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INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET P. BALDWIN

for the

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
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Interview with Margaret P. Baldwin – Part I  
Conducted by Ashley A. Criswell; edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott  
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AC: Professor Baldwin, let's start by talking about your background—where you were born, your childhood, and just a little bit about yourself.

MB: Okay, I was actually born here in Atlanta, Georgia, at Piedmont Hospital, one of the few Atlanta natives now.

AC: I saw that; nice to be local.

MB: It is. But my family moved away from Atlanta when I was sixteen. We moved to Richmond, Virginia, and I finished my last two years of high school there. I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but it wasn't until college that I started to think about theatre. I had always played dress up and liked to boss people around and make up performances in my basement, but I thought theatre was kind of a flaky thing to do. So I thought that I would be a short story writer and teach English somewhere. But then when I did my undergraduate work at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, they have a great English department there and a lot of great writing programs. One of my writing professors toward the end of my career there, like in my junior or senior year—I wrote a story and he said, "Well, this is not a very good story, but it could make a good play, and you should consider taking a playwriting class."

So my last semester in college, I ended up taking a playwriting class. It just sort of clicked, and I said, "Yes, this is the kind of writing I need to do." I ended up staying in Charlottesville. Actually, my first play—professional work—I was commissioned to write a piece, along with my playwriting professor. He invited me to work on it with him. It was commissioned by the Sexual Assault Resource Agency in Charlottesville, and it was right when date rape was a big deal, like on the cover of *Time* magazine [on June 3, 1991] and all. It seems like a long, long time ago. It was; it was about twenty years ago. We wrote a piece about acquaintance rape and then toured the colleges and sororities and fraternities all over the Southeast. I helped manage that tour, and I performed in it, and I worked with the training for it and all that. That was, I think, when I started to think about the power of theatre and how it wasn't just about doing musicals and song and dance and entertainment, but that it could really . . .

AC: Give a message?

MB: It could give a message, and it could also help people heal from a difficult thing. When we did the tour, we would go in, and we would perform it. We just had like six chairs, and that was our set. All of the actors who had all trained through the resource agency also facilitated the discussion and did counseling and things like that. After every performance I would have people coming up afterwards who were either in tears or they said this has happened to me or happened to my sister, and it was really powerful. It was

exhausting, and after a while you don't want to talk about rape any more. But it was great to see the power of something that was a pretty simple piece that then could encourage people to talk about ideas that are otherwise really hard to talk about. I think that goes back to part of what I love about teaching TPS 1107 and about running that class is I feel like the theatre gives us an excuse to be in a room together and to address parts of our humanity that otherwise we're just not going to deal with because they're unpleasant or they're hard to deal with or sometimes they're great to deal with, but they still make us vulnerable. I think that's what theatre probably does better than anything else, but of course I'm a little bit biased.

AC: Actually, like you said, pointing out about the healing process, there was an exercise that you did in your class when I was there. I was apprehensive at the time, but I wish I had done it—the poem where you could get on there and talk about anything. Even though I didn't do it in class, I did later write a poem that I never would have done had you not done the exercise. It relieved some of the things I had been thinking about and that I had not even realized until I wrote it down. It's amazing how you can not only heal things, but you can feel things that you wouldn't have otherwise felt. So I mean, it's not biased at all. That's why, like I said, I wanted to do this interview because I think the program is amazing.

MB: Well, thank you.

AC: Oh, for sure, I completely understand. Who would you say had an influence on you in your early years? I know you said it wasn't until college that it started to come in, but was there anybody earlier on that helped you get there?

MB: Yes, I would say I had some teachers along the way that encouraged my writing. I remember my second grade teacher, actually [several] early teachers that liked my writing. My first story was called "The Adventures of Super Pickle." She liked that a lot. They encouraged me to keep writing, which I think was great because even then when I was growing up and in middle school and high school in the 1970s, the world that I was in—most people did not go into the arts. They would go be lawyers or doctors or accountants or things like that, but there wasn't a lot of support for the arts, but I did have a few teachers. When I moved to Richmond—I actually just went back to my twenty-fifth high school reunion—I had a creative writing teacher who was really good. Her name was Buffy Morgan—Elizabeth Morgan—and she is a poet. I think she was the first person that made me think about the possibility of seeing myself as an artist because I had thought, "No, I'm not an artist."

