



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Willoughby  
Ions, 1964 Mar. 11

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Willoughby Ions on March 11, 1964. The interview took place in Richmond, Virginia, 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 retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. 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.

Some language in this transcript may be offensive. It is presented as it exists in the original audio recording for the benefit of research. This material in no way reflects the views of the Archives of American Art or the Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

RICHARD K. DOUD: This is an interview with Miss Willoughby Ions at her home in Richmond, Virginia, taken March 11, 1964. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud. Miss Ions, in previous conversations, you've indicated that your major interests were with writing, music, and the theater. Yet your associations with the Federal Projects in Virginia are concerned primarily with art. What was your background in art prior to your coming here?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I had done almost as much art as I had done anything else: costume designing, designs on textiles, and everything in New York for years, at Bonwit & Teller and some of the most important shops. My grandmother was an artist and a pupil of Turner's and she gave me the art training that I had. But I was more interested in the other things and I felt like art was a byproduct.

RICHARD K. DOUD: How long had you been in New York?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Nearly 20 years.

RICHARD K. DOUD: 20 years. And before that—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Went there 1916 when the Greenwich Village was started. The Left Bank came from Paris.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Before that time, you were a Virginian? Is that correct?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No, I was born in New Orleans, but I was transplanted to Virginia when I was half past four. [Laughs.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Half past four? At least part of your work here in Virginia was as director of the Fairfax Gallery. Why were you selected for that particular job?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I suppose there were two or three reasons. One was that I was about the only available artist in Fairfax, which didn't sprout too many. And Adèle was the—but she was a little afraid of nepotism, terrified that she didn't have any right to put me on. There wasn't anybody else who was available. There wasn't anybody else who could do the job.

RICHARD K. DOUD: You're a cousin of—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: First cousins.

RICHARD K. DOUD: First cousins.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Our mothers were sisters.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Would you like to tell us something about what went on at Fairfax Gallery during the '30s? How long it was in existence, and just what you did there?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I can't remember just how long it was in existence, but I know that one of these outstanding things—and it was insane jealousy on the part of everybody in the public schools and everything else—they hated me with bitter and briny hatred. And I didn't like them too much.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh, well—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And the children adored me. And the children would fight and insult the teachers and do anything under the sun for their—for their art lessons. They loved it. I did the most amazing piece of work. I still, I—you're supposed to destroy everything that the children did, you know. I kept them. I've got scads of the things that my children did.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What was the trouble?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Jealous. They didn't want them to like me. They didn't want them to study art. They were opposed to the WPA. Same old political thing. The same thing that made them hate Kennedy.

RICHARD K. DOUD: This is sort of a Virginia problem, rather than a Fairfax problem.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Oh, yes. But Fairfax was particularly horrible because there had been a lot of the Ku Klux Klan. Funny part of it was, that the building that they gave us had been used by the Ku Klux before the—got down all the papers and things that they got to incriminate 'em and they tried to hush it all up, and not let us know what had happened and hadn't happened and were afraid we'd find out all the people in Fairfax who had been mixed up with it. So, it didn't have too nice a vibration in the building. But the children were just adorable.

RICHARD K. DOUD: How many did you have there? Did you—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, the way I felt when they came in about 1,005,898. [Richard Doud laughs.] But there really weren't that many. I don't suppose there were above 40. They came in shifts. Different ages, you see.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Was this exclusively a white class?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Oh my lord. Fairfax? In the '30s? [Inaudible.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] Well, other than the art classes, did you hold exhibitions? Were there such things [cross talk] as traveling shows?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Oh, yes. We held exhibitions for the children's work. In fact—and then I gave them some—they wanted to make some exhibitions of my work. And I started out with *Child's First Night in the Country* and gave them a talk on that. But the people who were the sponsors were very stupidly—well, I'll tell you the other things that many me infuriated. I had more background than any of the people who were in it. My people had been there since '70. My grandfather's a naval officer. My grandmother and all the people had had the position of associating only with naval officers and lieutenant governors and governors, and everything of the sort. And some of these people were just middle class. Grassroots. And they dared to be condescending to me. And I could have could have killed them, every one, before breakfast and after supper. So, I think I insulted them by being a little snobbish myself. They didn't like me, and I didn't like them.

