



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Jasper
Deeter, 1964

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jasper Deeter in 1964. The interview took place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was conducted by Richard Keith Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: Well as I mentioned, Mr. Deeter, I think that it's of interest and importance to us to know something of your professional background. How you started in theater and how you became what you were in the 1930s.

JASPER DEETER: Well, I—because I came from a town called Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and because I managed to see a great many roadshows, I was interested at a very early age in how can these people possibly do the same thing night after night after night. What was called "the road" was very popular then, and plays would tour for, well, perhaps a year and a half or two years after running for one year in New York, or whatever the management thought was wise. And I had the feeling—without any knowledge at all—but I had the feeling that it would be better if these people had an opportunity to do something else some other night.

So quite accidentally and in a very amateurish way, my one and only purpose for myself in the theater—and it was entirely selfish at first—was that there should be change. Change in the theater means repertory. So when I first went to New York, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Coburn had announced a repertory of plays. Therefore, I joined then what was called the Greenwich Village Theater which is now gone, was down on Sheridan Square. They did a musical called *The Better 'Ole*. It made a mint. Therefore, their idea of repertory vanished and what I had hoped might be possible for myself was obviously not true because the Coburns hadn't made a lot of money before and if can put out three road companies and make more dollars, why shouldn't just stay with the *The Better 'Ole*? So that's what they did.

My role in that little show was that of a soldier. It was a very small part, but by the time we moved up to 48th Street, to the Cort Theater, and the show was a hit, I was playing the part of a vicar who received returning soldiers in the last scene of the play. For what was called "improper care of costumes," I was fired during the week of February 22, 1919. The play had opened just after the real Armistice Day, which was 1918, wasn't it?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: I remember that our dress rehearsal was held on the day of the false armistice announcement. I remember the celebration in Sheridan Square and going back to the theater. That's all I can do about dates. I'm not a historian. I'm spending a great deal of energy working for a wealthy foundation, which I hope yours is, trying to recall history. I've only one gag on the subject. I've been too busy making history to remember it. So many of my facts will be off, they'll be wrong, but my purposes will be the same as they always have been since whatever that was, 1918—is that the—I believe, that the most valuable form of theatrical presentation for the sake of the so-called undiscovered playwrights, unknown material, for the experimentation of directors, and for the experience of growth of the actors and directors, that repertory is the only valuable form.

After this episode of being chopped out for a reason—what was called a reason—then I learned Frank Conroy intended to do repertory back at the same theater that we had started in, the Greenwich Village Theater on Sheridan Square. He did what I thought—although I know nothing about the Hindu drama, I knew nothing then, I know less now. I've never had time to study it.

[00:05:00]

But he did what I thought was, certainly for me, an educational experience—what I thought was a good production of Kalidasa. Some of the highbrow say Kalidasa. I'm not going to study how to pronounce it. [Richard Doud laughs.] I know who wrote the play, that's good enough for me. He did this beautiful play and I thought did quite well, but the public did not like. And Frank Conroy could always get work in other things, and somehow or other that venture toward repertory disappeared.

At that time, way back then, Sunday night theater on Broadway was illegal, so I had spent a good many Sunday night's going to 133 MacDougal Street, where the right name of the theater in those days was the Playwright's Theater. A title insisted upon by Susan Glaspell, Gene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, George Cram Cook, Charles Ellis, Norma Millay, Eleanor Fitzgerald. And at that place they were doing—they had a rather restrictive policy which was: we shall produce nothing but one-act plays written by citizens of the United States. Among these one-act plays were the early sea plays by Eugene O'Neill, which were later produced together under the title of *SS Glencairn*, and they included *Bound East for Cardiff*—I think, *The Long Voyage Home* was part of the series, I'm not sure which ones I saw. But because I was then—although more deeply interested in repertory than anything else, but having these two, what you might call, brush off experiences in relation to the repertory, I thought, Well, you better do what everybody else does. You'd better become the manufacturer of an individual and personal career in the performing arts. And this institution—Provincetown Playhouse was its nickname because they had come from Provincetown—this institution conducted by these Provincetowners at 133 MacDougal Street, presented six different bills of plays a year, where I saw these early O'Neill plays and some other things that I admired greatly—*Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, *Aria de Capo* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Some rather ordinary farces but bright. *Not Smart* by Wilbur Daniel Steele. A very light comedy by Floyd Dell, whose name I can't recall right now.

I felt that here was a place where an actor had a chance to appear six times a year, and a few of the uptown critics were then covering the work. I think that at that time, they included Heywood Broun, Alexander Woollcott, and Kenneth McCallen [ph]—I'm not sure because he was on something called *the Evening*—might have been *Telegraph* or *Telegram*, one of the many New York papers that died. But your name was mentioned. You were intelligently panned or intelligently praised by these three, and I believe other persons. I know that Alan Daigle [ph] from the Hearst papers had moved East from *the Chicago American* and he was pretty disdainful about the whole outfit, and of course at that time, the critics had to pay to get in, so not many of them came. Anyway, it was a way to get personal individual attention, and I did this kind of a postponement of principals, which in a way was a surrender, and I thought, Well, if you've got to get yourself known, why, here's the place to do it, because the acting was not too good. The direction, in my opinion, was very sloppy and I saw a chance to work.

[00:10:01]

In this play by Kalidasa or Kalidasa, called *Skakuntala*, I was playing something that I think was called the second fisherman. And by very good chance Otto Liveright was playing another fisherman in the play. And he was rehearsing with this other group and through him, I got an introduction to the then-directors, Ida Rowell [ph] and James Light and I was engaged for November of the following year and I played there in six bills. And I returned to them for a second year. Now, this meant that instead of the Broadway salary of *The Better 'Ole*, we received \$15 for two weeks of performances, and during the three weeks of rehearsals—I don't know whether the others were supported by pleasantly inclined or enthusiastic grandmothers from home, but I supported myself by copyholding for the J.J. Little & Ives, Company out near the East River working from 12 midnight till eight in the morning. I worked in the kitchen at the Racquet Club. I worked in that one time baptist hotel which I think still exists on Washington Square. It used to have an electric cross over it, called—what, the Judson or something like that? Short order cook, the kind of places where the help boiled potatoes and peas, and if you wanted something better to eat, the best act you could put on was to drop it on the floor [Richard Doud laughs] and find it unable to serve—unable to—find yourself unable serve it, and clean it off and eat it yourself.

Now, this continued through a—the situation went on, for me, during a whole first year. In the second year, the first play produced was *The Emperor - Jones*! Since you're in the research business it might be interested to you note—for you to know, this title has, as far as

I know, never been correctly printed. The title was *The Emperor*, a long dash, *Jones*, exclamation point. When we presented the play here in Hedgerow Repertory Company in Rose Valley—one of its runs was 16 years long in the repertory—it was still impossible to get any newspaper or anything to print that title as Eugene O'Neill's original manuscript shows. It's very important. It's *The Emperor*, so a long pause, and the *Jones* comes out with an exclamation point. This play made dollars.