And what that means—going back to TPS 1107—I think what it takes to be an artist is you increase your capacity to experience life. My feeling is that we all are artists at some level and that we all can increase our capacity to experience life. That's a big thrust for me in teaching those classes is to encourage people to step outside of their comfort zone and to open themselves to the world around them and to feel it more and to see it more and to listen more. By doing that you can have a better life. The same tools that make us good theatre makers or good artists are the same tools that make us better human beings. That's my under-riding philosophy. Part of the challenge of doing this in a classroom of 65 to 90 students is that people learn by doing and that class is not about the content so much in terms of the facts and the history of theatre and things like that as about the

experience—your experiences as an audience member, your experience as a maker in the group project, and your experience just in the moment to moment aspects of the class.

AC: I know you mentioned a little earlier in your background, but what college did you attend after high school, and why did you choose that compared to some of the other options that you had?

MB: The University of Virginia is a great school, and by the time we moved there I was considered in state. I actually went up and did a tour of the Ivy League schools, and my parents had said, “If you really want to go to one of those, we’ll figure out a way to make it work.” But when I got back I said, “Well, I think I like UVA just as well as any of those.” My mom was like, “Okay, come on! You type and I’ll write, and we’ll get this application in.” I went there, and it was a great school. Then I moved out west for about sixteen years. I moved to Montana which is sort of an odd place to go to make theatre, but it worked for me. That was my ‘finding myself’ years, I think. I followed a cod fisherman out there, but it didn’t work out, fortunately (laughter). That’s another story! I actually found an interest out there in oral histories because I was commissioned to write a play based on oral histories of these small towns in northeastern Montana, which were like being on the moon they were so far out in the middle of nowhere. Doing that made me want to do more work with oral histories, so I’ve done a number of plays based on oral histories. That was also what inspired me to move back to the South because after doing that and hearing these amazing stories of these people that had . . .

AC: Did you do one in Kenya?

MB: Yes, I did one in Kenya once I moved back here and started teaching at Kennesaw. I’ve done a couple of family-based pieces and I did a piece called *Roland’s Song [ : A War Story]*, which was based on a French epic military poem, but then I worked with the students to interview contemporary soldiers and look at contemporary visions of what it is to be a soldier versus an epic story of it. I worked with them a lot. I liked doing that a lot. So that was part of what I got from my Montana years. Then I went to the University of Iowa for my master’s program, and that’s where I got an MFA in Theatre Arts with a concentration in playwriting. There’s a program there called the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, and it’s one of the better ones in the country. I liked it because I had already been making theatre for about eight years at that point and always producing my own work, and they had more production opportunities than some of the other programs that I was looking at. Plus I could do a teaching assistantship, which helped me pay for it. But then I found that I really loved teaching, so ever since then I’ve had some form of teaching going on along with my own creative work.

AC: So along that road with the different schools and everything you went to, I know you told me about some childhood influences. Were there any mentors that you had that really helped you establish this love that you had for what you were doing?

MB: Yes, definitely. I would say more so at the University of Iowa. I had some major influences there. There’s a playwright name Erik Ehn and he was a really big influence to me. Also a director named Anne Bogart whom I got to work with briefly, and I’ve used a lot of her work almost in every class I teach.

AC: Yes, I think I remember that name.

MB: The Living News exercise that we did, sort of how to make a play—that came from him. He’s one of these people that I think looks at the arts in terms of how they can heal society. He, for example, has done a lot of work in Rwanda, post-genocide, and using theatre down there. He created this conference called the Arts in the One World conference. It’s about people using the arts all over the place for social change and for again, this question of how are we human, and how can we use the arts to make us more human? How can we use it to inspire compassion or empathy, and how can we use it to deal with conflict? How can we use it to help people find their voices and to deal with difficult circumstances? He’s also just a really fun teacher. When I first started writing plays, I wrote strange, experimental, odd things. I was afraid of what I would call straight plays, like just sort of realistic plays. Since then I’ve actually come to like realism and to appreciate it, but through the classes I took with him he gave a number of ways to approach writing a play that for me were helpful at the time. He also was just a great teacher, and so I use some of his exercises all the time. The same with Anne Bogart—she has a style of working and developing theatre and training for theatre called Viewpoints that she’s developed. I’ve used a number of those techniques. Her ways of approaching being an artist in the world is, I think, really inspiring. Those are probably my two biggest. I have others, but those, I think, are probably my two biggest influences in my work.