[00:05:07]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Were there any adult activities associated with the gallery?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No, except for every now and again they'd have a tea or do something, come all dressed up with white kid gloves on. Stupid thing.

RICHARD K. DOUD: As the director of the gallery, to whom were you responsible?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I think I was responsible to Adèle.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Did you receive orders from Adèle or from Washington telling you how to do your job? Or—

[Cross talk.]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No, I never had any orders from Washington what to do. I don't remember getting any orders from anybody. Adèle just knowing the reputation that I had as an artist, that I knew my business. Of course, I consulted. I didn't dare take my head on anything that I thought she wouldn't approve as the head of the thing in Virginia. So, I was—she was the only person to whom I listened at all, and whom I consulted.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Were there other people involved as teachers or were you a sort of one-man operation?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I was a one-man—Alexander [ph], the one-man band. Yes, I didn't have anybody. I was the only person.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: There was a secretary. A very stupid little girl. And let's see. Oh, there was a janitor. There were a few people like that. But I was the only teacher.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, were you there when the Fairfax Gallery came to a close?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No. Because I didn't realize at the time that people wanted me to leave. It was difficult for me to get backward and forward. I was four and a half miles from the courthouse. I had to depend on people taking me backward and forward. Thank you. It wasn't easy. I'd have to wake up early in the morning, get my father's breakfast, trot down a hill—ice, snow, acted like the postman—and get there on time. And if this woman who once in a while let me down didn't stop for me, I would be absent for the day. And of course they took that out on me.. There was no way—no cars, no anything. You just had to be dependent on somebody who was good enough to carry you. There wasn't a bus. There wasn't an anything.

So, once in a while, I had to miss, if she didn't stop for me. If I was one minute late, she wouldn't stop. You would have thought the devil was behind her with a horsewhip and I—but most of the time I was there always on time, and I stayed late in the evening. One night I stayed there all night because it was difficult to get home. And Adèle was horrified. She thought everybody would talk about me—would talk about me staying in a place all by myself. I was scared to death of the ghost of the Ku Klux Klan. [They laugh.] But Adèle thought that I was taking a terrible chance with my reputation, to stay all alone in a place in Fairfax. Everybody would talk. Let them talk. They talked about me anyhow because I always gave them something to talk about.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Who—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Actually, I lived there all my life, in Fairfax. The other times in Washington and New York.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Who replaced you then?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: That was—did Adèle tell you that story, about Stephen Walker [ph]?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: She didn't? Didn't you go into it?

RICHARD K. DOUD: She mentioned Stephen Walker [ph], but she didn't say much about it.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: She didn't? Well, I don't think I'd better say it, then.

RICHARD K. DOUD: All right.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I'll tell you afterwards if you want to know.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, what were your associations other than the Fairfax Gallery?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Associations where?

RICHARD K. DOUD: With the Federal Art Project here.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: That's all. Oh, I know I came on down here when the war between—all—the whole everything in '41. Pearl Harbor and everything. My father and I came on down. Adèle was by herself, her sister and niece had left. And we came on down to be with her. And then when the war came on, we couldn't get transportation because we couldn't get gas. We couldn't do anything. So, my house just fell all to pieces, and I was miserable. Didn't want to leave it. But then they stopped saying that you couldn't work on the Project if you weren't on location. So, then I came on down—whenever I was down here, I just worked down on Fifth Street and Gary, where the headquarters were, where Adèle had her office.

RICHARD K. DOUD: You—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: But I did work on—then I had my own time, you see, when I had just so many hours. So, then I did develop my own things while I was on the Project that didn't have anything to do with the Project. My Stephen Foster plates and my—all my own things.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Did you work for the Index of American Design?

