Oral history interview with Cleveland Morris, November 27, 2013

Morris, Cleveland
Painter, director, and co-founder of the Delaware Theatre Company

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Cleveland Morris on November 27th, 2013 at the Delaware Art Museum. So let’s start by talking about your early biographical—you know getting some early biographical details. Are you a native Delawarean?

CLEVELAND: Yes I was born in the Wilmington Hospital in May of 1947, baby boomer, and really kind of the classic boomer in that my mom and dad met during World War II. My dad was from New York City and was stationed in the Navy after he joined the Navy after Pearl Harbor. And for reasons that are obscure and convoluted was stationed at an inland town on the Chattahoochee River in Northeast Georgia and that’s where he met my mom. So my dad was from New York. My mom is from Gainesville Georgia. And my older brother was born in Georgia but dad had joined the DuPont Company right out of college.

And so Ed DuPont had a policy wherein if people had joined the company and then enlisted they could return to the company and those years of military service would count as part of their DuPont career for retention purposes. So I was born here in Wilmington. We lived in Deerhurst. Among my earliest memories, I have to get this on record, were taking art classes here at the Delaware Art Center. There was a teacher, I don’t know what became of her, her name is Mrs. Ingrasol and that was the highlight of my week. I just loved it.
And I can see it now in the Fletcher Brown Wing and the wonderful fun we would have. And every week we would go and find out whose clay piece had exploded in the can and demolished everyone else’s like an A bomb. But grew up there and then my parents moved out to the country. And I was—I started—my very first year, first grade, I went to the Alfred I Dupont elementary school which is up where Staples is on the inaudible pike. And there were all these boomer kids there and it was so crowded they had to have split sessions.

So I went in the afternoon. My best friend went in the morning. And then Foulk Road Elementary School was under construction. So I was in the first class that entered Foulk Road and stayed there through the fourth grade. My parents moved out to the country and then I went to Friends and I continued on at Friends and graduated in 1965.

MARGARET: In 1965 from Friends. And where did you go to college?

CLEVELAND: I went to Yale University as an undergrad. Or when I went—as a high school student I had been extremely interested in all the arts. I loved painting and I loved dance both modern and classical ballet. I loved the theatre. I didn’t so much love the Opera because I didn’t know so much about it. I liked literature and—I liked it all. And so I was very, very fortunate to go to a university which had very strong programs in all of those areas. And when I went I think my strongest interest was in art history and probably in studio art. But Yale was then, and still is, a theatre mad campus and I got involved in a play in my freshman year directed by a grad student from the Yale drama school from Peru, Alonzo inaudible. And it was the most fun I ever had anywhere.

And it seemed to me to sum up all the things I was interested in: play directing. I had been in plays in high school but play directing didn’t really exist as a field—as an art form. There was this fellow he loved history and he loved psychology, he loved composition, and he loved music because the music would add in. And he loved psychology and all of these things. And it was so much fun and so lively and so throughout college I was a drama major but I continued to take studio art courses every semester I had at least one studio art and one art history course plus my drama classes.

And then in graduate school I studied abroad. I got into inaudible and directing from the University of Manchester in England and they’re also another one from inaudible good theatre school. And at that time those were the only programs in play directing in the UK.


CLEVELAND: So they were very, very, very selective.

MARGARET: Were there not comparable programs here in the United States?

CLEVELAND: Yes there were.

MARGARET: But you were interested in going abroad.
CLEVELAND: I loved English theatre and I still do and I very much wanted to study in England. Yes there were very fine play directing, very fine directing programs here. England—America was far quicker to incorporate the fine arts and performing arts into the academic curriculum than were English or European universities. It was very—it was considered—they were considered not suitable subjects for academic study. Not necessarily in a disparaging way but in the old traditional way that it was best learned in academies and in private instruction.

So in England there was—for drama, there was the royal academies, there was for art. And [inaudible] London Academy, and Music and Dramatic Arts in the [inaudible] those were the five schools. But for the programs to be incorporated in a college curriculum was a big step for them to make. Far less than it was in America. In fact the only—not to go on and on about Yale but Yale has, I believe, it’s the oldest school of art in America. The oldest art museum, college of [inaudible], associated art museum in America and the oldest school of drama in America. And they also have one of the oldest and finest schools of music. So for Yale, for an academic school, has always believed very strongly in the fine arts.

In fact the Yale Art Collection goes back to John Trumbull who was [inaudible] to General Washington so he went back a long way. And the school of art I think has its roots in the 19th Century so it’s quite good. Anyway—but—so when I graduated from graduate school, from that second program, I pretty much lost my even tangential interest in studio art because it was pretty much [inaudible].

MARGARET: And when did you finish the graduate program?


MARGARET: 1971. And tell me about your time following graduation? Did you come back here to Wilmington directly?

CLEVELAND: No, no, no. That was the furthest thought from my mind. I very quickly—my very first job was as a guest artist and resident at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. And I was brought over there—I learned after the fact that somebody dropped out very, very quickly and brought me in. And I was brought in to direct a play called The Beaux Stratagem by George Farquhar and I thought it was a very obscure play—it had to be a play that I knew very, very well. And because of my English years it’s a late restoration comedy so it was really right up my alley and I hit the ground running, was really ready to go for that.

But I had never been to the Midwest before and some of my students were older than I was at that point because I had both graduate and undergraduate students. And I really enjoyed it but I did know for a fact that a teaching career was not for me. I really wanted to work in theatre. So that was my very first job and then I moved to New York because of course that’s what you want to do, that’s what I wanted to do.

And I moved to New York in 1972 and then I remained in New York from ’72 to ’78 and had a great variety of experiences there. And three of the most formative were—well in England the
route to play directing—not so much here but in England the route to play directing is stage managing because you really learn the mechanics of putting on a show like no other way. Directing can be very conceptual and very lofty but stage management is calling the cue at the right time and making sure the props on the table where it needs to be. And dealing with an actor who suddenly balks about putting on a costume piece when they need to make an entrance. That’s what a stage manager does and it’s very exacting.

And so I was able to get some stage managing jobs right away through a connection—a name dropping connection that I won’t go into because it’s just happenstance. And the first two shows that I stage managed, they were Off Broadway productions and they were commercial productions as Off Broadway was and is. These were—it’s just a smaller scale version of what would have happened on Broadway but it was a lot of money involved at least at the time. And one was a new play and one was a revival and they both closed on opening night. And I had no conception of what the impact was of that kind of experience.

And then the third show I did in pretty short order played a little longer but it never recouped the time of the investment. And I became increasingly interested in rethinking the model of producing theatre, and heaven knows that I am not doing anything that many of thousands of other people had done but it really slams you in the head when all of this work and all of this money and all of this belief is pulled out from under you in—overnight. That’s what it is. If a review comes in in the Times and it’s a slam they don’t—the longer you run, even playing out the week, you’re just spending more money and it’s very hardnosed. And it is what it is, it’s still the same way, but it’s very different from college experience.

And it’s very different from the institutional model that you have in Europe and that you were beginning to get in the United States. Just beginning to get these not-for-profit institutional regional theatres. And some of them were in New York City as well but mostly not in New York because New York is the big bow wow and it’s the commercial theatre and nobody can compete really with that. But in cities like—all up and down the Eastern seaboard there were the beginning of these theatres that even if a play got bad reviews, even if it was not very well received, people would still say, but it was worth doing, in many cases. It was provocative, it was stimulating.