I had a vague hope about which I did nothing during this time of working like mad to keep myself eating, but I still had a vague hope that in that place, 133 MacDougal Street repertory might be developed. You must understand that this is not an intelligent approach, it's not a reasoned approach. It was only the way in which I would like to see things done. I felt that without variety there must be staleness from repetition. The highbrows used the phrase "the freshness of impact," and not only is possible that many very able performers have been able to give the freshness of impact to plays that run for years, but it's very, very hard to do. The phrase I use for actors is not freshness of impact, it is that this material must be played as though it never happened before and could never possibly happen again. Well, I thought there was a chance for this kind of thing, but there again, this in the case of the Coburns with success, *The Emperor - Jones!*, it was known, of course, as *The Emperor Jones*, made dollars.

[00:15:09]

So a half interest in the show was sold to Adolf Plouver [ph]. Some of us who saw the financial possibilities borrowed money. I borrowed \$200 and bought one-fifth of the Provincetown share for myself, made a lot of money out of it. Why not? That was my attitude at that time. Why not? We played four or five weeks of special matinees at the Selwyn Theater on 42nd Street. I believe we played Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons. All the non-matinee days. The business was good and the show was moved to a regular eight times a week run at the Princess Theater on 39th Street, another theater building which is now gone. I think every theater in New York that I played in, except The Cort, has been destroyed. I know the 44th Street is gone, I played there for a month in another play that would come later. And since I was in New York working yesterday, I didn't have time to sightsee, but I did notice that one that used to be called the Jolson up on Seventh Avenue up near the park seems to me to be gone. Maybe it's there and I missed it. That was a later story. That was a run of the Čapek's insect comedy [*Pictures from the Insects' Life*] comedy which old man Bill Brady called *The World We Live In*.

Anyway, we went to the Princess. The business was quite good. By the time it began to falter, one of the leading ladies of the American theater refused an invitation issued by the Drama League, which was then a rather important organization, was trying to do the best it could for what it considered worthwhile efforts—doings in the theater that might not catch the degree of financial support and popularity that these people felt were merited. I'm very glad to say I can't remember the lady's name. It was one of the leading ladies who—they gave two prizes each year, two honors. They probably used the word best or [inaudible] or outstanding or successful or best woman performance of the year and the best man performance of the year.

Charles Gilpin, our Emperor Jones, was awarded the man's honorary, means go to a lunch and so on. Received adulation. Mr. Gilpin's word for it was "Reflective glory, Jasper, reflective glory." [Richard Doud laughs.] Anyway, the lady who received the chief honor of the year was white, and she must have been conscious of the fact. She refused the—to accept the invitation, and of course, the show at the Princess went into sellouts right away. So it became a kind of a—it was the first legitimate economic success. But this first-page space in *the New York Evening Post* in a story written by Henry Beckett gave us standing room only, and I think standing room is not allowed in that theater, I don't know, but I know they only seated about 332, or something like that, a little bit over the 300-mark, or maybe it was the old license restriction of 299, I'm not sure.

There was a problem called race in those days, too. Some people did notice that you happened to be born white and I happen to be born purple, or whatever distinctions they make. And after this particular kind of success, there was a moment that should, Mr. Gilpin and I always had to watch our timing on the first scene. I was playing Smithers, the cockney role—the cockney beachcomber role—and he has a threat in the first scene.

[00:20:10]

[Imitates character] "Talk polite, white man. Talk polite, do ya hear me? I's boss around here now, is you forgettin'?" We [would be quite appalled (ph)] because usually from the orchestra floor anywhere from eight to 12 or 14 people would leave the auditorium. Sometimes they would leave noisily enough that we could get away with a little [sotto voce -Ed.] dirty talk on the stage and sometimes maybe we were heard, but it didn't matter at that time. Anyway, that play ran on and on. It went, I think, the full length of the season which I believe used to close about—just shortly after Memorial Day when there was no air conditioning in the New York houses, I'm not sure how long it ran.

Now I have to go back, in my second year of one-act plays at MacDougal Street, I had the good fortune to be directed by Edward Goodman, who is still, I think, the head of the American Academy of Dramatic Art in Manhattan. The play was one of the really lost O'Neill plays called *Exorcism*, in which I played the allegedly autobiographically written role about Gene's unsuccessful effort to commit suicide. The play is was a deliberate experiment in anti-climax. There was some sort of a way to kill yourself in those days which was very popular, some sort of a drug whose name I can't remember. If you walked around for enough hours, you survived. And this character walked around so then he was going to live again. It was a happy ending in scene one, this is was a two-scene one-act play. In the second scene, it deliberately experimented in anti-climax—I imagine, influenced by Gene's deep appreciation of Strindberg, but I don't know enough Strindberg to say that's what really influenced him, and I'm not going to stop to study Strindberg at age 71, you can do that. [Richard Doud laughs.] But anyway, in the second scene, there's a business of facing life and it becomes a little bit like Shaw's gag in *The Doctor's Dilemma* when Ralph Bloomfield Bonington sees that the case that he's handling may be lost, he says, [Imitating character] "Well, as my dear friend Sir James M. Barrie so tersely phrases it, Better dead, better dead." So the feeling in this second scene—which I don't play very well, and I think Eddie Goodman directed it well, but I don't know, I was too busy trying to do better than I could—I'm quite sure my performance was bad. Anyway, this scene quite horrified the public at that time, and I believe, irritated the critics but I never kept scrapbooks. I don't—I'm always interested in what's going to happen tomorrow or next year or somewhere in the future. I agree with Susan Glaspell that an artist is a man who keeps faith only with the quality of the light that waits.

Anyway, during this experience, we had a board at that time, a board of 10 people I think it was, who were like an executive committee of the Provincetown Players for the Playwright's Theater. And because of—I guess because of some conversations, or maybe because my ideas were not well incorporated in my acting for some reason or other, Eddie Goodman went to this board and told them that I was the—he said just the one member, that I was one member of the company who ought to be directing. Well, the board tried to—the board decided, not tried—the board decided to entrust me with the direction of the play by George Cram Cook called *The Spring*.

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They arranged that I could be replaced in the long run of *Jones*, at the Princess, and direct this play, which I did.

Alex Woollcott was then very much respected as a drama critic and I just remember the lead of his story: Well, the cast [inaudible] as it passed by MacDougal Street, Jasper Deeter has praise, et cetera. New York, even then, with almost seventy individual playhouses, loves, as it does now, exceptional and newfound reputations. It doesn't make a bit of difference whether I was able as Woollcott thought or not, but that was important, that—it gives you status. Status may last 90 minutes or it may last two-and-a-half years. I have no interest in status—I have none, thank God. But anyway, I was then entrusted with co-direction with George Cram Cook. He was the author of *The Spring*, the husband of Susan Glaspell. He was the husband of Susan Glaspell. They're both gone now. And I was entrusted to have the job of co-directing *Inheritors* by Susan Glaspell. So I had two experiences in the direction that year.