[00:10:01]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Yes, I did. One of the first things they took was something I did. It was—I got the jar right there. A piece of Strasberg pottery—end of day pottery. A great big jug that my grandfather had had brandy sent from Strasberg from—in these old jugs and I had collected one of them, and discovered it down in the cellar.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, how did this—I'm not sure how this Index of American Design thing really operated as far as—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: They took two of my things as far as I recall. But they threw down a lot them—turned down a lot of them that I think were terribly good. If you would like them, however. I got my grandfather's sea chest, and a bottle—a wedding bottle—the two things for the bride and the groom to drink out of. Somebody lent it to us from Whitestone or somewhere. But they didn't think they were good enough. I thought they were awfully good.

RICHARD K. DOUD: On this Index of American Design, did people—did a committee select objects to be depicted, or did the individual just do what he wanted to do or what he thought would be important? How did they—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I think—I think it had to be passed on by a person who was qualified to say if it was an authentic thing and not a copy. It had to be an original.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Don't you see?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: If it was furniture, if it was glass, or handwoven stuff—anything of the sort. It had to be passed on. I think that Adèle made the decisions on that for Virginia.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I see.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I'm not too sure. I couldn't remember.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I often wondered how they arrived at what object was to be rendered for the—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, it depended on whether—the authenticity and its rarity.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: If it's something unusual, that one million—of course there were millions of quilts. There were dozens of pieces of furniture. And of course, you had to pick out what was not only the most outstanding, but that you were positive was real.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Was authentic. Was an original.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Did the artists sort of hunt up the objects to be done, and then bring them to the attention of the director?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Some people did, some people didn't. A lot of people came forward with the—when [inaudible] doing it—came forward with things that they'd inherited, that they knew about. I can't tell you too much about that. Adèle'll have to.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Because I always hoed my own little garden all I could, and kept away from all the rest. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] Like *Candide*, you remember? End of *Candide*? "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*"

RICHARD K. DOUD: And on the easel paintings, you just—you did what you wanted to do?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: You can call them easel if you want. I can't paint on an easel. I put them on a table, went swish, swish.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think we call it—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I mean, we call it easel paintings.

RICHARD K. DOUD: We call it easel paintings, yes.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I did my little mermaid, which I think I showed you, didn't I?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: That didn't—wasn't on the Project. That's mine. Done long after that. And my [inaudible]. They were done on an easel but it's hard for me to paint on an easel. It isn't easy to do watercolor on an easel.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I don't imagine it would be, no.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Because the water could drip.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes. Uh-huh [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: So, I think you have to—

RICHARD KEITH DOUD: Have to it—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Although, I paint differently in watercolor from most people. As I say, my grandmother was a watercolorist and she had studied—got a few lessons under the great Turner. And so she gave me two or three things—Adèle too—things that lasted us—like *Alice in Wonderland*: "The muscular strength that you gave to my jaw has lasted the rest of my life." I profited by. But I loved watercolor. I never painted in oil except decorating furniture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, this rather amazing, quite interesting series of pictures you showed me when I was here last. Your—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, that was—

RICHARD K. DOUD: —childhood reminiscences.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: —Adèle's bright idea.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Were those done in any sense under the Federal Art Project or—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Yes. Adèle said that she wanted—she psychoanalyzed me. We used to spend our evenings sometimes when we were girls giving each other psychoanalysis. And Müntserberg was then just beginning to talk about all these difference things. It was before psychoanalysis, and Freud hadn't come—was just beginning. And we used to psychoanalyze each other after we'd go to bed at night, and tell each other what was wrong with us. We had a lovely time.

And so, Adèle decided that she must break up my complexes. I had been transplanted from city life, as I said, half past four. Came to the country for the first time, terrified of everything

and just petrified. And I wasn't afraid of anything in my life until that first night. So Adèle said, [Inaudible]—now I believe that if you were to try to paint this, you might psychoanalyze yourself and get all your complexes out. And I said, Well, I might not, could get some good pictures, I think. And so, Adèle—we spent more money on that wretched telephone calling each other up to trying and find out whether my complexes [Richard K. Doud laughs] were being broken than to find out whether I'd done good work.