It is the same thing you get in the visual arts, you don’t only measure the success of an exhibit by how many people come and see it, that’s a criterion but it’s not exclusive criterion. And likewise in the theatre. But if you wanted to do—and this was very much my model. This has changed enormously in the meantime. But you want to do Moliere, and you want to do the Greeks, and you want to do the English 18th Century, 19—George Bernard Shaw. We opened our theatre with a little play by George Bernard Shaw and I love the classics. But I also love new plays and American plays.

I like it all and I wanted our seasons to be a mix of the ones that would do lively business at the box office and the ones that people would just sort of frown and shake their head but hopefully go out and talk about it in some detail. And so these big bang, catastrophic experiences—and
man I am not saying these productions of mine that I was involved in with stage managing that closed they were dogs. If I saw them now I would probably say oh [inaudible] but when you’re on the inside you think about it differently. So I thought what the heck am I doing that everything is up in this—roll the dice really with what The New York Times was going to say.

So that was in the back of my mind in a very big way and the times they were a changing then too. But also when I was in New York I—gosh I was the administrative director of a small Off Broadway theatre company so I got some administrator experience. I taught. I always taught as a guest artist, as an adjunct in various places. I had a TV show for WNYC TV. That was the beginning also of the establishment of PBS as a real influence culturally speaking. And WNYC was one of the two New York City PBS stations. WNET is the—was the big gun. But WNYC was the city owned and operated PBS station and I did a TV program for them.

So I did a lot of things and I had a lot of interesting experiences and met a lot of people and formulated a lot of thoughts about theatre. And so in 1978 when I was just turning—I was 30 and no doubt thought I was a great deal smarter than I was; undoubtedly thought that I was a great deal smarter than I was. I thought, well I’m ready to start my own theater. Little did I know. So that’s my biography.

MARGARET: So that’s your time in New York. So in 1978 you came back to Wilmington with that motivation to establish your own theatre?

CLEVELAND: Yes but let me clarify two things. I came back to Wilmington but I still maintained an apartment in New York so I still had to make a living. So I was actually in New York half the week. I was working with the associate editor or of a startup Theatre [inaudible] that never came about but it was a good source of income. And [inaudible] at the moment. And it was interesting because I didn’t have a car and I would take the train back and forth and I would get off the train at the train station and you can’t imagine what life was like down there. It was before Martin Luther King.

And before all those abandoned buildings there was a hotel called the Terminal Hotel and it was something out of [inaudible]. It was seedy down there. What was the name of that? Front Street is what it was called.

MARGARET: Front Street.

CLEVELAND: Front Street. And I would walk out to my apartment, first of all, on 10th Street right across from where Sugar Foot is now and then on Market Street Mall. I would walk back and forth and walk back and forth. And I lived in New York and I didn’t think much of it but when I moved back to Wilmington, Wilmington Delaware was one of, I think, two states east of the Mississippi that didn’t have a regional professional theatre. And I couldn’t tell you off hand what the other one was but even West Virginia had one. I think Maryland had a leading one. Virginia had several. North Carolina did. South Carolina did. Georgia, big guns in Atlanta and Florida. They were now sprinkled all up and down the Eastern sea board and farther west. Even,
gosh, Tennessee did. Ohio had several. So in Delaware it was an interesting opportunity because it didn’t have one.

And Wilmington, as you well know, was taking on a very different character by the mid—with the work on The Grand and it’s reopening in ’76. But so many other—Mayor McLaughlin was a brilliant and inspiring. His Chief, his administrative assistant was a man named David Singleton. I don’t know if he’s made it onto your list but he should and he’s still around. And Dave Singleton worked hand-in-hand with Mayor McLaughlin and Dave has an old theatre background himself which made him particularly suspicious of and amenable to our approaches.

But I also moved back to Wilmington with a partner, a professional partner and his wife and they were both—she was a student of mine in the University of Missouri and he was somebody that I had directed as well. And so there was really Peter and me. She was—Ceal was in New York, she was sort of learning a living for him and I was earning a living for myself. So when we started out it was a partnership with Peter and me. And so it was not—it certainly was not me alone.

And then the other thing that’s really important to stress is that theatre is about collaboration. Everything to do with theatre is done with many people and many people’s inputs and many people’s points of view and that’s why people fall in love with the theatre by and large. And so no sooner did I move back to Wilmington—I graduated from college in ’65. I lived in my parent’s house. I also had a summer job ’65—’66 and then after that I never lived here again. I mean I came back and visited my parents but I didn’t live here. I didn’t live here in ’68 certainly, when the riots took place. And then I was in graduate school abroad for quite a bit of the time and spent my summers either in New York City, either travelling in Europe and I was in college.

So the city had changed so much and the people that were making change happen in ’78 were totally new people to me. I did not know them.

MARGARET: That’s interesting.

CLEVELAND: And they did not know me. And it was all part of the fun because you pioneered—was that your word? And that’s what you feel like. And that’s a wonderful—it’s a wonderful feeling. But there were a couple people in particular, David Singleton for Mayor McLaughlin and Mayor McLaughlin himself. But a woman named Carol Balick and if you have a chance to talk with her she was and is a remarkable individual. And she had a store on Market Street Mall called Artisan’s III. And it was the cultural clearing house for everything that was going to be new and happening. And I remember I came back to Wilmington, it was actually a fourth of July weekend in 1978 and I just got on the phone.

And one of the people I met early on was a fellow named Joe Brumskill and he was working—I think he was the part time administrator for both the symphony and Opera Delaware but he had an office over at The Grand. I went over and introduced—somebody had mentioned his name, I went over and introduced myself and he said, “there’s somebody you got to meet.” And this was within a week of moving back to Wilmington. And it was Carol Balick and she had her shop
next block on the 700 block of Market Street. And she was on the Delaware Art’s Council at that time and very good friends with Mayor McLaughlin and with Dave Singleton. And on the board of The Grand Opera House at the time. And she was very determined to see things happen in Wilmington.

And fortunately for me she fell in love with the concept that I was peddling and vowed to do anything to help and did. And she is no longer on the board at the theater company but she was for decades and there’s nothing that she wouldn’t do and there’s nothing she couldn’t be relied upon to do. But for her, the vision of theatre as part of this mix was just tremendously exciting even though she was already so deeply committed to so many other aspects of a renaissance in town.

MARGARET: Now, quickly, tell me again, Peter [inaudible]

CLEVELAND: Peter DeLaurier.

MARGARET: And spell DeLaurier for me.

CLEVELAND: D-E-L-A-U-R-I-E-R. And his wife was a woman named Ceal, C-E-A-L, she is now deceased, Phelan, P-H-E-L-A-N.

MARGARET: Okay.

CLEVELAND: And then to pick up this tangent with Dave, our first quest was to find a place where we could put on shows. Because if you’re in New York—it’s like your friend wanting space to work. If you are in New York and work in the theater at this space here, people would kill to have this space. I would say, but you can only fit 15 in the audience. I don’t care. We have fly space. We have a seating here. People want spaces to put on shows so I didn’t have any question about my ability to direct a play, I knew how to direct a play and I could do it on a shoe string budget. I just wasn’t—I wasn’t concerned about that. Or—and I could find actors to act in plays. I just wanted a place. And we looked at all kinds of places. And, you know, if you’re 30—I was 31 at that point. What looked like The Palace Theatre to me would have been some old rat infested dump to somebody else.