Now, as it came time for the *Jones* run, I kept going back and forward in a—I can't do the dates at all, I don't know what—I know that Charles Ellis took my place in the Smithers role at the Princess, and I just cannot remember. I remember one section of the run of *Inheritors* in which I played with Smithers, it was a short show, and taxied to MacDougal Street to play the third-act role of Ira in the play that I had directed, *Inheritors*. I can remember doing the two things at once, which was almost as dizzying as working in kitchens [Richard Doud

laughs] or falling asleep over the printing presses in J.J. Little & Ives Company, where my fatigue gave a costly first edition error, by the way, to one of Gene's plays. I had done the original typing—because his cramped longhand was very hard for people to work out—with the help of a magnifying glass and patience, I had typed his longhand script of the play called *Different* for use at the 133 MacDougal Street. And I think the right phrase that ought to be in that first edition is "from [inaudible] to keelson." Well, I knew the play by heart by this time and I let the proofreader get by with the word [inaudible] instead of keelson, and think that *n* is still in there and I think it means nothing in the language of able-bodied seamen. I think it was a dreadful error, but anyway, I was sleeping.

But I did this commuting thing, and by the time *The Emperor Jones* closed, two things persuaded me to try to continue the totally unventilated season on MacDougal Street—horribly hot conditions. My chief—well no, that's not the way to do it. Most of my energy came from the fact that a number of younger persons associated with the organization had been very loyal and had worked hard and were not having enough of the experience they really wanted, which was to play. One of these was Emily Taft, the daughter of the Chicago sculptor, Lorado Taft. I think she was or is Mrs. Senator Douglas, I don't know. I don't know about politics.

RICHARD DOUD: What was that?

JASPER DEETER: I think Emily married Douglas. I had used Ann Harding in the leading role in *Inheritors* and she immediately—because of a certain vibrant personality—and two different natural colors of blonde hair being—half of her head going albino or albeano [ph],—whichever that word is—and the other golden—she had immediately been offered things which were very important to her because she had lived long enough for—on \$18 a week as a secretary for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

[00:30:11]

She had to take advantage of her opportunities because her father, a general, was heartily opposed to the theater. So she had every reason for leaving for more dollars elsewhere. And with Emily Taft in the leading role—other chances for other persons, I did another but nowadays they call it "revival," dreadful word. Did another production of the same play. I remember I did a bill of one act plays in which I wanted to use two of the things I had seen there years before, or sometime before, *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell and *Aria Da Capo* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Then I made a very important tactical error. I produced a play that I'm very fond of by Gustav Wied, W-I-E-D, Danish I think, called *Autumn Fires*. Now that came under the wire of the wishes of the executive committee because it was a one-act play, but it was not written by a citizen of the United States. So, therefore, all the authorities got mad—not all—but the word was expressed to me by my friend, Susan Glaspell, who was especially irritated because my production—I think this is what—this is maybe not fair, but anyway, her irritation followed upon an especially glowing notice written for one of the highbrow magazines, I think it was called *The Dial*. Ernest Boyd, who had been—I guess he had had his own—in his own way had been noticing that there were many fine one-acters in Europe that this organization was not noticing. Well, I did this quite unconsciously, it gave me a chance to have eight or nine of the men who had had only small roles all year in interesting character parts. And so, I can't say I was thrown out of the theater. I think I was pruned out. [Richard Doud laughs.] Anyway, they were right, their policy had been original one-acter by, what I think they called, American playwrights. I think they meant t United States, but I think they called it American.

And then I next went on—*The Emperor Jones* was planned for tour. And we opened Labor Day the next year in Baltimore and that same day I received my notice firing me. I have no anguish about the word fired. I have to go back, may I go way back into history?

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly.

JASPER DEETER: Beginning in 1910 I became quite accidentally acquainted with the dramatic recitals and then gradually acquainted, in 1911, with the teaching ability of Professor Clarke, as everybody called him. S. H. Clarke, the father of ballad [ph]. Who was head of what I think was called—oh, something like public speaking department, University of Chicago. I don't know what his all-time job was. But Chautauqua Institution had then—and I think now still has, under the auspices of some university but then it was on it's own—a six week summer school. I found this man so valuable—this man's knowledge and his skills, so

valuable to me that I planned to return there every summer. Which I did from 1910 to 1920. I continued to study with Dr. Clarke after I was—uh, playing [ph] in New York, which is where the calendar gets very balled up for me. And up there I again did the same kind of thing—though sometimes I had some dollars from New York engagement—but the same kind of thing I had done in New York, I worked for the Chautauqua Institution lunchroom.

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Worked as a waiter, and then as a short order cook because the schedule was like 6:30 a.m. until 10, and I had a chance to go out and carry on in the chorus under Alfred Helen [ph] and was like a service cook at lunch. Nothing but fill the orders and off at 1:30 [p.m.] to go to Dr. Clarke's classes. And hear his course which he called "Masterpieces of the Drama." Beautifully cut versions of very great plays, a little storytelling, and then fine readings of the scenes. He could play all the characters magnificently. He was a big, strong, successful enemy of what used to be called elocution. And I think he did more than any other man in the United States toward getting rid of all these phony do it with gesture stuff, you know, like my heart hurts so you hit your heart, or whatever.

Anyway, the reason I continued with him after I was in New York was be—to study a particular subject. Now he was, himself, by nature, a very fine actor. Though I don't think he ever did very much acting. But most of his students are school teachers who couldn't talk, and ministers who—or theological students, both practicing ministers of the gospel and theological students who—well, whose line of resonance was not very good. Let's put it that way.

After I played in that huge thing that used to be called the Jolson Theater, I found out that I had great difficulty with the projection of quiet material in large places. I still have. I don't like large theaters. And it's a very difficult thing to do. Some people could do it magnificently, and some can—some can't. Well, I'm one of those who still has to work hard at it. So, I was playing the insect comedy for Mr. Brady up at this huge thing, which was then called the Jolson, and later was called several other names before it was abandoned, or gone, or whatever it is now. I went back to him to study this one technical subject. As I told you, most of his students were ministers and school teachers, he was very interested in the three or four of us who would show up each summer who were going to do some acting. So, we got—we got much more than our money's worth. The course was cheap. But anyway, he would work overtime on these things which didn't really concern the other people. He was busy helping some of these school teachers from Texas, and Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania be able to talk at all. So, it was fun for him I think to be able to help some of us who could talk be able to talk more ably than we could talk. Anyway, he was a great help to me.