[00:15:04]

So, I started on *Child's First Night in the Country*, which is when I was four and a half. But I went back and did things at three. See, I remember back to three years old, in such detail that it's just as though a color slide were going in front of me all the time. I can recall any color, any thought, any word, any anything, any poem that I read as a child, any book that I read as a child, what we had for breakfast. I just have one of these terrible memories.

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's amazing.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It's terrifying sometimes. You remember what you don't want to remember. [They laugh.] As well as what you do.

RICHARD K. DOUD: As well as what you do.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: But I can go to the piano and play pieces of music that I hadn't seen since I was a little girl, 14 years old, or earlier than that, eight or nine. Every song that my mother ever sang, with the German and the French and the Italian words because I was like a parrot: Here now do it. "*Il segreto per esser felici*" and so on, and so on. And the Schubert *Lieder*. My mother's a brilliant musician. Played the piano and—incidentally, I never was in a school a day in my life.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Is that right?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Educated all together at home. French, English, rhetoric, poetry. I wouldn't study German because I didn't like the way it sounded. And a smattering of Italian. But French—I was born speaking French. See, my mother had been—and Adèle's mother—had studied at Madame Derieaux [ph] Institute in New Orleans.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And everything—they had teachers of music and French, imported. And in back of the old French opera house, so we heard all the rehearsals of the operas. So, I was brought up on opera. My mama would play a whole score. And if I said—if I didn't call out, she'd stop playing. But as long as I was awake, I'd call out. She'd play until 12 o'clock or one o'clock in the morning until she'd do the whole opera score, so I'd be familiar with opera.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, about this *Child's First Night in the Country*—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I got more and more frightened every minute. Adèle would call up and say, Your complex is broken. I'd say, I've got a wonderful picture, but I'm more terrified by the second. I'm getting more complexes as I remember so many things that I hadn't thought about too much. Now I'm really frightened. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] So it didn't do a bit of good, but I've got a good picture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I've noticed that this particular painting seems to be, perhaps, more abstract than your early or your later reminiscences.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Later. That is the—I think that was the one that really came out of the bottom of my soul. The others were pictures. But that was desperate emotion. Although the one with the pigs, you remember that one?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: From the New Orleans Exposition. I was frightened of pigs all my life because of those two monsters. [They laugh.] I'm still afraid of pigs.

RICHARD K. DOUD: So, getting these things out in the open doesn't help as much as some people might think.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No. I don't think it matters. I don't go around screaming if I eat bacon or ham and things of that sort. I'm not that afraid of pigs. I love Smithfield ham. So, I mean—

RICHARD K. DOUD: So do I.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: But I think a dead pig is much nicer than a live one. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I hate farm animals. I love the country. I adore flowers. I love fruit trees in bloom. I love streams and trees dipping into them. I love wildflowers. But I don't like animals. And I hate to think that they raise the poor things just to eat 'em. It's horrible.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I wouldn't mind having a farm that had nothing but fruits and things, and somebody'd do all the dirty work.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] Gentleman farmer.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: [Laughs] Gentleman farmer. It used to upset my father horribly. I wouldn't eat anything that was raised on the place if I could help it. Because I saw the hen, and where the hen laid the egg, and didn't want to eat the chicken because I knew she had been killed. I was an awful problem. I didn't want to do anything that anything to do with the farm. I loved red raspberries, and blackberries and strawberries. I never liked apples very much. I think they're dull as dishwater. I love mushrooms. We had acres of mushrooms. And a quarter acre of red raspberries. Little crabapple trees. Peaches and pears. All kinds of things, all over the place. 165 acres, you see, I was brought up on. But the minute night came, you couldn't get me out of the house. [Richard K. Doud laughs.]