But it was Dave Singleton who first suggested—actually a year went by and we had talked to people and I had written up a prospectus. I had written up a very detailed prospectus, a business plan, the national scene and what was going on so that somebody could read this document and really get the full picture. But it got to the point when it was too much talk and not enough action and I said we’ve got to do something. We’ve got to put on some kind of play so that people understand what a resident professional theater is. We were caught between the Playhouse and The Wilmington Drama League and we wanted to distinguish ourselves from both. Not to disparage either but to say we are different, here’s how we’re different, and see for yourself.
And it was Dave Singleton who said, well you know what? We’ve got this abandoned firehouse down at 3rd and French Street. And it was a result of the riots and urban renewal and who knows what and it was the only building left standing south of 6th Street.

MARGARET: Interesting.

CLEVELAND: And it stood all by itself, on that block, the entire rest of the block was gone and everything north of it was gone. And just about everything east of it was gone. It was—I mean it was Fort Apache down there but I thought it was great. And so in December—December 7th of 1979 we had—I remember December 7th because I was born in Delaware. I don’t know if you were too but it’s Delaware Day. It’s the day that Delaware ratified the constitution and became the first state. It is also Pearl Harbor Day. But it also became Delaware Theatre Company Day at least in my view. And for one weekend only we put on a one-act-play by George Bernard Shaw called *Overruled*.

And there are people around who were there both for the glorious event and also for the nightmarish lead-up to the event. There is a woman here in ton named Judy McCabe who was the partner of Carol Balick’s and she came by the night before. She did flowers and beautiful flower arrangements. She came to bring some lovely flowers because we were going to have a reception there too. And the set wasn’t ready, the costumes weren’t ready, the lights weren’t on, the seating wasn’t ready. I mean it was a calamity in the making. And I remembered she delivered her flowers, looked around, her first impulse would be to say, what can I do to help? And she just burst into tears. But it all came together and it really was—it was everything you would have wished it to be.

It was a classic play, beautifully acted. It’s not to say—I directed it, of course, and we *inaudible* just four—it’s a four hander. And three of those four actors are now deceased. It’s odd to say. And they were very young at the time so it’s something maybe in the asbestos at the firehouse, I don’t know. But we loved that space. And the history of the regional theatre movement and the Off Broadway movement is really linked to taking unconventional spaces and converting them. Not purpose-built theaters which in a way can overwhelm and swamp an event. But taking a warehouse or taking—and that’s what Long Wharf in New Haven was when I was in Yale.

And it was wonderful because it was everything that was an archaic *inaudible* of the theater was swept aside and it was just about putting on—putting folks on the acting and the directing to a certain extent sets but not a great deal. But making it really theatrical and so it was far, far better to have a firehouse to use as a theater than it would have been to get something that was built as a theater.

And so the firehouse was great and the weekend went really well. And then the *inaudible* people were so casual, that was so much fun when’s the next show? Well we weren’t remotely ready but we scraped together and did a first season. And I promise I won’t go season by season but the first season was meant to be characteristic of what we would do. We did—and they were small cast single set shows. I mean I knew how to produce. *Private Lives* by Noel Coward. Four
actors, actually five. One set. *Glass Menagerie*, four actors, one set, and so it was an English comedy and an American drama; both classics of a sort. Then we did Reading of a New Play and that proved very controversial. There was a figure in Wilmington known as the Gentleman Bandit, his name was Father Bernard Pagano, and he was a real guy.

He was a Catholic priest who was arrested and tried for being a robber. He would go into stores and say, “I really don’t want to do this. I really hate to take advantage of you but I need to have all of your money.”

MARGARET: Oh interesting. And was he a contemporary in the 1970s?

CLEVELAND: Yeah he was [inaudible] so we—I really have to reconstruct this in my mind because it’s a long time ago. He was around. He was tried. He was acquitted. But a lot of people thought he really wasn’t guilty. And so we commissioned a local playwright named Rory Pifer to write a play about Father Bernard Pagano. We wanted to be provocative of course, particularly if you’ve just done *Private Lives* and *Glass Menagerie* and a new play is exciting to do and a new play on a politically incendiary topic of course. And so we did that just as a staged reading and of course it mightily ticked off some people that would—who had been interested in what we were doing.

In fact our largest single donor whose name I won’t mention but who was very important to us in getting the opening production was a devout Catholic and felt that the episode really besmirched the local Catholic hierarchy. And he never said it but he never gave us another contribution. And I learned at that point that it’s a political game and if you want to do—you’ll never survive by playing it safe but you will also make enemies and I made a lot. Never, never on a personal basis, on an *ad hominem* basis. But as a consequence of choices that I made deliberately.

And on down the road, the third season we did a wonderful play, an uproarious comedy by Albert Innaurato called *Gemini*. People loved it but it was filled with foul language. And we were looking to add a fire stairwell to the firehouse because we weren’t in code. And the largest single possible donor came to see that show and never—said, that’s it. Too many bad ‘f’ words, too many bad ‘sh’ words and that was it. Even though it was a tremendously popular comedy; heartwarming, funny. People laughed as I had never heard them laugh in that firehouse. I mean it practically raised the roof it was so joyous.

And I thought, you know, if people are that petty that they can’t see why coming together as a shared experience and sharing your whole level of humanity. Play set in South Philadelphia, Italian-American family in Philadelphia. If they can’t see the fundamental wonderful human quality of this and they’re so mightily offended by language—and all theater is is language—then we’ll never make music together.

But that was one other thing about Mayor McLaughlin, when we opened the firehouse we were not up to the fire code. And the fire department came down to inspect and said, no this doesn’t make it, you’re going to have to have a fireman, an off-duty fireman at every performance. And we had this shoestring budget and that would been the largest single [inaudible]. And Carol
Balick called Mayor McLaughlin or called Mary McLaughlin the Mayor’s wife and said, we can’t—can you do something about it? She said, I’ll talk to Mayor. She always referred to him as Mayor. I will talk to Mayor I will tell him he can’t do this. And she did and that took care of that.

MARGARET: Oh interesting. Now tell me, were you working primarily with local actors?

CLEVELAND: No, not at all. Part of the philosophy of this theater was that we were going to be fully professional from the get go. And that met working under contract with the actor’s union—Actor’s Equity Association of which I, myself, was a member. And so we did all of the casting in New York City. And, to me, an advantage of being in Wilmington was that it was so easy to zip back and forth and for me to cast most of the actors who could always go home on their days off. So the idea was that we would only—we would get the very best that we could persuade to join us from New York.

From time-to-time we’d cast supplement with somebody local but mostly we kept our cast very small and we brought everybody either from New York or from Washington DC.

MARGARET: Okay but you did occasionally work with local playwrights?

CLEVELAND: Only this once.

MARGARET: Only that once.

CLEVELAND: And I’m afraid that had a very unhappy ending but I don’t remember all the details but there was a tremendous misunderstanding. When we did this play, the man Father Pagano, gave us the rights to do this story theatrically but he also sold the rights to CBS TV for a television [inaudible] station. And somehow or another our local playwright was going to be involved in the CBS thing. I can’t even—I can research this because I can’t really remember. But CBS called us and said, you do not—our rights preclude your rights. Because we were—I was going to turn it into a full production for the next year. We did it as a reading but I wanted to do it as a full show the next year.

CBS’ legal department called us and you know they could make mincemeat of us as you could imagine and said, absolutely not. We might have been able to challenge it and Father Pagano was a real creep, he did not stand by his agreement with us. But the playwright somehow or another thought we double crossed him. And I had nothing to do with it, I wanted to put the show on, but he thought—and you get to a certain point where you can’t say, “I’m a good guy.” And the world is littered with these incidents.

I mean Peter DeLaurier and Ceal, I mean we made it to the third season—into the third season [inaudible] and that was the end of that. We were just not cut out to work together.

MARGARET: Oh interesting. Did they stay in Wilmington?