The—after the being fired on Labor Day in Baltimore, my, by this time, very close friend Charles Gilpin and his wife Mrs. Gilpin—very good friends of mine at the time—Mrs. Gilpin and I had various conspiracies together about keeping her husband and our star sober. Mr. Gilpin was going to face the first night at the Studebaker Theater on Michigan Boulevard in *The Emperor Jones*, and he had been the leading man in a Negro stock company. They used to have a place here in Philadelphia down at Broad and Lombard, and they had something in Washington, and they had this in Chicago. I can't remember the name, it had sort of an oriental name company. But he was scared to death of the notices, of the critics appearing for the first time in Michigan Boulevard, you know, top—regulation legit under white auspices. So, I made a deal, because I was fired with a single week's notice—so I made a deal with the executive committee that I would stay with Mr. Gilpin for one night in Chicago, which I did. Of course, at my own expense because they were either mad or else they wanted the change—I don't know what they wanted.

[00:40:06]

Anyway, I was trying to tell you before that I've never been bothered about being fired and that took me back to the Chautauqua lunch room, because whenever I was fired as a short order cook I had a [grand dodge (ph)] which always worked. I'd invite eight or nine friends to dinner there and order something but I knew they had nobody to cook, and I got hired again. So being fired in show business is nothing. It's much more interesting to be told that you're too sloppy for the good manners necessary in the kitchen of the Racket Club, and therefore we'd rather have someone else. I was too sloppy for anybody's kitchen, not just the Racket Club. But it's alright to be fired. We can look around and see what else there is to do. At least it was alright in those days to get fired. I wouldn't like to get fired from a job like that

right now and try to make a living in New York. But then it wasn't bad.

So, I played this one night in Chicago, and I think Mr. Gilpin hauled down something like 21 curtain calls. It was a terrific ovation, and he was very pleased and I withdrew. And at that time Chicago was somewhat of a production center. So, I had read the ads in *Billboard* or *Variety*, or somewhere, and saw that a repertory company was being planned. Well here's repertory again. Repertory. And it was repertory in a way. Madame Borgny Hammer and her husband were doing through—were doing three plays. One of which was *The Master Builder*, and the other was *Ghosts*. The third play was called *The Climax* play, it was sort of a matinee show. But these two Ibsen plays were the main selling point. And these people had both been well known for Ibsen, for their work in one of the Norwegian theaters, I don't know its name. The tour was planned through what show business used to call the Ibsen territory. That means sections of South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, places where there was a knowledge—there was an interest in Norwegian things. Even on the part of these people who maybe had left—maybe their grandparents had left Norway. I don't know, but anyway, Ibsen sold it that way.

I worked to try to help Madame Borgny Hammer with her English, stealing what I knew from Dr. Clarke. Not being very successful at it, but I did that. And I played Ragnar in *The Master Builder* and had nothing—no part in *Ghosts*. I worked as a sort of stagehand—stage manager job, mixed with stagehand on a corny little tour like that. And Dorothy Peterson and I played the several matinees, when the two older people had a rest, in the show called *The Climax*. It was repertory and it was interesting. I learned a great deal. We played some theaters, and a good many colleges. I think the whole works only ran about six or seven weeks, I'm not sure.

I returned to New York. I think it was cold. I think it was either January or February, I don't know when. And there was in rehearsal, at MacDougal Street, *The Hairy Ape*. By this time one act plays didn't matter anymore. *The Emperor Jones* was called a one act play at eight scenes which is rather ridiculous, with one long scene or seven other little scenes. Anyway, it was technically a one act play at eight scenes. In fact, when they first planned it they were going to do two other plays on the same bill, which seemed a little fantastic because the audience would have been dead. Especially if they put *Jones* [inaudible] performed first. The audience— nothing but one little—how they call them—they used to call curtain raisers when it was the opening thing, they had a name for closing comedy bit in the old days. Afterpiece. Anyway, *The Hairy Ape* was in rehearsal, and out of arrogance, because I'd been fired, I decided I'd work for them for nothing.

[00:45:07]

So, I helped to develop the sound plot of *The Hairy Ape*, and also did the sound for a fast [ph] play by a poet from Indiana, whose name I can't remember. I did music, off-stage things, and sort of hung around. Then came my last round of the Broadway. My first big important round of Broadway, and my last round, which—oh, they say nowadays, firmed up my resolution to start a repertory theater. It went like this. Does this solo go on too long?

RICHARD DOUD: Pardon?

JASPER DEETER: Does this solo of mine go on too long?

RICHARD DOUD: No, no, I find it very interesting.

JASPER DEETER: Well, it went like this. John Cromwell was selected to direct what was called in Europe *The Insect Comedy* by either one or two Čapeks—either Carl or both the brothers, I don't know—for William A. Brady, the father of Alice [Brady]. He [inaudible] talked to me about it and said he was quite sure he might use me in what was called the ichneumon fly, or the part called the parasite, and would I be interested? I said yes, unless some larger opportunity comes along, because at this time I was going to shop. If they wanted me, I was going to get the best there was. But I'm still one of these egotistical career makers, you see, off and on, in between little dabbles of repertory, I thought, this is the way they do it, why,, maybe I can do it, too. I was greatly distressed at the time—by the fact that by that time things like Frank Bacon's *Lightnin'* were running into their fourth or fifth year, were going to go on forever, and *East is West* was in it's third and a half year. And a play that everybody had panned was going to live forever, that immortal work called *Abie's Irish Rose*, was thriving. [In fact this was (ph)] James Barrie for me, "better dead."

Anyway, I was interested, but a better opportunity came along. John D. Williams was

producing *Rain*. I don't know whether he had seen some of my work or how I got mixed up in it, but anyway, I was, for a time, preferred in the really great role with what they called the Reverend Davidson. They didn't use the work mister because it didn't belong in that context. I had already admired Jeanne Eagels work. I don't know why, or what I had seen, I can't remember. And I was very anxious to do this role. I decided—now this time—in getting acquainted with Broadway, you keep a record, you keep a list of what happens. [Inaudible.] So, I recorded the numbers of telephone calls, the appointments, the being looked over by the star, being reinterviewed by Mr. Williams, and so on. It got [to be pretty high (ph)]. Costume fittings, reading sample scenes, especially the big climax. And I was very interested. I wanted the role greatly.

Equity, at that time, was looser in its demands upon people, upon managers—or that's what I think, that may not be true. Anyhow, Mr. Williams discovered just before rehearsal that he owed an actor, I think it was, \$400, for something that he had produced before. I'm not sure what the play was. And so, I received apologies and assurance that I would have the understudy role. Well, this being as it is, I'll work on *The Insect Comedy* for Papa Brady, and under John Cromwell's direction.

[00:50:07]

Cromwell had been one of the people who, like myself—although uptown show business like my first year in New York—used to go Sunday night. I started to tell you before, that Sunday night was illegal in New York theater. Well, in Provincetown it was illegal too, but they knew the right people, so on Monday they'd pay the magistrate ten bucks and go to plays on Sunday nights. Anyway, he had seen some of my work there and he had reasons for wanting me. So, it wasn't just a plain shot in the dark.

