame when they were stars, most of them older, you know, established stars who were there with their entourages and the people flocking around them. Tommy Lee Jones I watched him on more than one occasion separate himself from the thing and go out and see a couple of meeker, quieter people standing off by themselves, and he went up and introduced himself and signed autographs. I thought that was so contrary to all the reports of Tommy Lee Jones. The other thing that always strikes me about him is that he has more than once had a part written into a movie for my friend Jo Harvey Allen because he likes her work. So yet he's not all peaches and cream. Talk about—this may be difficult for you to do, but talk about a success.

JM:

I'm thinking of two cowboy hall of famers maybe who are actually born in Cincinnati, Roy Rogers—

AW:

Yep. Leonard Slye.

JM:

And Annie Oakley.

AW:

Really I didn't know where she was born.

JM:

She was from near there. I think she was from a town has now-- that Cincinnati has now engulfed.

AW:

You know she is an interesting character, and one that I don't know of any treatment of her life has been what I would think to be worthy of what a remarkable creature she was. Not just in her marksmanship but her assertion of carving out this role, this place in the world and fitting the persona at a time when that was—and of all things shooting a weapon you know, fire arm, very interesting. What about a success? Do you mind, will it feel too much like bragging?

JM:

I think of my successes as things that I liked and some other people liked. One I'm proud of is this thing I concocted called the Low Life Leader.

AW;

Low life?

JM:

Yes.

AW:

As in L-o-w life.

JM:

Yes. Low Life Leader.

AW:

Where did you concoct that?

JM:

In San Francisco at San Francisco State University. It was in a Black Box theater, and it was songs of Kurt Vile, and we set it in sort of dive in an unidentified middle European country. The way it worked out was that the songs were either in English—mostly in English, I think we had some German and French thrown in. But surrounding the songs was this sort of environmental play in a made up middle European language. We did it through improvisation and what's now called devising, it didn't have that name then, or any name particularly, collective creation. We kind of fashioned the characters to the actors. We assigned the songs along the way.

AW:

You didn't start out with we're going to do these twelve songs?

JM:

No, we had a sheaf of songs that we worked on, and we eventually had to pick. Our improvisation started out—at some point, I just told them to say, “Okay just make up the words, make up a language.” Originally they started in English and I wasn’t satisfied with that. I guess part of it was there was such a frustrating process for the actors because they obviously weren’t used to working like this, they didn’t know what they were doing exactly. At a certain point I got a delegation sent, “When are we going to have a script,” I said, “Oh, no script. No, we’re kind of creating it.” I guess it was a success because it was so troubling to them, and yet what happened was, out of all this improvisation, there was really—they came up with a resemblance of a script, I paired it down. We took the language we and established some rules and some common vocabulary, some exceptions to the rules.

AW:

So it could be repeated. Just like any language.

JM:

Yeah. There were certain things that were still open and other things that, “Okay the que has to be this word.” Out of this chaos came a beautifully controlled production that actually made sense. People watched this—it started with seventeen minutes of establishing the characters, establishing the situation—

AW:

In English?

JM:

No, no.

AW:

Oh, no. In the made up language.

JM:

Yeah. We had a character who came on who was obviously a deranged woman, obviously homeless. She came and she was fascinated with the piano, she would bang [bangs on the table] on it, and say, “Oh.” The thing that made her feel good was the idea of *lieder plunken*, *lieder plunken* that she would play German art songs on this piano. She sat and she banged a little, and then suddenly this cue was hit, and these people were all kind of dragging around and having their little conflicts, their little amours, and whatever, and suddenly she struck a cord, and we were doing a choral number in English that made perfect sense, and it’d fit into the ambiance. It was the “Alabama Song” from *Mahagonny* that was the first number. Like that moment itself, which it felt—okay this is really crazy, the whole thing was probably describing it, it sounds

crazy, but when she hit that cord and they all started singing in harmony, and being different characters and being in English, different lighting, and suddenly there was staging, the whole concept made sense and seemed like a thing worth doing.

AW:

How did audiences react?

JM:

Initially it was confused, and then they were kind of suckered into it. By the end they just loved it.

AW:

Did you happen to have film or video of this?