CLEVELAND: No they did not.
MARGARET: So they left after the third season.

CLEVELAND: They left after the third season, that’s correct.

MARGARET: Now in regards to theater I am thinking—and you of course would be familiar with this. So many people, artists, supporters, that I have been speaking with have been talking specifically about the visual arts compared to what was happening—compare what was happening in the 1970s and ‘80s in regards to contemporary art to the Brandywine Tradition. There’s this obvious kind of traditional point of comparison. Did you experience that in theater?

CLEVELAND: Yes I think maybe in a broader sense in that if you’re a youngster in this area the Brandywine Tradition at least in the ‘60s was what you wanted to rebel against. When I was talking before we started recording about working here when it was a slum [inaudible] they really at that point in the ‘60s at the bottom of their reputation. They were very much disparaged. And likewise for a youngster growing up here in the ‘60s, the Brandywine Tradition it was just not what you wanted to do.

I remember getting for Christmas one year John Canaday’s books, mainstreams in modern art. You wanted what was now. You didn’t want that. And having gone to friends they were all—[inaudible] kids were friends with me so I knew that tradition very, very well. There were four of those boys and I knew them all, I knew the rest of the family, but that’s not what you wanted. You wanted something that was, number one, contemporary, and number two, connected with something beyond the confines of this geographic area.

So as you well know when we got started on French Street in the firehouse in 1978 the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art started—not the same year, the next year.

MARGARET: The next year in 1979.

CLEVELAND: Also on French Street, just down on the next block and across the street. And so that was just great as far as we were concerned because contemporary art is contemporary art. And even if we’re putting on a traditional play we’re not doing it in a traditional way with the curtain and realistic sets and that kind of stuff. We wanted something that was going to be up-to-date so it would be like what you would see if you went to a show Off Broadway in New York. Likewise they wanted to do something that was going to relate not to the previous traditions here but to the greater world. And I don’t know if—I knew all the people back then but I don’t know how many of them, if any, had a Delaware background at all. The ones that I remember did not and so they weren’t even prevailing upon that as an outlook. It didn’t figure into the picture.

Besides how are you going to compete, it was so—the Brandywine school was so entrenched and so—there was like the studio group. And once again, not wanting to be disparaging because they did wonderful things but it’s not what a young person coming out of school with kind of rip-snorting modestly revolutionary goals with what a—you don’t want to do watercolors on a pot of geraniums. Many of them couldn’t have done a watercolor of a pot of geraniums anyway but that’s not what they [inaudible].
So I think in the theater, when I grew up, I went to see all the plays. My parents loved the theater and went to see most of the plays at the Playhouse. I loved that. I loved seeing those plays. Occasionally we would go to see plays in New York and I remember I was like a little, little kid going to see the [inaudible] which they would do in Arden at the Guild Hall and I would just love that. We never went to the drama—we would go—belong to the Brandywine [inaudible] Gardens. So I saw a lot of plays but that wasn’t what I wanted to do. So in a way I don’t think there was a Delaware theater—a Delaware tradition in theater that is comparable to the Brandywine school but even if there had been I am not sure it would have been mine.

MARGARET: Right it—you would have been—

CLEVELAND: And I had gone to Yale and there was—I got down to New York a fair amount to see theater when I was in New Haven. New Haven had two regional—had Long Wharf Theatre was one of the best in the country at the time and the [inaudible]. And then I had lived in England and it seemed the best of the best over there. So I think I had an idea in my mind of what I wanted when I went to the theater and my goal was always to try to find a way to present that to people that I thought would share similar outlet and share a similar test. And I am sure I fell way, way, way below the mark. I [inaudible] below the mark I came. Not just early on but all the way through, 20 years of it, I’m sure I never ever came close to what I would have liked it to have been but I did have an idea that was based on a fairly wide point of view.

MARGARET: And throughout the seasons, you were there for 20 years—

CLEVELAND: Let me just say one other little thing, to get this off my chest too. Even though we tried to make it clear that we were inserting ourselves into this niche between the Playhouse and the Drama League, there were people on both ends that were extremely suspicious and extremely negative. And there were some devastating—there were a lot of great articles in the paper, a lot of good publicity and a lot of very positive outlooks, and there were some very negative ones, some real attack pieces that came along.

One of which I will never forget and never forgive. That was published not even in Wilmington but in the Philadelphia Bulletin. And it was—to this day I remain convinced that it was prompted by one of the community theater people who got—

MARGARET: Okay so speaking about Otto Dekom and he reviewed theater productions in addition to reviewing exhibitions.

CLEVELAND: He—there were two additions of the paper in Wilmington at that point, the Morning News and the Evening Journal. And Dekom reviewed for the morning paper and then Phil Crosland—Phil Crosland reviewed theater for the evening paper. So you would get two reviews of many shows. I know it’s surprising but it’s true. If you go back in the archives you will see—I don’t know when it just merged—I mean morning papers were on their way—the evening papers were on their way out at that point so they were probably beginning to think about consolidation.
But they did have two papers and two different reviewers for quite a few years. And Dekom reviewed most of our play and I don’t think there was ever a good one, they were awful. And people would say, oh we don’t believe a word they said, but they did.

MARGARET: But he did.

CLEVELAND: Correct.

MARGARET: It seemed like he had a particularly strong voice in the—

CLEVELAND: He did. And of course he was unschooled and everything. The thing that irked me was not so much the bad reviews but he was just a total poser. He knew nothing about theater as far as I can tell. He had no background in theater. He had no professional means of comparison. He was just a hack journalist. And he also reviewed food, I mean that was the other thing. He was a restaurant critic.

MARGARET: Oh I didn’t realize that. So his was the critique.

CLEVELAND: His was the critique, he was the man. And he always used to review the Bloody Mary he would have before dinner. And I thought, well anybody who thinks that a Bloody Mary is a suitable aperitif before a fine meal shows his own true colors. But then there was a wonderful fellow that worked for the evening paper named Phillip Rosen. And Phil was as positive as Otto was vitriolic. But guess who got read and quoted more? It’s always the way. It’s like John Simon in New York, you know John Simon who wrote for New York Magazine? Wrote these awful, awful, scathing reviews of shows that unlike Otto they were often very witty but witty because they were so negative.

It’s always easier to be funny when you write in the negative than it is when you’re writing in the positive. So we would get these two reviews and Rosen would write a good one and Dekom would write a bad one but undoubtedly Dekom’s had much more influence. But this was the other great revelation of the times which was the answer to all these ups and downs for single performances, single productions with subscription.

And there was a man who wrote a book, profoundly influential. The man’s name is Danny Newman and the book is called Subscribe Now. And it wasn’t just for theater it was for orchestras and ballets and [inaudible] companies. And everybody read and subscribed to Danny Newman’s theories, Subscribe Now. And I would recommend that. It was the Bible of the times.

MARGARET: And when would that have been published?

CLEVELAND: It would have been published around 1978. I mean it was that—it was the perfect philosophy at the perfect time and he was the perfect salesman for it. But everybody believed it. And he was right in a way. I mean if you read the book you’ll see he was absolutely right. And it was an argument to the vagaries of an individual critique or individual production. You had to deliver all the season that people were happy with on balance and that often meant
starting strong and ending strong and kind of getting a little dicey in the middle if you needed to. But it sort of took the power away from the single critique. But I will tell you this: there was not a single critic who wrote for the News Journal in all the years I was there that I felt had even a remote grasp of the art of theater.

MARGARET: Interesting. Certainly Penelope Bass Cope after wrote generally more positive reviews, certainly compared to Otto Dekom.