[00:20:01]

Terrified of the dark. And I had never been afraid of anything until that very first night. So that's why I think that painting is an emotional piece—it really was pure emotion. Terror.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think that painting very well expresses your feeling.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I still feel that way. I sold my place, incidentally, since I think you were here. My place in Fairfax. I got—at last sold it. I inherited 34 acres of it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Was anything done with this series of paintings of yours? Were they exhibited, or—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Oh, yes. They've been all over the state and be right up with the academy of—oh what's the child's name? And now she's the head of RPI. Art thing, I can't remember her name. I can't for a second. She said that she would give anything in the world to have painted that picture, which I thought was saying an awful lot.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Is there any chance that these might be published or illustrated or—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Do you—ever heard of Bryant Baker, the sculptor?

RICHARD K. DOUD: I don't think so.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: He's done a good many things here at the state capital. He's British and he lives in New York. And each time he's come on down he's been our guest either for lunch or dinner. And Adèle, as head of the Project and on the Art Commission and so on and after that was over, always entertained the dignitaries and the people who came, you see. And Bryant Baker came and he was the last person in the world I would have thought like those—he went off the deep end. He said that I ought to have every—that there should be a book of nothing but those pictures with the story, because each one has a story. And he said that—I talked to Leslie Cheek at the museum.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I used to like Leslie Cheek. I'm not gonna tell you about that. He's [inaudible]. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] He said [inaudible]. Anyway, Leslie Cheek said—I said that I wanted to get in touch with Mrs. Rockefeller. You remember, she was making all this—collecting all this Americana. And I wanted—that's why I asked Leslie to see whether he could get her interested in seeing those pictures. I thought that they were just as important



as people barefooted, sitting down, picking chicken bones on the porch on Sunday dinner. And the chickens scratching and the pigs and the men yawning and them being in suspenders and things I thought that—after all, the South, and the whole of America, wasn't grassroots. It was a little different. But they didn't want anything like that. They just wanted the yokel.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Anyway, she said, Oh, don't you dare to do that. You must—ought to have a set. Do six more or seven more, and I'll give you a one man show. And never did. I didn't—he lost interest, and I didn't keep on painting the pictures because he got funny. He didn't stop coming down to see my exhibitions and things. So, I didn't fool with him. But I still have a lot of memories. I can do still.

RICHARD K. DOUD: You should.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I think I should. But I've still got so many things to do. My plays are the most important. You knew I had written a musical?

RICHARD K. DOUD: This the one you were telling me about last time I was here.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Yes. That's the most important thing at the moment. I've got to have copies and copies and copies for—one to send to England, one to send to Australia, one for Library of Congress, and one for me to keep.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What's the real core of this. You didn't tell me much—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It's a complete satire on the Victorian Era.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, that should be interesting.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It's terribly good, says she modestly. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] No, it is. It blew the house down every time I've given it at clubs, excerpts from it. I've set it—it's drawn the rounds. Scribner's given me—John Hall Wheelock, who's the head of the poetry society—I mean, the poetry branch of—just appointed himself—wrote me the most amazing letter that if the music was as good as the script, it ought to be one of the few Broadway hits of any season, but that they couldn't publish it. They couldn't publish a play with music that hadn't been produced. But it has—England has given me quite a lot of acclaim, but I couldn't leave it with them because I don't dare trust the music out of my hand. You see, I'm a musician who's terrified of plagiarism. And if I'd had one note in that that sounded like something that somebody else had done, I'd cut it right out—no matter if it was good.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: If it was reminiscent—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: —my pride wouldn't let me copy.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It had to be mine, or else I didn't want it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: So—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: But it has—I've got more fan letters from people who have heard it at the different clubs and the different things, writing to tell me how wonderful—one girl said she had been waiting and waiting to see *Oklahoma!*. And she's a friend of 30 years. And she wrote back and she said—she always calls me, "Lamb Pie"—"Lamb Pie, I waited to hear *Oklahoma!* and it let me down after hearing your play."