JM:

A very bad film.

AW:

Gosh, I would love to see it.

JM:

I've never been able to look at it but I do have it somewhere.

AW:

I would love to see it, I really would.

JM:

Okay. When I unpack I'll see if I can find it.

AW:

As you were talking about this, it just flashed across my head, I travel a lot and drive around in small towns. Last week I was all down in the Big Bend over around, and I go by lots of railroad tracks and I see lots of train cars and I'm really taken with the train car graffiti. The art figures, but also the odd words and language and the way that those words are constructed. When you mention this made up tongue I thought, My goodness. Because when I drive by I look at them and I think, How would I pronounce that word, that thing that's on there that some tagger painted on the side of the—and what did it mean to them, where did it come from in their language, I mean their construction. As you continue to describe the piece, it seemed to make perfect sense that it would develop in the same way.

JM:

People got into it. I guess I enjoy that process of initial discomfort, and then, oh I get it, and then it's not so much I get it, I can make my way here, and oh this is interesting let me explore it. I did a play called *My Sister in This House* by Wendy Kesselman, and it's the same story as Genet the Maids. It's about a bourgeois household in Le Mans, France in 1930 and this bourgeois woman and her daughter take in a couple of maids who are sisters, and they live together for quite some time, and the sisters do their job, and one day they kill the mistress and the daughter and chop them up and throw their eyeballs around. A true story. So how does this happen. It's a fairly realistic piece, and very sort of we hear the clock going tick tock tick tock for several years before this explosion of violence. I simply set about to do the play, which involved casting. As I looked at the casting process, something happened when I looked at, "Okay who are the best actresses?" My first thinking was, Okay it's a realistic play so you cast according to type, and I said, "Okay who are the best actresses?" Then they don't fit any of these types. So I ended up casting a sort of Irish American girl as the daughter, a bohemian woman as her mother, a black bohemian woman as her mother. As the two sisters had sort of New Mexico, English, Indian, Hispanic girl, and as her sister somebody from Bombay, Mumbai, because they were the best actresses. So you to suffuse this realistically with this wacky casting, and it's like the audience—I kept getting, for the first few minutes of course, I was put off, I did not understand why this was happening, and then I forgot that and just got into the play, and so I totally forgot. I guess my message here in doing that was I did an all-female *Twelfth Night*. Two reasons, the original was done same sex, and it plays around with sexual identity, and the girls act better than boys, so I cast an all-female production. There was one guy who didn't speak but he played instruments, played recorder and various things. So there was one guy but we didn't make much of him, the rest were all women. The reaction was, "Well at first I didn't understand, I didn't get it, it made no sense, and then I forgot, I forgot about it, and at the curtain call I was surprised that they were all girls. Now that, that's a success. That's a success. It's to enforce the women's suspension of disbelief.

AW:

I was just about to ask that question. That these—pardon me I didn't mean to startle you Thelma. These various things that you talked about seem to be a maybe more extreme method of doing it, but the suspension of disbelief is such, to me, a key element to make theater work. That and the humanity that's on stage in front of you instead of an image on a screen. The fundamental difference in having real people doing things, which is why a kiss on stage is far more powerful than a kiss on screen, whatever it be, because you never lose the fact as the audience that those are people. But the suspension to disbelief, what great ways of doing that, mixing things up including the Beckett piece.

JM:

It just seems so—how could they possibly put themselves down as meeting that position. The play shouldn't promote miscegenation. How could Barney Rosette, a flaming liberal, endorse such a notion?

AW:

Well, we all know how positions sometimes waver in the face of cash.

JM:

I think he was just in a panic over losing his.

AW:

Right, well its 3:30 and I know you've got some place to be. I'm going to say thank you, and I hope this is not the last time we talk. I've got some other questions, but thanks again.

JM:

Well, thank you.

AW:

It's been of great fun today.

JM:

I'm glad. I'm glad.

AW:

And thank you Thelma for not barking at me, you have a special place in my heart.

JM:

Where did Louise go? Oh she's in her—

AW:

She's ignoring us or ignoring me.

JM:

Self-exiled.

AW:

All right thanks.

[End recording]