CLEVELAND: She did some theater reviews too.

MARGARET: She did. Okay.

CLEVELAND: And then a guy named Bill Haden—Gary Mullinax came in. He wrote art reviews too I believe.

MARGARET: He did yes.

CLEVELAND: And he did theater. He was the best writer of the group. He was the best journalist and certainly the smartest. But he [inaudible] about theater. And then a guy named Bill Haden came in. And Bill Haden was there when I left. We also tried to get reviews. The Delaware State News had a writer named Joyce Mullen and she gave us these fantastic, over-the-top, rave reviews. Unfortunately nobody read the Delaware State News and nobody from Dover ever came up to Wilmington to see a show. We would always quote ads from Joyce Mullen and she was always very laudatory of me personally so she was my very favorite reviewer.

You know we tried to—Patrick Stoner would sometimes review things for W—do you know him at all?

MARGARET: I don’t.

CLEVELAND: He’s still around and—you probably know his wife Joyce Hill Stoner.

MARGARET: Oh yes of course.

CLEVELAND: Her husband—she and Patrick both have a theater background and Patrick reviewed for WHYY. And I think he’s still employed by—he does a syndicated show [inaudible] so he would do some reviewing too. But we did not have—we never had a very—the press—we were never able to—you don’t want to rely on press because they’re not your collaborators, but I never felt that they were much—that they never really understood what we were trying to do. Although I have gotten—my papers are at the University of Delaware so all that stuff is there. But I’ve got my own mounds of papers. And heaven knows I don’t even know what my mom has done with hers, I’m sure she clipped everything out. And there were so many positive pieces.

There were so many—I ran into Lise Monty the other day, somebody had just sent me a piece that she wrote about me about 1980—about me and the company so I really shouldn’t complain.
There was a lot of coverage. We were not obscure. I think we became fairly well known pretty early on.

MARGARET: Right. Oh that’s wonderful. Now tell me about any relationships with other arts organizations. Certainly there was the close proximity with the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts. So any other arts organizations or colleges and universities. Did you have any relationship with the University of Delaware?

CLEVELAND: I taught—I [inaudible] in college but I didn’t have anything with U of D. At that point, see U of D—well I wouldn’t say I had no relationship but it was a very tiny program and this was before the PTTP days. And there was [inaudible] who was there who operated a tiny very little program, an underfunded sort of insignificant little graduate program, certainly kept in touch all the time. And I taught at Wesley. But I was very close to Stephen Gunzenhauser at the Delaware Symphony and then [inaudible] with the Wilmington Music School. [inaudible] in Delaware. Directors here. I didn’t know Laura well but I did know Bob Frankel well. He came—I don’t when we came, probably around 1980.

MARGARET: Right yes. Late ‘70s—it may have been ’79 even. He wasn’t here too long unfortunately.

CLEVELAND: No but I liked him a lot.

MARGARET: And he was doing interesting things here.

CLEVELAND: I think so and I liked him. We were all very much a part of one community. And the various directors at The Grand. Before Dave Fleming—well when I first came there was a man named Bob Dustman and then Bob Dustman left and a very obnoxious guy with a Russian name, it was not like [inaudible], I think maybe it was Oleg Lobanov was his name. Very full of himself and rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. And then he left and Dave Fleming who had been Director of Development became Director and we were all very, very close. And very much aware of what the other was doing.

And I think it was a very collegial—I did—I personally did a lot of programs with the Delaware Symphony and I enjoyed it enormously. And I enjoyed working with all of them. And at one point—this was later on we did special Christmas program sponsored by The Grand with the symphony and with me putting on kind of a dramatic program too. I think we all felt we were in it together. They were all very—I looked at them as very close colleagues.

MARGARET: Okay, interesting. So did you continue to keep your apartment in New York?

CLEVELAND: Only for a couple years and then you get down—it was actually after Overruled it was [inaudible]. I had just got a good job offer from a University on Long Island. And I—it was a fork in the road which way to go. And it had—Overruled had gone and did—it was so much fun and it had gone so well. And there were so many people at that point that were invested in the idea that I had been pitching and peddling. And I thought, well you know, how
much do I believe it? And I decided—and I am a poor schmuck who has to work for a living so these choices were important choices and I didn’t have a backup plan.

And so, no, I got rid of the apartment in New York and it was a wonderful apartment in [inaudible]. Oh God I could cry now when I think about it. It was on West 9th street between 5th and 6th Avenue. It was one of the most beautiful blocks in New York. Fifth floor walkup in the heart of the old part of The Village. It was glorious, I loved that apartment. But I—actually it was rent controlled, rent stabilized at least. And I got rid of that and, yeah, I committed full time to Wilmington. And I discovered for 20 years that even a full time commitment, at least for me, wasn’t enough. It needed 150 percent.

And then after four years at the firehouse the state had passed the Financial Development Center Act and they had decided the likeliest spot to build their first bank was right on top of where we were. And this was Mayor McLaughlin and he said he was going to—what was it? He was going to have—I don’t even remember. I don’t remember who was going to get it but he was not going to sign the deed over to them unless he was satisfied that a plan was in place for the relocation of the Delaware Theatre Company. But this was after only four seasons. I mean I marvel to think of it now. And so we completed a fifth season in that firehouse.

But it’s a funny thing, Margaret, because those of us who lived through that experience still refer to the firehouse days and people will still say [inaudible] to the theater since the firehouse days.

MARGARET: Oh interesting.

CLEVELAND: But that’s not 35 years ago. But those five years were so informative and so impressionable. And I could tell you every production we did there and probably every one in every cast then even though things from ten years later would all be a blur. But then we—and this becomes very complicated story and its own chapter probably of how we relocated from the firehouse to the Riverfront and the people that were so influential making that happen deserve their own chapter too. But when we moved down to Riverfront—it’s a marvel when I go down there now. I took some of my Virginian friends down when they were here for my opening and it’s beautiful; it’s so glamorous and upscale.

Well when we moved down there our next door neighbor was a concrete—a place that made concrete coffins. And everything else was derelict. It was skid row. It really was skid row. It was ghastly. And we moved down [inaudible] Mitchell and Associates were the partners and they were across the parking lot but there was nothing, there was nothing else down there. It was—not only was their nothing but unlike French Street which at least stood by itself and had big lights around, this was dark and dangerous.

But one thing that was fun in all this, I have to say, was—it became a topic of boasting in a way for people who would say—and we got some very, very influential community leaders of whom none was more important and none, by me, more beloved than Mrs. Lamont du Pont Copeland, Pamela Copeland who actually joined our board and she and her friends would say, “Oh Pam you went down to Third and French?” And she said, “I certainly did and Miles did too and we
had a perfectly wonderful time. I couldn’t recommend it highly enough.” And her friends would line up and they would go. So it became something. And they would say to their friends, “Well we went down to see the Moliere play at the Delaware Theatre Company.” “You went down to Third”—and then—I am assuming what people would say. “I hadn’t been downtown since 1968,” that’s what people would say. That’s what my parent’s friends would say, “I haven’t been downtown since 1968.”

And I would say, “Well”—I couldn’t say come down to Third and French Street and you’ll see a whole new Wilmington because it was horrible. But I would say come down and I think you’ll have a good time. But we had to post people to stay in the parking lot and help people. But it became a subject of kind of personal manifestation. People could attest to their bravery and their unconventionality. And a few leaders like wonderful Mrs. Copeland turned the tide. Emily DuPont was another one who did that. And a handful of others. Emily DuPont particularly. She didn’t give a damn about the theater but she loved downtown Wilmington and her husband Henry B. DuPont was the man who was the founder of GWDC and he’s the man who saw about moving some of those buildings to Willingtown Square and all of that kind of thing. He was a very, very big believer in downtown.