I went to read for *The World We Live In*, as Papa Brady called it, and Edgar Norton was reading, and so was I. I don't like competition. I can do well under those circumstances, but I don't like it. So, in the middle—not in the middle, but after one of the casting appointments when Mr. Norton and I were used in the same role, I told Mr. Cromwell I had to talk to the old man, as they called him. Papa Bill. I went to him and told him, This situation is impossible for me. That man's got a wife and three children and I don't want to be preferred. I only have myself to take care of and I can go back to the kitchens or do anything. I'm not—I can't do this. Well, Mr. Brady's eyes opened wide and he said, Well, I'll tell you, we'll do something. Then the word came to me from John Cromwell who was directing the play that Edgar Norton would have the ichneumon fly and I would have the terrifically fat showy bit, which closes act two. If you do it well enough it brings the house down. And I did. I played one of the snails in the epilogue. Two very beautifully written little roles, very showy, lot's of notices. But something else happened. And I didn't find out until afterwards why it happened. Mr. Brady had for a while owned the rights to *Rain*, and he wanted it for Alice. And he was very wise, she would have been magnificent, I think. Not that Jeanne Eagels was not good, she was. She was fine, except circumstances took over. Circumstances over which she had no control.

Again, equity was more lenient. So, they permitted Mr. Brady to do this very unusual thing for me. It was very unusual in those days, I'm quite sure it's illegal now by equity's rules, and it ought to be. But he arranged that I could show up at the Maxine Elliott as the understudy for Davidson at 75 bucks a week. And by the deadline—whatever it was, eight o'clock, or something—scoot up to the other theater where I wouldn't go on until act 2, and they were both—

RICHARD DOUD: [Inaudible.]

JASPER DEETER: —[inaudible] at once [ph]. Well, that was my first very large New York money, so I moved into the fifth floor front room on Fifth Avenue [inaudible.] I was done with kitchens for a while. But when this whole thing was over I thought, Well, I know a number of people who have talked repertory and talked against Broadway. I'm going to find out how many of 'em mean it. Those people included, Morris Carnovsky, Allyn Joslyn, Alexander Kirkland, Ann Harding, and Eva Le Gallienne. Every one of those persons had a contract for the summer of 1923, but Miss Harding's contract with Jessie Bonstelle's stock company gave her the right for a two week notice. So, she was the only one who got here with me in 1923. Several other New York people, who were not so well-known, came. And we had not—we had no idea of founding a repertory theater, we came for a summer to try something. And from there on this thing grew. That was 1923 and now 1964 or something. So, I think that's

enough about the background.

RICHARD DOUD: 40 what, 41 years?

JASPER DEETER: What?

RICHARD DOUD: 41 years.

JASPER DEETER: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh my goodness.

JASPER DEETER: Everybody who starts something new gets dollars from the foundations.

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:55:00]

JASPER DEETER: I can refer you to "The Folklore of Philanthropy" chapter in *The House of Intellect* by Jaques Barzun.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: His writing made this subject easier for me to think about, but as they say in some of the English comedies, I feel it too deeply. Very deeply. Those of us who have done things forever get no dollars from the corporations. But if you have a 17-page project of what you're going to do, well then. And for a while then, you can strangle or sink at the end of the time, so—I wouldn't like dollars that way I think that's enough about me.

RICHARD DOUD: You had been in this particular locale then for, oh, roughly 10 years or so—approximately 10 years when the Depression really, really got rough. Could you give me some idea of how rough things were in theater around this area, around, we'll say, the Philadelphia metropolitan area? Or Pennsylvania in general?

JASPER DEETER: Well, there had eight legitimate houses in Philadelphia. By that time, I'm sure the Lyric—well, not by—what date did you give me, the '30s?

RICHARD DOUD: Around 1932 or '33.

JASPER DEETER: Well, I think the town was already down to four, but I'm not sure. I'm not good enough on this. I know the Lyric and the Delphi were sold, up on North Broad Street. They were scrapped. And I don't know when the Chestnut Street Opera House—no, Chestnut Street Theater went, and the Chestnut Street Opera House stayed open. The old Forrest and the Garrick and the South Boyd. I know there was much less going on in theater. This is in the Depression period.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: I don't know how much less.

RICHARD DOUD: How well established were you people here? Did the Depression make that much difference to you after 10 years here or—

JASPER DEETER: We went broke here in 1926. And we started in 1923. And we absolutely decided to keep ongoing, those that could. Some had contracts in New York and everybody had a right to move in and out. For instance, when Allyn Joslyn was playing beautifully here, he was also a Fuller Brush [ph] man on the radio show with plenty of dollars in New York. So, he commuted at his own expense to play here. And similar generous things by actors who could afford it.

But in 1926, a number of the members of the company who were doing very well here decided that—because [the Sesqui-Centennial played in Philadelphia -Ed.]—we should take over the South Broad Street Theater. We did. Everybody in Philadelphia who liked anything like the Hedgerow Repertory left town because the exposition was much more heartily hated than the nasty articles about bad architecture of the show that you're having in New York. The thing was loathed by the Philadelphians, and anybody who could get out of town, got. And so, our audience was practically gone. We dropped \$19,000. We went \$19,000 in debt

because a lot of the dollars we dropped, we didn't have.

So, we all went back to whatever we could do in New York. Marion Phillips, [ph] who had been one of our—who was becoming one of our most valuable performers at that time, went into a chorus job at a show. Ferdinand Milford [ph] went into set building. Dorothy Opal [ph] worked under Bulgakov [ph] in his special matinee, *The Seagull*. I worked for Bulgakov [ph] in [The Princess Turindo (ph)], 'cause I wanted to really know how somebody from the original Moscow Art Theatre directed plays. And the reason I went to New York because I was chosen by the Provincetown to direct Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom*.

I think this was due to the history, because several members of the board had said—when I fought for the casting of Mr. Gilpin as a member of the board, they said, You bring a [racist slur] on this stage and nobody will come near this place.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: And that kind of—that kind of thinking is just nothing, so I fought them, insulted them, and beat my way to the use of Mr. Gilpin instead of one of the quite-able white actors that they wanted to use. And I guess that was in their memory, but anyhow they gave me the job of doing *In Abraham's Bosom* which opened December 30, 1926.

And after, the Pulitzer Prize was moved by the Theater Guild of the Garrick for just several weeks, because they wanted to find out the answer to the same thing I had run up against on MacDougal Street, would a white audience attend a play where Negroes were playing serious roles? And they saw a white audience would, and so they did *Porgy*.

[01:00:22]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: Now they—when we came back here, June 1, 1927, we began to make money in a very small way. I had read years ago that show business thrived under two conditions: depression and war. I think now that with the TV that would probably not be true.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JASPER DEETER: But I think it was true. I don't know who—one of the people that wrote on economics and show business had written this thing. Anyway, during that—as that Depression began to seep in here, we went up and up and up in dollars. We were finally able to buy these two properties. This one which was, then, almost four acres, and the place where the theater is. The two combined cost us just a little bit more than \$25,000. Which, of course, this is ridiculously cheap for now. This land is now worth 10,000 bucks an acre.