AC: You mentioned getting a few techniques—I always wonder and I always like to ask somebody that is so involved in the arts, where do you get, I guess I would say, your muse? You were saying you used non-realistic; that has to come from somewhere. Where do these things come from? Are there certain things that inspire you or just kind of a weird dream you had one night (laughter)?

MB: It really depends on the project. Sometimes it starts with an idea. I’ve been asked to work on a piece about water. That becomes an assignment to then say, “Okay, how are we going to make a play about water? Where do you begin?” So I just start looking at things and say, “Oh, there’s something about water; I’ll pull that.” Or there’s something. Then I start saying, “Where are the connections?” So in this piece that we’ve started doing and just had at the Brave New Works Festival—and this is a piece that I’m working on collaboratively, so there are other people who are throwing in their ideas. My job is to sift through all of that and put it into a dramatic narrative, which can sometimes be easier said than done.

So, looking at well, how do scientists look at water and this connection between the fact that without water we can’t survive, and then you have people looking for water in the universe, on Mars and places like that, and the idea is, if they can find living water that means that there’s a chance for life. So that’s interesting to me, but on the other hand it’s interesting to me that women in Ethiopia can walk 3.7 kilometers a day to find clean water and walk back, but then they can use their cell phone on the way. So they may spend seven hours a day . . . so all the contradictions that are there. Some of it’s depressing, but also it’s how do you make sense of all of this? I think a lot of playwriting for me is how do you make sense of the world around you, how do you make contact

with the world around you? A lot of times a play may start from an image. I had a play *Night Blooms*—did you see that one?

AC: Yes.

MB: That came from a seed of a family story, which ended up not being true, but still made me interested in the play. Then sometimes it's an image; sometimes it's a phrase; so it depends on the piece. I have several files that I keep of just sort of, "Oh, that would be an interesting idea for a play, and maybe someday I'll get time to write it and maybe I won't." I'm obsessed with spam; I have folders of spam; you know, the spam that you get in e-mail. I think it's odd the way that the language comes through, so I probably have like 5,000 spam e-mails that I've collected that I might make something out of one day. So sometimes I feel like I'm more of a collector.

AC: A hoarder.

MB: Yes, I'm definitely a hoarder. My husband would agree to that. Then when I used to do puppetry, I literally would make object plays, so I'd make plays out of working on . . .

AC: A piece of string or something?

MB: Exactly. Yes.

AC: That's so fun.

MB: It is fun. It's a little bit about giving yourself permission to play around.

AC: You have the freedom. That's the thing that I've learned through some of my interviews is that you definitely appreciate freedom when you're in the arts. Freedom, I guess to think, feel, and do things that may not necessarily be accepted usually, but in the arts it can totally be.

MB: I think freedom is important, but I also think, for me as an artist, I need a lot of structure, and that's one of the reasons that I like to teach because it gives structure. I almost get overwhelmed if there are too many possibilities. Even if I don't have rules, I'll make up rules, and I tend to work better.

AC: Oh, that's interesting. That's definitely one thing that I haven't heard, but I guess a little too much freedom can be a little too much sometimes; so yes, the structure is nice to balance that out.

MB: The structure can be a freedom.

AC: It can be a freedom for you. You told me some about your career, but I saw that the *AJC* [Atlanta Journal Constitution] has honored you for a few things. That's big. You want to tell me a little bit about that? I was really surprised when I read that and I was like, "Wow, I didn't even know this, and that's amazing."

MB: Yes, you all don't know what good folks you have (laughs)! I guess two plays that I've done—both were developed at Horizon Theatre—one was based on interviews, oral histories that I did with my great aunt, and that was a play called *Her Little House*. We

won a big national grant for that; that was in 2004. I think the *AJC* named that as one of the best new plays in 2004.

AC: Yes, they sure did.

MB: And then recently with *Night Blooms* the *AJC* and I think also the ArtsCriticsATL.com named it one of the best plays of 2010. So yes, that's exciting. And it's funny because both of those plays were my most realistic plays, whereas most of my life I've done the other things, so I guess, well, maybe there's something to this.

AC: Or somebody thinks there's something there.

MB: The thing about it is it takes a really long time; it's much harder. Both of those plays took me a number of years to work on.