MARGARET: Interesting. That’s not been mentioned.

CLEVELAND: It should be.

MARGARET: That’s an important point.

CLEVELAND: He was a real power behind the scenes and of course had the money to back it up. And then when he died Emily, always referred to as Cousin Emily because she was one of those born a DuPont and married a DuPont, she was downtown all the time. I remember her saying to me—she located the Wilmington Garden down to Willingtown Square in one of those little buildings. And she said—she lived in a big house in the country so she said, “I would really rather have a little apartment above the Wilmington Garden Center.” And those—as I say when it seemed like all things were possible that was the one thing that seemed like it would be the most fun.

MARGARET: Oh how interesting. So just quickly, I know you touched on this very briefly. You acquired the land of the Riverfront in 1983. You spent a season at Absalom Jones Community Center.

CLEVELAND: ’84–’85.

MARGARET: ’84–’85 and then when did you occupy the space and have the first season?

CLEVELAND: In the new theater, 1985, the fall of 1985.

MARGARET: Okay.
CLEVELAND: We acquired—we didn’t actually acquire that land in ’83. We knew we were going to have to relocate in ’84. We knew we were going to have to relocate in ’84. Is that right? ’83–’84, ’79–’80, ’81. 1982–’83. No we would have learned in ’83 or early 1984, the fourth season of the firehouse that we were going to have to relocate. And so we spent that last year there dealing with this and then ‘84–’85 we had just done five seasons and I felt very strongly we couldn’t stop producing plays. We couldn’t just disappear and raise money and so we—the best of a bunch of very bad alternatives was to do a season out in Newport Delaware at the Absalom Jones Community Center. And I am so glad we did even though it was very, very difficult for us and probably even more difficult for our subscribers to go out there. Awful place. I mean awful facility for putting on theater and not [inaudible] parking and it was the middle of the neighborhood.

It was run by, I think, County Parks and Recreation owned it. I could get detail about it. I could find out if you need to know but I believe it was theirs and I contacted them and they said, “well we do have this space and you can rent it for…” you know a nominal sum. We rehearsed not out there but the old Cathedral of St. John at Concord Avenue and Market Street.

MARGARET: The Episcopal Cathedral.

CLEVELAND: Exactly.

MARGARET: Interesting.

CLEVELAND: They had a great room that we could use to rehearse in and our office was there too. We had our office down on Market Street in a building owned by the Cathedral and we rehearsed there. And once again, it was a real sweetheart deal. And at that point we must have settled on that Riverfront site and a woman named Leslie Kelly was the architect for our building until she finally left [inaudible] and another guy, Joe Davis I think his name was, stepped in and finished the design for us. But we opened in the fall of 1985 with I’m told—I had forgotten this but apparently the theater company did a big event the weekend before last with Governor Markell doing a—reading a play. Apparently it was a lot of fun and they did it kind of—they had some photos of the openings with me and Colleen Dewhurst at the opening of the theater. Do you know Colleen Dewhurst?

MARGARET: I don’t.

CLEVELAND: She was a very high, very significant American actress in her day. And of course Mike Castle was Lieutenant Governor at that time.

MARGARET: Oh at that time, okay.

CLEVELAND: I think Peter du Pont was Governor and Mike Castle governor elect. But he did—they all were wonderful.
MARGARET: Well my goodness Mayor McLaughlin’s support of both the Delaware Theatre Company and the DCCA and ensuring that you each had spaces because then they just erased that entire area.

CLEVELAND: Yeah that whole area is gone. And yeah he was wonderful. And of course Mayor McLaughlin he was a subscriber to the theater company to the very, very end but it was all new to him. He was a very down to earth grassroots kind of a guy but he was up for anything. And he and his wife came to see all these shows and some of them very bizarre [inaudible]. And they sat through them and Mary was very outspoken and the Mayor would just nod and say he was glad he came or whatever. But, you know, they were the best kinds of supporters. Jim Baker very much the same. Now he didn’t come to a lot of the shows because he had a lot of other irons in the fire. And I think with the DCCA they moved up to the Water Works down—and that didn’t work out for them as well as our move worked out for us. I am glad things turned out as they did.

MARGARET: And then it took them another however many years to get down to the Riverfront as well. Given the close proximity of these two organizations that were founded almost—

CLEVELAND: Within months.

MARGARET: Within months, exactly. And the relationship that these two organizations had, I’m curious to know if you saw any impact on the physical separation of these two organizations. And the movement of these two, kind of, pioneering arts organizations in downtown Wilmington. Did it—was there an impact on visitorship, activities, did it feel like audience was being splinted? I may be making a bigger deal of this than there was.

CLEVELAND: I didn’t feel that way. To tell you the truth they were down the street and I love the arts, I love visual arts, and I went down their often but I was not—they were barely in my peripheral vision to tell you the truth. We performed in the evening. They were always closed in the evening. They had a cool building. They had a very cool building. There is an even cooler building the next one down that we had looked at. It was an old grocery store. I can’t remember—it was beautiful ‘30s style with glass brick and stuff. I was much more attuned to what was going on with the performing arts with the grand symphony, the opera.

And from time-to-time with the Playhouse because they had some general managers—a fellow named Greg Moore who is very interested in working together. He and his wife—his wife was a great theater lover and they were subscribers and then he became general manager at the Lighthouse. And he really reached out and wanted to find ways to work together. You know if I were to think back on the earliest people that I even knew at DCCA I don’t know who their first paid staff people were. I knew people like Gina Bosworth who was a volunteer. Suzie Saunders was a volunteer. Rick Rothrock who was involved but I don’t know in what capacity. There was a fellow named Stuart Moore whose—I don’t know if he’s—I haven’t thought about him—I am amazed these names are popping back into my head but he was involved. And—but I don’t know who was—
MARGARET: You know Rosanna Capaldi may have been one of the first paid DCCA staff members.

CLEVELAND: Was she paid down on French Street?

MARGARET: Yes I believe so. But I believe that would have just been part time even. Most of it was volunteer of course. A lot of volunteer work on the part of those two—the earliest artists kind of the first artists who had studios in the space like Ken Mabrey or Graham Dougherty.

CLEVELAND: I remember Graham down there. And I don’t remember Ken down involved until—I didn’t know he was involved until the Waterworks days and having a studio there. Graham was sort of there from the very, very onset. But you know it’s interesting because they were a collective and we were not. For all that I have said about theater being collaborative, and it is, ours was a very structured organization. And it depended on a paid staff, a tiny bit of a staff, but a paid staff nonetheless and paid actors. And a full time staff at that.

And the DCCA came about as a community of—a collective. And you know in that real classical, vaguely—very traditional but also very vaguely ’60s kind of hippie set ups. But even so they needed somebody to run the gallery that’s when—Mary Page would know better than I but I think that’s when her friend Suzie Sanders really came into this. But even the shows there—I don’t remember going to a lot of shows there. I remember early on buying some work there and needing to pay on time, they were always very good about that. The painting must have cost $250.00 and I couldn’t pay it all at once and they were—they were their own—I think certainly when Bob Frankel was here at the Museum I had a much stronger connection here than with DCCA.

And part of it may have been because they didn’t have a director whom I could call on the phone and say, “Look what do you think about this” or “what do you think about that.”

MARGARET: Right. That’s a really interesting and important point. I am really thinking of DCCA certainly as it was, as a collective.

CLEVELAND: And a rather disputatious one too.