But anyway, the Depression did not hurt us. Whether it was because of this need for diversion, whether that drove more people into getting entertainment out of shows with ideals in them—and many of our shows were— at times our repertory theater was too high brow. It had too much Shaw, too much Ibsen. And to leaven that, as soon as we could afford it, we began to do American originals. United States originals. We did three of the early Spewacks; we did two first times with Lynn Riggs; we did M. M. Musselman, a smart writer of comedy who I think is now dead; and a number of shows which were have-a-good-time-at-the-theater-and-forget-it— try to develop catholicity of taste. And of course the—we had done already—or had done by that time six or seven—we finally did 12 Shaw's, we did eight Ibsen. And the highbrow part of the audience was furious. But we told them that they could stay home because they could just read the program, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: [Laughs.] Sure.

JASPER DEETER: Read the repertory. The people from Chester, PA and Media—the little towns around here—loved *The Solitaire Man* by the Spewacks, which became a rather inferior movie, was a good melodrama. Why not? It was theater we were doing, it wasn't specialization. Are we going to run out?

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RICHARD DOUD: Well, I take it then that you were fairly well-known in New York as well as in this particular area when the so-called New Deal came into being. Could you give me some

idea—

JASPER DEETER: Are you getting toward the Federal Theater—

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: How did it come that you were selected originally for—

JASPER DEETER: Well, this thing called the National Theater Conference, Edith J. R. Isaacs of the old *Theatre Arts* magazine was a prime mover in it. There were only, at first, there were 10 or 12 members. They included—she was Hallie Flanagan then, later Hallie Flanagan Davis.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: And Dr. Mabie, that you and I mentioned before we were doing this thing. I think Lee Norvelle was in from the beginning—I'm not sure. Fred Koch, who I think had just moved from Fargo to North Carolina, but I'm not positive; some lady from Vassar whose name—last syllable was lyn, L-Y-N, I think it's—but I can't remember her name. And who else? Dr. Drummond from Cornell; Fred McConnell, Cleveland Playhouse; Gilmore Brown, from Pasadena; and myself, were the three so-called independent theaters. And they were. And these conventions happened sometimes in the summertime, when more of these people with academic loads were free. And then they began to happen also at Thanksgiving weekend, usually at the Piccadilly Hotel in New York or someplace like that.

And that's how I became acquainted with these different people. But the most important one here is Mrs. Davis, Hallie Flanagan Davis. And out of that organization—that organization's meetings in New York would attract people of other than Broadway interests, like Elmer Rice who became very important in the theater business. I think maybe Houseman attended one of those meetings too, the man who's been writing about the Federal Theatre Project. But I'm not sure.

But anyway some playwrights were attracted to it, like Paul Green, became an officer of that organization later. Its life depended upon a Rockefeller grant which didn't last forever. In other words, at first we were paid to go to Iowa City for a meeting, or the people like myself couldn't possibly afford it without expenses. And I think some of the rest of them were working for practically nothing, as I was—or were working for very little. Certainly those university jobs weren't paying too much.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: And that's how I got to know these people. Much of the enthusiasm of that organization was for what was called regional drama at that time. In other words, let's do plays native to Dakota if we work there, or North Carolina if we were down there. And fairly early, Sam Selden was a member of the organization, and other people like that. Most of them, I guess, worked for universities. Paul Baker was the name of the man in Texas. He was in it fairly early. But I'm not sure of the history here. I really don't know. But I think it was because of my acquaintance with Mrs. Davis in that organization that I was called upon to be the director of the States of Pennsylvania and New Jersey in the Federal Theatre Project.

RICHARD DOUD: This must have had an influence because the people you've been naming—the others who were there, were also given positions similar to this.

JASPER DEETER: I think almost everybody from that organization. At least those original people. Then the thing began to get larger and more diffuse, and I don't know.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, could you tell me a little bit about—I understood, at least from your early letter to me, that you weren't associated in this capacity too long. Could you tell me a little bit about what you did, how you tried to go about setting up a Theatre Project or theater projects?

JASPER DEETER: Well, I was a failure in the mind of Hallie Flanagan, because she had hoped that within this Project I would do some of the kinds of original—be capable of some of the kind of original movement that she knew I had accomplished as a director on stage here.

[00:05:02]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: The thing that made me a failure, and justified her entirely in getting rid of me in early in the deal—I don't know how long I was in it—was that a large part of my own background, which I haven't mentioned at all up until now, was influenced by, what I think where then, the real values of social work. You've got to remember there's no welfare state. Now when I first went into semiprofessional theater here in Philadelphia—this is long before the New York stuff we did before—I lived in a college settlement at 433 Christian Street, where Anna Davies was the director. I told stories, and I ran games, and so on, things like that. And I was terrifically impressed by the squalor and the poverty. At that time, immigration was wide open, and we had a great many illiterate people. We had four or five people helping us to teach any kind of conversational English to Italian people, Polish, and so on.

And during the middle of this whole thing, my sister Jane—Jane Deeter Rippin, who later became the Executive Secretary of the Girl Scouts of the United States, was appointed to the, at that time, I think best paid position of a woman public servant in the state. She became a chief probation officer of the—first the juvenile court in Philadelphia, then both the juvenile and domestic relations courts. She was 12 years older than I was. And at her home—because I'd once in a while show up in Philadelphia, and I was very much younger than Jane and her husband, Jimmy Rippin—yet, I would see these, oh, all kinds of derelicts, so-called derelicts brought into the atmosphere of home and—for short visits—and their lives completely changed. This influenced me toward the social work aspect.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: I took this thing literally. We are to find jobs for these unemployed people. I don't care if it was the rattiest kind of a made-up vaudeville [ph] they were going to do or it was pretty good enterprise, that I understand happened in Reading, Pennsylvania or something pretty good that happened in Newark and something pretty good that happened in Pittsburgh. I did not care. I took it from a social worker's point of view. These people must not be driven into theft. They must eat. So, okay, anybody that came in with a likely project that looked as though it would not just jam up the whole works, I okayed it on all seven copies of the complicated, bureaucratic forms. Result: a few of the things happened to be done, so I've heard, rather freshly. I had no time to oversee the thing. I did go to Pittsburgh on one visit. I gave plenty of time to the people from nearby places, like the man who ran a very good Pennsylvania Dutch thing, near Reading. I can't remember his name. And some good vaudeville on weekends—nightclub acts that were drummed up in Philadelphia. I still have people that I don't know from Adam thanking me on the streets for making a pseudo-living wage possible during those times. I did not bother—I did not feel that there was a situation in which I could do the good kinds of things that I believe happened in New York under Elmer Rice and Houseman, and so on. I did not see that it was that kind of thing.