[00:25:09]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Is that right?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: She said nothing ever will touch it. It's been called a later Gilbert and

Sullivan. It isn't at all like Gilbert and Sullivan, but it's making fun is my—but you see, they burlesqued.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I didn't. I made the people do everything seriously as they did, which made it much funnier than making fun of them. And they made fun of themselves. [Laughs.] Oh, I had fun. It took me exactly nine months, just like a baby. Then I went on to New York with it and Mr. and Mrs. Harry Moses [ph] played with the idea—they're the ones that discovered the *Grand Hotel*—played with the—but you see, musicals hadn't come—now everything—you can't buy a bar a soap without hearing it sung about. But nobody was doing musicals. And then it's all verse. There isn't a line of prose in it. The whole thing just poured into it in verse. And I've done things in that play that had never been done before. The opening chorus makes a Union Jack on the stage. All the divisions of the British class, in the costume, and so on. And then the—all the inventions and everybody fighting progress, fighting inventions.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, how long had you been working on this thing?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I wrote it in nine months.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I mean when?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: '34.

RICHARD KEITH DOUD: Is that right?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And it's gone the rounds. But now there's this young man who put on *Caesar and Cleopatra* at the museum was—spent two hours with me here. And he was so impressed with it he told me to send it to the Players Club in London. They were looking for stuff of that sort. But you see, I don't dare to send that music until it's hide-bound. And every time they told me I had to much music I wrote something else. Every time. Something new came and had to be put it in. So I just had to put it in.

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's the way things go.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It's the way things go. I gave an interview once to a newspaper girl here in Richmond, and she asked me how it was that, if I was interested in this, interested in that, and interested in the other, why had I done so many things? And I said, Well, I'd want to go on the stage, but at the time that I was a little girl, people didn't go on stage. And it would have taken money and it would have taken someone to chaperone me and all that stuff and my mama and papa were horrified of me going up on stage. Ladies didn't go on stage. And I said I didn't want to be a lady. [Richard K. Doud laughs.]

Which upset them no end. But they knew I couldn't go on the stage anyway. And my ma said, "But ladies don't go—" I said, "Well, look at Cora Urquhart." You know, the brilliant Cora Urquhart, New Orleans, red hair. And finally, she married Bishop Potter after she was—I don't know, anyhow she had quite a career. And I said, How about Cora Urquhart? Defiantly to my mother. And my mama said Ah, but [inaudible] that she did put something on her head to make it a little redder than it had been originally and she used makeup. And I said, Well, I suppose you had to. Well, she said, It made her déclassé. And you couldn't be déclassé. And I said, I want to be déclassé.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] Problem child.

[Some language in the following passage may be offensive. It is presented as it exists in the original audio recording for the benefit of research. This material in no way reflects the views of the Archives of American Art or the Smithsonian Institution. -Ed.]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: So much more interesting—oh, I was a horrible problem. I may not be a child, but I'm still a problem. [They laugh.] Maybe I'm in a second childhood and don't know it. Maybe I'm just retarded.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I doubt that very much.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I don't know. Sometimes I think I am. I used to get mad with my father and he'd say, Nothing in the world's the matter with you, except that you're retarded.

And I said, Well, maybe we've got something, darling.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, why is it that, with this interest and ability in music, you didn't work with the Music Project during the '30s?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, the history of why I got on the Art Project has been a very bitter disappointment to me. I can't get to be on the Theatre Project. I didn't expect to be on the Art Project.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh, I see.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And the person who was at the head of it was a friend of Adèle's, and had thought so much about my work, and the play and everything that I had done, that she thought that I'd be the greatest asset for the theater group. And she was demoted and thrown out and a man put in her place, and I was out it before I got on it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, what—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And I never forgave anybody.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What happened with Federal Theatre, here? I can't find that very much went on in Virginia in the theater.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It didn't. This one man who just put on all kinds of things he felt like putting on. There was one very good play. The Theatre Project didn't do much. It would have it this woman had stayed at the head of it because she had been on the stage in New York. She was brilliantly educated. She was a Shakespearian scholar. And she just had taste.