MARGARET: So you were living on Market Street. And that would have been I guess after you let go of your apartment in New York.

CLEVELAND: Correct.

MARGARET: And how long did you live on Market Street, through the 1980s?


MARGARET: Okay and you moved out of the city?

CLEVELAND: No I moved to 19th and West Street, an area that’s—
MARGARET: Oh yes I know that area.

CLEVELAND: I don’t think I would want to live there now. It was dicey then. But you know this is another thing about those times. Urban pioneers. There was a lot of that going on. Trinity Vicinity that was Dan Foley, that’s how he made his mark in Trinity Vicinity. And the area along I-95 corridor, Jackson Street and Harrison Street, those areas. People were trying big time to get something going in Quaker Hill. They did some beautiful renovations on West Street down there and some new construction. And when I saw this house for sale, actually it was funny because I was living on Market Street and walking to the office which is down by the Cathedral and I would walk back and forth.

I would take different routes each day and I walked by this house at 19th and West and I thought, “That’s a really cool house.” And the rest of the block was pretty bad but the time was that you’d see a great looking house, with great looking bones, and a block that looked nice and just a couple blocks from the Brandywine Park. And you could look out and see the [inaudible] skyline and think, “well this has got to turn around. ‘This has got to get rediscovered.’” And that was part of the spirit of the times. I was, no doubt, very naïve. And heaven knows I would have never made any money in the real estate business or in any other business. But I thought any place that looked as cool as that, was as convenient as that was sure to turn [inaudible].

You could walk to work if you wanted to. You could walk to restaurants and cultural events and Superfine Lane was coming along with—what was his name? The architect, Chalfant, Dick Chalfant. And I remember that because there was a painting here by Jefferson David Chalfant. Anyway Dave Chalfant created the Superfine Lane project but 19th and West never—it never salvaged itself and now it’s next to a really, really terrible part of town. But I lived there until I left the Theater Company and then I sold that house in 19—actually I sold the house in 1999.

MARGARET: Now what—

CLEVELAND: I was still a downtown guy. I was still a city dweller and downtown as much as possible.

MARGARET: And so were you—I would love to get your sense of the kind of artistic landscape community outside of the theater and the performing arts. Were you attending openings at galleries within the city? Certainly by this point you would have just missed—I think you would have just missed Rob Jones.

CLEVELAND: No we just intersected.

MARGARET: Oh you just would have intersected, interesting.

CLEVELAND: He was one of the very first people I talked to. And everybody knew Rob Jones. And I went over and I introduced myself and he was gung ho enthusiastic of course. And his was the spirit—that was the spirit that I wanted to be a part of. Take some unconventional space, do something funky and unexpected and people will come. So, no, we did overlap.
MARGARET: Did just overlap.

CLEVELAND: And I’m so glad we did. He was a wonderful guy.

MARGARET: And so—because I think he went up to New York in, I believe, right around 1980.

CLEVELAND: That’s about right.

MARGARET: Right around that time. Oh that’s interesting. So that’s interesting to know that you did just overlap. But at least in terms of moving into the early 1980s there was no longer, at least as far as I believe, a dedicated space for contemporary art in—certainly on Market Street. Sewell Biggs was doing some—

[Crosstalk]

CLEVELAND: Was one of the very first people I met when I came back. Because I—in New York I had friends that knew Sewell very well. And they said, “Oh you’re going to move down to Wilmington” [inaudible] said, “Oh you must introduce yourself to Sewell Biggs” and so I did. And Sewell also went to [inaudible] school so we had a lot of things in common. And yes, he had The Grand Gallery at that point. Yes I remember—then I knew Sewell all the way up to the very end. But he didn’t keep that gallery. I don’t know when that gallery closed but it wasn’t in business all that long after I moved back. I knew Susan Isaacs from the get go and I remember her when she was on Tatnall Street I think it was.

MARGARET: Yes with the LB Jones Gallery.

CLEVELAND: Right.

MARGARET: Okay.

CLEVELAND: And then she moved—what I also remember, she did—she got one of the lobby spaces in one of the banks, maybe it was the Chase bank downtown and then she had a gallery on Tenth Street. And I bought some pieces from here. And I for 20 years did a radio program on WILN called Delaware the State of the Arts.

MARGARET: Oh yes.

CLEVELAND: Did that come up with anybody else? Stephen Gunzenhauser and I were cohosts and wonderful Sally Hawkins who is still around, Sally was the owner and general manager at WILN which was all news, all talk, local radio station. And we did this weekly radio program, Stephen and I, but I produced it so I lined up all the guests. It was on every—what was it—Sunday afternoon. And then it was rebroadcasted at some point. But it was only 20 minutes and it was great because I lined up the guest and I lined up everybody that I thought was doing something fun and interesting. So I kept in contact with the whole gamut if I could.
MARGARET: Okay. Oh gosh it would be so wonderful to have transcripts of that program. Are they really? Oh that’s disappointing. Susan—

CLEVELAND: But Susan was on the show many times.

MARGARET: And then I believe she may have been a regular host.

CLEVELAND: I believe after I left she may have become the host.

MARGARET: As well. So she had mentioned that as well. Oh gosh.

CLEVELAND: I did it for 20 years though. And then I think she did take over. And then I think the Delaware—somebody Paul Weagraff.

MARGARET: Paul Weagraff.

CLEVELAND: Weagraff?

MARGARET: Yes.

CLEVELAND: He may have taken over.

MARGARET: Yes because now The Delaware Division of the Arts, I guess, runs the—

CLEVELAND: Is it still on?

MARGARET: It is. It’s still on. Yes. So did you establish The State of the Arts program?

CLEVELAND: Yes absolutely. Well Sally Hawkins and—I went to Sally Hawkins and said, “What would you think of?” And I talked to Stephen beforehand and said, “Would you like to do it together?” See I had done my show in New York was an interview, was an arts interview show, the television show. So I had some experience with that and I always loved radio. I think I had a face better made for radio than for television in any way. And so I thought this would be fun. And Sally was up for anything. She was so tied into the downtown scene—WILN may still be there but they’re on 14th and French. So she loved downtown and she was very much involved in everything. She’s still around by the way if you ever want to call her. Sally Hawkins and she lives out at Stonegate, same as my mom.

MARGARET: Okay that would make for a good interview I imagine.

CLEVELAND: She would be very interesting and she’s well on in years now but she’s also—

MARGARET: On tape. So we’re talking about the Delaware State of the Arts radio program, when was that established?

MARGARET: 1979, how perfect. Okay, interesting.

CLEVELAND: There was also in Wilmington, thinking back, Sally had a regular journalist on WILN who also wrote for the newspaper named Bill Frank, has his name come up at all?

MARGARET: Oh yes, I’ve seen it in print.

CLEVELAND: He was a gadfly columnist and he wrote and broadcast some scathing things about the theater company and about me personally. That’s how I knew they didn’t keep the transcripts because he broadcast this awful thing, it wasn’t even scripted. He just kind of got on the air, “awful idea and what do these people know, they don’t know anything.” And it was just ugh. He was an interesting, interesting fellow. He was like my mortal enemy. And then he came to see a production that we had done and he did a review of the production in the firehouse and it was very positive. And then he came back and saw a production of Our Town in the new theater [inaudible] new theater. And he wrote the most extraordinary review of that production that I ever read. And he wasn’t even the critic at that point, he wrote it as an op-ed piece.

MARGARET: Interesting.