Furthermore, you cannot be the—by that time we were spreading direction here. Other people were directing. But you can't take the responsibility for a repertory which—well, the greatest worst overreach we made was to close about 14 non-Shaw plays on one night and opened eight Shaw plays the following Monday. That was where we overreached ourselves in repertory. But it cannot even be the—take the artistic responsibility for large repertory of plays and do too much else. And we had already committed ourselves for things that I was very interested in.

[00:10:00]

I'm not saying these things as alibis. If they sound like alibis, they shouldn't. They're reasons, in my mind. I don't think I would have done better if I had nothing else to do. But anyway, what happened was we were developing here because a number of people had signed contracts which—or given their word for, "I'm here three years from the day you see me." And that's the only way you can build a repertory theater. You can't bother with this Mr. and Mrs. Cronin [ph] can afford it for one year, then they're out in Minnesota, then back in show business. What can you do? Robards [ph] can starve, but then he goes back or something. What are you going to do? They won't build anything.

Well, anyway, there was a sort of dangerous we-are-it developing among the company. I felt

they should see their nation. There's no use scolding anybody for a provincial point of view, you just live with it. I worked in Manhattan yesterday, that place is just as provincial as it was in 1918. It's a little worse than the town where I was born, Mechanicsburg, PA, where at least our provincialism is part of our daily life. But there you have it too. There's no use attacking it, so we accepted an offer to tour the first year. I think these years are '33 and '34, but I don't know. And I don't know the year that I was engaged for this organization. But at the time I was engaged for it, we had a tour that went halfway across the country, Kearney, Nebraska and down to New Orleans, and up the East Coast through Georgia and different places. Most of them were college dates, a few were theater dates, and so on.

At the same time, another company was keeping this theater alive. I think that it would have been sensible for me—I know I'm not sensible—I'm not sure, I think I did the sensible thing—if I could have just said, Well this \$15 a day for a part-time job in an executive—or at least executant authority for the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey is something you should not try to do in addition to what else you're doing. I think it would have been kinder to Hallie Flanagan if I had had the sense to see that. But I thought, No, they want to eat; all I do is sign papers and they eat.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JASPER DEETER: To me, it was still an experiment in social work. So I can't get so furious at the Congress, if some of those members felt if it's an alleviating or an ameliorating enterprise so as to try to diminish the growth rate of crime. I can't get so angry with them for turning against the enterprise when at last it had some good, bold ideas. They had their reasons, I think. I don't agree with any of their reasons. I loved the fresh stuff that Elmer Rice got done, the Living Newspaper stuff and the—and what I read about, because I didn't have the time or the dollar to run off and see all this thing. Just as I didn't see my own very bad, very likely, enterprises, I didn't see the good ones either. Of course, when you are devoting yourself to an enterprise like this, you don't have the dollars to travel. I loathe New York coaching, but I will go there and work if I'm terrifically overpaid. But otherwise, I won't do it.

RICHARD DOUD: [Laughs.] Sure. Well, who did take over then when your association ended as the regional director here? Do you remember?

JASPER DEETER: I think it was the girl that directed for us who came from a theater in Arizona. Oh, dear. She once organized our whole library which has now disintegrated badly. I can't think of her name. I think she took the job. I really don't know. I was just very politely dropped by Hallie Flanagan, but I was on tour and I—

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JASPER DEETER: —Rose Schulman a large gal who's uptown shopping now, who's been with me for about 30 years. She and I did the work by mail, once in a while by telephone. She sort of held the fort. But I should have asked—at the original meeting in Washington, I should have asked for a clarification of purpose.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

JASPER DEETER: And then I should have withdrawn at that time. If I saw that I was expected to be able to do, well, what is now been called the first epic production on the American stage by people who write theses about it, if I'd known I was supposed to do original work for those people, then where would I look for the directors? And you see, the trouble with this whole thing is that Philadelphia, not only for audiences, but for actors too, it's a suburb of New York.

[00:15:20]

RICHARD DOUD: This I've heard before, yes.

JASPER DEETER: We just—we have people here, it isn't that they don't know about the theater, but most of our houses in this town are rather lousy. So they save their dough, and they go over there on a Friday afternoon, they catch a show Friday night, matinee or night Saturday. And they blow their theatrical wad. [Richard Doud laughs.] And then they go back again later in the year. And it's the same way with actors. They don't—Philadelphia hasn't been the—a producing center for anything but vaudeville and nightclub acts for years. It used to be—well, Chicago was once quite one for a while, so was Los Angeles. And

Philadelphia was never a legitimate—oh, it was a legitimate way, way back, the old repertory days, 1870s or so, but not for a long time.

RICHARD DOUD: Were you aware then of what went on later in the federal theater? Did it go more in the direction that Mrs. Davis had intended, or I mean, was it less a relief type thing?

JASPER DEETER: I really don't know.

RICHARD DOUD: You were still [inaudible]—[Cross talk.]

JASPER DEETER: At that time, you see, we were able to afford to bring out unknown playwrights. And I was doing a great deal of work with people like Lynn Riggs, who was practically unknown then, now is again unknown. And other people like, oh, Mariah Cox [ph] for the beautiful play on Kit Marlowe, and other people like that. I was doing a great deal of work with playwrights and trying to get our number of originals each year up from three or four to, I think, the most we were ever able to do were eight. And the lady who still runs the rights for most of the French playwrights in New York—what is her name? I can't remember. Anyway, she was giving us a great many first times in the States plays. And it was very hard for us to sell the delicate French—modern French writing to this Pennsylvania Deutscher community.

RICHARD DOUD: I bet it would be. [Laughs.]

JASPER DEETER: And you had to have this kind of planning, you see, you could put on a thing as delicate as *Martine*, and it might have a little approval, but you have to place it so that it had what the Russians called [inaudible] rehearsals, you could only afford to offer it only once every three weeks until it found its own public because it was a kind of writing that—

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

JASPER DEETER: Who cared?

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JASPER DEETER: *De Pas* [ph] has never been done in this country except by us, I think, a beautiful rich play. And finally, we were able to attract an audience for that portrayal, just as it was rather easy to get an audience for the Spewack's satirical political comedy called *Sweeney* [ph]. Of course, that's the kind of thing that would infuriate the Shaw fans, apoplectic. So there was too much—my major caring was here, and I had a place in which by that time we could afford to do original work. See, the policy of this place has always been we produce what we wish to produce. We repeat what you would like to have repeated.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JASPER DEETER: So again, you may spend a good deal of dollars on something that—for instance, I think my finest Shakespeare production was *Henry IV, Part I*. It opened about three days before Paris fell. Everybody stayed home in numbers. Nobody would go to Shakespeare, whereas *Macbeth* ran on, and on, and on, forever, made lots of dollars. And so did *Twelfth Night*. Yet I think my best production was Harry Shepherd [ph] in Falstaff and Dick Basehart [ph] in the prince in *Henry IV, Part I*. At that time you couldn't sell it.