[00:30:08]

And it took a special—it takes somebody specially qualified to lay good work, to know what my play is all about. It hasn't got a dirty word in it. But it's got plenty of Victorian innuendo. All the innuendo you want, but not one dirty word. Situations that are almost, but not quite.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I see.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: So, there you are.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, did this Barter Theatre over at Abingdon have any federal support, or do you know?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, yes. I don't know whether—the state—I don't think it was federal, I think it was state. Oh, Bob's a nice person. Do you know him?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I don't.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I'd talked to him about it because he was a very good friend of Adèle's and mine. Still is when we ever we see him. I wanted Bob to put this on in Abingdon—put my play on—and he said he wouldn't touch a musical with a ten-foot pole. I talked to the Barksdale people. I—Lydia Longacre [ph]—we had a party about three weeks ago. A friend of mine from Newport News, a girl I've known since she was about 15, and starred and did all kinds of wonderful things in the theater, in a theatrical group in Mary Washington [ph]. She had a gorgeous voice. And she sings the things in my play like nothing in the world. So, she was down for a weekend about three weeks ago, and John and Lydia Longacre [ph]—you've met the Longacre's [ph] haven't you?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, John and Lydia [ph] are very close friends. In fact, all the people who are doing anything in Richmond, I know. Adèle and I both know. But—and a good many—when I say have heard my play, they know I've written one anyway. But she sang and for the first time—and you know Maurice Bonds [ph] the—Maurice, our darling, our baby, we've known him since he was 17. And he stayed on the whole summer. He and I kept on the last tragic little tag end of the Federal Project. You know, a catholic priest leant us the parish house.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes, I heard about that.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And we talked a little mountain of people and so on. But we kept then going for a whole summer and then we folded up. But he and his wife were here and a girl from—do you know Bess Appeley [ph]? Mrs. Appeley [ph], who's the head—who's with the Abbey Theater in Ireland?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, she's the mainstay of the Barksdale. And she hasn't heard the play. But her niece, Grace Lane [ph], who's married a delightful young doctor, who's at a medical college, Dr. Frank Mulinax [ph]—well, we've known them for years. So, Grace and Frank and a whole bunch were here, as I said, about three weeks ago were here. And for the first time, all of them heard the music sung. They'd just heard me play it and say the words—of course, it isn't the same thing. And they were quite knocked over. They're all telling me what to do with it. Because everybody always tells you what to do with things. You've got to do it in your own way.

There's only one thing I would like to do, and I haven't got the entrée [ph]. Don't know how I would do it. Arthur Rank [ph], if he heard that play—you've seen the things that he's done. You've seen the Gilbert and Sullivan one—marvelous color thing that they did. And *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Oh, they do brilliant work. Arthur Rank [ph] is the person who ought to see that play. He'd put it on. He'd grab at it so fast you couldn't see him for dust in the air. But haven't gotten a way of getting in touch with Arthur Rank [ph].

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's too bad.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It's horrible. Well, anyhow, that's the story of why I didn't do anything for the theater. Then, they weren't going to give my ballet—there's a dream ballet in the play. Six gay young blades and six lady's book girls. In hoop skirts, the ballet. And then men, all these weird costumes with a great big gardenia each in his—and with whiskers and sideburns and whatnot. All of them. But they all—it's a dream, so they can say and do—it's the only time anybody can let his or her hair down. So, they say and do all the things they want to do. And there was a chance of my getting it on, and I think I'd better tell you this without—I mean, I don't want to tape record it. It wouldn't be diplomatic. I'll tell you later.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think it'd be interesting for you to tell me.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: No, I won't tell you because I've got to mention names and I won't do it.