CLEVELAND: And then when he retired they published an anthology of his—the best of his columns. And two of his columns about the theater company were in that. And the News Journal had a cartoonist named Jack Jurgen and Bill Frank gave me an inscribed copy of the book and he got Jack Jurgen to do a cartoon of a crow—in it was Bill eating crow. It was really a wonderful, wonderful gesture of his humanity, his background, his taste. But Sally kept him on the air for years and years and years. Ah, memory lane. The funny thing for me is when I moved down to Virginia, I knew when I retired from the theater company in 1998 that it really would be impossible for me to stay here in Wilmington for so many reasons. But if I wanted to start something totally new, go back to that career I first started out to pursue I’d need to go someplace where nobody knew me and I did not know anybody.

And I did not know one person in that town and nobody knew me. And then once I started making friends and getting involved in activities and one thing or another, I really did not talk about my former life at all. Number one, people aren’t very interested and number two, there’s nothing worse than somebody who says I used to do this and I used to do that. Big deal. So this is a very strange experience for me because the people that I see here in Wilmington know it all anyway. The people that I know in Virginia don’t know it. If they ask they are welcome to ask anything they want but I don’t bring it up on my own. And in this past show I had seven friends up from Virginia for the show and it was the first time we really had a lot of interaction between people who knew me back when and the people who know me.

MARGARET: Those two separate lives. You were not pursuing your painting practice at all when you were involved with the theater company?

CLEVELAND: It started to change towards the very end. I cannot describe to you how all-consuming that work was. I never caught up with my workload ever. It was one of the reasons
why I just got so burnt out. I never finished at the end of the day, at the end of the week, at the end of the season there were so many things undone. Maybe it’s because I am not organized enough or productive enough or whatever but I never got it all done. Towards the end, it may have been around 1996 at the instigation of Carol Balick and probably Mary Page I started doing some life drawing sessions at the DCCA taught by a guy named Eo Omwake—

MARGARET: Yes.

CLEVELAND: He may still be around. And I loved it. Because when I was in college there is nothing I loved more than life drawing. And these were—he did a little bit of instruction but mostly it was just a [inaudible] and I loved it. And I had never painted still life before at all. I didn’t have a studio and I didn’t have much time so you know I would set up a glass of water and a couple of oranges and I did it entirely for my own amusement. But the last season I was at the theater company we did a fundraising event and there was a silent auction included and I donated one of my paintings. And nobody had ever seen—I didn’t show these to anybody and so I donated one of my paintings. And people would look at it and say, “Cleveland Morris” and say, “who is the other Cleveland Morris?” but it was me. And there was a huge bidding war for an enormous sum of money and I thought, that’s really interesting.

And when I left the theater as I said, I do have to work for a living, I still have to work for a living and I didn’t quite know what I was going to do but I was going to take a year off. And I went out to Cape Cod and I was working on a novel mostly in the mornings, which I am still working on. And I painted in the afternoons. I don’t know. This is a very egotistical story so forgive me for saying it. So I did all these still life paintings and I didn’t—because I work in the mornings all the writing I could do and then I’d do these paintings and I had such a good time doing them. And I talked to Carol Balick and she was having her first show at Carspecken-Scott. And she said, “Why don’t you bring some of your paintings down to show Fred?” and I said, “I couldn’t do that.” And she said, “Oh just give it a try. You’ve known Fred forever.” And I said, “Okay.”

Then I called Fred and said, “Would it be okay if I brought some paintings down?” and he said, “Sure.” I have since heard what his private thoughts were at the time. It’s so funny. He told a group of people his version of the story when I was up for my opening this last time. It was just dread. And so I brought these paintings down because I was up in Cape Cod for this year because of the house I had up there. And I set them up on the gallery and I was so nervous I could hardly unwrap them I was so nervous. And Fred came in and said, “These are great, let’s do a show.” I said, “Huh?” and he was a business man. He said, “Let’s do a show.” “Okay.” I bundled them up and I went out to Cape Cod and then I thought I can’t do this. I can’t have a show. And he said, “No I really want you to do a show.” And I said, “Okay.”

So we did the first show in 1999 and this is the part that’s really very outrageous to say is that it was the first time in the history of the gallery that a show sold out before it opened. People came for opening including Mrs. Copeland and there were nothing but red dots. They were just—I mean everything was gone, every single painting was sold. And they did—there was a full page
cover story on me and my paintings in the News Journal. This is why I said I could never really complain about them or what they did. Big full page of these color pictures of my paintings and a big article about me the day this thing was opening. And I went to the open house and I was just dazed. And Fred put his arm around me and said, “I just want you to know it doesn’t always work out this way.”

So we decided—Fred said, “well when can you do the next one? We’ll do it all over again. When can you do the next one?” And so I, a friend, Bill Owen, who is the music director at Christ Church that I’ve got a place—I had just sold my house—just sold my house. He said, “I’ve got a place down in Virginia that you can use in South Central Virginia.” And Fred said, “How soon can you be ready?” And I said, “If I do nothing else we can do another show in six months.” And this time we sent out all the invitations, said no paintings will be sold before 9:00 p.m. so there was a lot of people who went around the block and those paintings—every single one of them was sold in about five minutes. And that was the beginning of my painting career.

And when I realized I could maybe even earn a living doing this if I watch my expenses. But I’ve always been—I have always been a very frugal person. I never had opulent taste other than buying art work which I can’t afford. But I thought if I lived someplace where the cost of living is really low and I devote myself to it, with a little bit of pinching I could probably make a go of this.

MARGARET: Do you show your work in Virginia? You do as well?

CLEVELAND: I’ve been very lucky. In fact I counted it up from my resume; I’ve had 19 solo shows since I started painting.

MARGARET: Oh, in a very short amount of time.

CLEVELAND: Since 1999. The first was there. So I’ve had 19 there. I have been in numerous group shows and I also have taught drawing. I teach currently at a prep school in Staunton and I taught at—I am connected to this adult art school in Staunton called Village Street Studio School. And I’ve taught a college in the area too. None of which have I pursued on my own. I have always been asked.

MARGARET: At invitation.

CLEVELAND: Yeah. But I am shown widely in Virginia and in Staunton and elsewhere in Virginia. Yeah I tried—I’ve been very, very lucky, Margaret. And I don’t delude—I don’t think I delude myself about what it is that I do. I know what it’s very great limitations are. It’s nothing more than what it is but I love doing it and it’s got a certain commercial appeal to it. And it makes me very happy to do it. And the good luck, the good fortune is that it’s—it has—there’s a commercial slot for art like this.

And I’m not trying to revolutionize the art world. I’m not trying—it’s the nice thing about doing something in your 60s too. If you’re in your 20s you want to make an impact, you want to make
a change, you want to be noticed for your innovative ideas. I don’t feel that way about anything in my 60s. I am 66. I want to do what I want to do and I want to have a good time doing it. And if I can make a living doing it then it precludes having to do other things instead. So it’s a great combination. And the contrast between putting on a play—you can’t direct a play unless somebody hires you or gives you money, but you can paint every day. You need a lot of people to put on a play and I’ve only myself to rely on.

And my ultimate test is this, and I’ve said it hundreds of times, if I did a show at the Delaware Theatre Company and 100 people came to see it and 99 people walked out and said, “That’s the worst show I’ve ever seen in my life” and one person said “I loved it”—and believe me we had shows like that—it would be a disaster. But if you came to a gallery, 100 people said, “That’s the crappiest painting I ever saw,” and one person said, “I love that painting who do I make the check out to,” it’s a success.

MARGARET: That’s a success.

CLEVELAND: So it’s just, I’m very, very lucky to have had two careers that I loved as much as I have. And that are such total contrasts.

MARGARET: Yes.

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Duration: 93 minutes