RICHARD DOUD: [Inaudible.]

JASPER DEETER: So if you go ahead and see, well, we got to rewrite the schedule. We got to do this, we've got to see to it. So, this place was, and still is, my major interest in the theater. I will work other things, and I like learning. I like new jobs. So I did a semester at Brandeis University last year. And I went into a not too elegant TV show because I wanted to see what that is. I don't see why we shouldn't do new things. Doesn't matter that we're over 70 years old. I probably made trouble for the theater arts department of Brandeis, but I don't mind.

[00:20:21]

RICHARD DOUD: I'm sure they don't mind. You mentioned earlier that it seemed to you that the Depression really didn't hurt theater. In other words, people needed a diversion along about the time, and you seemed to grow here, during the early years at least.

JASPER DEETER: Okay, on the audience. But now think of Eva's predicament. Eva Le Gallienne. Think of the death of the old Provincetown Players. Provincetown money raising meeting was held on Sunday night. It was scheduled for Sunday night and they were stupid enough to hold it on the scheduled day, just two days after Black Friday. I went to New York. Some of the old Provincetown people behaved as though they thought I came in for the kill. It was not true at all. I wanted to see if anything couldn't be done. Well, they had a very nice show. The gal who did the choreography for *Oklahoma!* did a beautiful satiric patriotic razz dance. And they had a very good thing, [but when it came to dollars, who was there -Ed.]?

Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory was founded on the basis of a large contribution of one person and forty persons at \$1,000 each, so that you could afford to sell tickets for a dollar and a half. . She wanted to do a mixture of art and social material. When the market crashed, those people were busy learning how to do their own cooking and getting rid of at least all the servants but one.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JASPER DEETER: And they had no dollars. Now the audience didn't work that way. So when they got to that kind of position, I can say thank God we never depended on rich mainliners to keep the place alive. We never did. Our growth was always from the ground up. And maybe we would have had the same kind of fate that the Civic Repertory was stuck with. And the Provincetown Players just had to say no after this ghastly appointment. It was just scheduled—it was either two days or nine days after the market crashed. It was awful because they had been dependent upon dollars from the old days when some of those original one-acts were not selling, why, Eleanor Fitzgerald would just go down to Wall Street on Tuesday morning and find some rich friends that she could beg from to keep the place alive.

RICHARD DOUD: That all changed.

JASPER DEETER: Disappeared. The situation changed greatly, and the dollars disappeared.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, is it possible for you to assess at all the value of federal theater, I mean, the value of government assistance to theater? What did it do for theater? The development of theater—

JASPER DEETER: I see no reason why government should not successfully support the art of theater, but just as ruthlessly as you must if you're controlling somebody's \$450,000 bankroll for a musical. I see no common sense in trying to mix it up with made work. That is not true in Manhattan because there's so many able people were there who needed a salary. But for the rest of the country, what sense does it make? It's fine that they did some good work. It's grand. I never saw it, but I know it was good. But generally, no.

So if you're going to bother, as we've had in some situations—if you're going to see to it that the cabinet minister's daughter or girlfriend or something has to be in the company, otherwise he's going to vote against the appropriation, well then you're a mess. But it can be done. It has been done. There are regular, no-questions-asked subsidizations which leave the artists their freedom to do well or ill, whatever they want. You've got the great generosity of that one commissar in Russia who went on with the dollars and dollars and dollars for months and months of rehearsal. And then Meyerhoff [ph] was still trying to cast his wife and finally they just said, Well, after this date, there's no more dollars. So Meyerhoff [ph] disappeared. That's all right.

[00:25:00]

You don't have to become dependent upon a grant or a gift, but the—the—there must be absolutely no strings. Now who do we have? I don't know. I don't know the present rich people. I knew Otto Kahn very well, personally. Otto Kahn wanted to see—because he had traveled in Europe a good deal—he wanted to see the scenic arts advance, so he finances an \$80,000 production, which was a lot of dollars those days, just so that that play could have a new kind of décor which had never been tried before. He financed some of the Hopkins things so that he could find out what Bobby Jones wanted to do and what he was able to do. And then we had a whole new growth in technical ability on the stage.

And the theater was about to be strangled by the photographic reality of the so-called realism, naturalist [ph], as the Germans call it. This photographic realism of Mr. Belasco with

792 props on the stage for the auctioneer, whatever it was, each one authentic. Then Kahn's generosity enabled people like Norman Bel Geddes, Bobby Jones, to change the whole course of the theater in the scenic department. The same thing can be done with the interpretations, too. I don't know how well Tyrone Guthrie made out with the steel in Minnesota. The articles I've read seem ambiguous and confusing. And I skip—haven't read the whole way through. I read the lead article, and I see that it's going to amble, and I quit. So, I don't know history.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, do you feel maybe that what actually happened in the federal theater was that, in some cases, it did allow a certain amount of experimentation, but it didn't do the job as far as making work for people who really needed it throughout the country?

JASPER DEETER: I missed the last part. Didn't really do the job about—?

RICHARD DOUD: Feel that it really didn't do the job of helping the people who needed help on a local level, throughout the country. That it might have failed in the sense of the Midwest or the Rocky Mountain region or even around here, of giving people who needed a living some sort of support whereby they could stand—

JASPER DEETER: I don't know this at all. That's why—there's a Hallie Flanagan Davis book about it which I have not read. I don't know what Hallie wrote or said. And there's other writing about it. I have not read any of it.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I think, in general, she felt that of course it was doing a good job. And that it was unjustly terminated in Congress in 1939, through the label of Communism and this sort of thing.

JASPER DEETER: Well, I think Hallie would have had good reasons for knowing it might have gotten better if it hadn't been strangled, didn't she?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: I would agree with her. Because they were getting something done there. And they might just as well have said, Well, we've got New York, and LA, and Chicago, and that's it; the rest of the country we can't do. But the error, as far as I'm concerned, was expecting—well, I say some of us because some people were in agreement, but I just better make it singular—expecting me to have the same kind of artistic freedom under a set up like that, that I have had here where everybody has earned the right to his own freedom.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JASPER DEETER: The capitalization of this place has been labor and skill—other skills. Physical skill, mental skill, and so on. And to go into a situation like that and expect to have the same artistic freedom that you have under a very different situation—that's why I should have looked at the thing and found out more about it, should have canvassed this area first and the New Jersey area, and said, No, I can't do this, instead of just signing papers. That's just what I should have done.

RICHARD DOUD: Hindsight is always—

JASPER DEETER: What?

RICHARD DOUD: Hindsight is always much more clear, of course.

JASPER DEETER: Oh, yes, especially it a thing like that. See, I not only went into it ignorant, but I'm still ignorant. [Richard Doud laughs.] Don't know how much that helps you.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I think maybe I'll bring this to a close then. I want to thank you for spending the time with me.

JASPER DEETER: I'm glad to do it.

RICHARD DOUD: I enjoyed it very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]