[00:35:00]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, we'll hear it after a while.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Yeah, I'll tell it to you, but you can't use it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh. Would you care to sort of give your opinion in perspective of the value of Federal Theatre, Federal Art, the entire federal sponsorship of the arts during the '30s.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I just told you what I thought that Roosevelt had done, that he had put art on the map in this country. That he'd—or did I say that already?

RICHARD K. DOUD: You said that before we turned the machine on.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Oh, did I? I thought I had said that—no, I think that it's been the greatest step forward that could possibly be done. And I think if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated, and he'd been reelected that it would have been the most terrific impetus to art, music, everything. I think it there was a blow to culture and cultivation when Kennedy was killed. Because he had the same idea that Roosevelt did about fostering and sponsoring arts. But I think it's been wonderful.

RICHARD K. DOUD: There's still a—

[Cross talk.]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Of course, you wouldn't want it to be like it is in Russia, telling you what to write.

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, well, that's something you—a problem you'd always have to face at the time.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I wouldn't write.

RICHARD K. DOUD: There is a—

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I'd stop doing anything. If I'd been told what to do.

[Cross talk.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: There is a bill in the in one of the senate subcommittees now. A bill to establish a National Foundation of the Arts, and I also think an advisory committee on the Arts, that if it ever comes into being will supply grants to groups or to, I think, individuals for the advancement of culture, various artistic projects such as theater and painting and sculpture and this sort of thing. I don't know what the chances are of it ever getting out of a senate subcommittee, but at least something is in the works at the moment that may help at least promote art through government sponsorship.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I think it would be wonderful, and yet it does have this feeling that it might not work out as I hope it would. That you might be told what you had to do and what not to do.

RICHARD K. DOUD: How do you account for what seems to me to be the amazing lack of government direction in the '30s, when the government was so involved with all these things and yet seemed to, very sensibly, keep away from telling people what to do, specifically, in other words what to—

[Cross talk.]

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Well, I think we had a genius at the helm. I think he made some mistakes in the people that he—that he had—some of the people I don't think were the right people. But I mean, a man in that position had to do the best he could do. It seemed to me that so many people who were not known, who would have been better than some of the people that he picked out. But how could he know about them?

[Cross talk.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: How could you know? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: [Inaudible] "Mr. President, I'm gonna be better than he is, and won't you let me do it?" You couldn't do it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I thought that Adèle ought to have had a much bigger position than she had.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think Virginia's fortunate that she got the job she did, though.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: I do too, but I think it would have been better if she'd been at a higher position, federal position. I don't think Virginia completely appreciated it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: She was working under Tom Parker at the time.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Yeah.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Have you met Tom?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I haven't. He has been interviewed though, by one of our people.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: But he's given up, I think, doing anything much with art. I think he's doing real estate now.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh?

WILLOUGHBY IONS: Making much more money, I understand.

RICHARD K. DOUD: That figures

WILLOUGHBY IONS: [They laugh.] You would make more money in real estate then—

RICHARD K. DOUD: That figures.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: It does indeed.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLOUGHBY IONS: This might interest you. Adèle found it. I've got all my scads and scads of press clippings. This is something else that I did. Not on the Project. I made toys.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh my.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: All of the—all of the Tenniel illustrations in *Alice*.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh, for goodness sake.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: And *Alice* was exhibited at the Valentine Museum when they had a doll collection. Mrs. Coghill [ph] was a friend of mine, was working for Valentine, said that it wouldn't be a complete doll show if my *Alice* wasn't in. She was put in a shadow box. And she quite walked off with the show. And afterwards she was bought by a friend of mine who couldn't bear for anybody else to have her, so she has her in a shadow box at her home.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, is it that interesting.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: With the pig baby in her arms, with the little bonnet on it. And I had her this way with a clip, so she could hold the pig. But the pig would come out and she would just hang her hands down, you see. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I stuck them all in cloth.

[00:39:59]

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's very interesting. Well, listen, I think I'll turn this off so you can tell me what you didn't want to tell me a moment ago.

WILLOUGHBY IONS: All right, you do that.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]