AC: I guess it was worth it. I mean, the reward of being in the *AJC*; that's a huge thing now having such an honor like that. You obviously did a lot of amazing things. So what brought you here? How did you get to Kennesaw? I know you said you loved teaching, but what brought you to Kennesaw?

MB: I worked with a director, Karen Robinson, who teaches here [professor of Theatre and Performance Studies]. She's been on the faculty here for a number of years [since 2000], and she directed that play at Horizon, *Her Little House*. We had also collaborated on a solo piece that I wrote and performed for Synchronicity Performance Group a couple of years before that; and we clicked—we worked well together. Now she's directed maybe five of my plays. She informed me that they had part-time teaching available. I taught TPS 1107 as an adjunct. At that time it was a team-taught course. There were four professors and maybe 200 students in the class. We would divide up the grading, and we would do it team-teaching. Then that changed, so now one person has 90 or 75 students, whatever it is. Usually it's 90. I get a bit of a break. Then it was a little bit of a luck thing because they ended up having a one-year opening for a theatre history teacher. It's not really my background, but I was game, and they needed someone at the last minute, so I said, "Sure." At that time something else came up. Since then I've become a lecturer, and I'm the interim coordinator of general education. That's really a big passion of mine is that class. It's a pain in the butt, but it's also, I think, one of the most important classes that we teach. One of the most important ways to have an impact on our community is through that class.

AC: Right. And I saw that you were the interim coordinator of that. How do you deal with that? I mean, I know there's obviously huge resistance coming from somebody who's not a theatre major. How do you deal with that? I did see some of it firsthand, but obviously you see it a whole lot with all your students. I remember when we did a raise of hands, it was very, very limited the students that were in there that were actually theatre majors.

MB: Yes, in most of the classes we don't have any theatre majors. The one that you were in we actually started the new thing of having them be in it. So that was even a different circumstance. Usually people come in, and there is a lot of resistance because they don't want to have to take the course, and they're checking a box off, and they don't see the relevance to their lives. Fortunately, I have a great team of adjuncts that work with me

and feel as passionate about the art form as I do. Our job is to turn that around. Sometimes you feel like you're sort of a clown; sometimes you feel like you're a missionary; sometimes you feel like you're just there to open people up to new possibilities. What's rewarding about it is I would say 80 percent of the time you see that, and you see people like you who come and say, "Boy, I didn't want to go see that performance, but that was so great!" Then I feel like it's worth it.

AC: Right.

MB: That's the point—to help people connect with it and appreciate it and understand what it means to do what we do and also to think, "What are ways that I can connect this to my own life?" When we think about it in terms of performance studies, it's not just, "What are you seeing on stage?" But, "How are you performing in your own life?" So I think there's a lot of relevance there. Sometimes, just the sheer numbers are a little bit daunting because now we have almost 700 students a semester that take that course. Any time you are dealing with that number of students, there are going to be more problems. There are going to be more issues and more opportunities for things to go wrong. But most of all I feel lucky that this is a class where it is about, "Okay, this is something I love to do, and I want to share it with you, and if you don't like it, get over it, and just stay here anyway and see what you find." I love the group project. It is hard to do, and I think we're always trying to figure out a way to make it work better. It would work great if there were fifty students instead of ninety. It's too much, but I don't want to lose it. We always ask, "Should we cut the group project?" But I don't want to lose it because I think that part of it is so important where it's the practical application of the ideas in the course.

AC: I don't think it would have been the same without the project to be honest with you.

MB: Yes. As painful as it is, and theatre is very painful (laughter).

AC: It's like somebody covered in tattoos, "Oh, that hurts so bad, but I do it anyway because I love it!"

MB: Yes. It's always a bit chaotic. It forces you do deal with others. It forces you to come up against your own fears and your own expectations. I would say nine times out of ten people get back on track. They pull out things that they didn't know they could do. Every once in a while you have train wrecks, and it just happens. But that's okay too.

AC: So at the end of the semester would you say that you feel comfortable that there were several students that do have a change of perspective?

MB: I feel like that. I hear that in the responses and the reflections. I try to always keep in mind where students are coming from and where they began. One of the other things that I like about that class is that people come to theatre taking whatever their knowledge is—whether it's communication or biology or history or something else—in that there's something in the theatre that they can apply that to. So that makes it more interesting to me because I think you have a wider range of dialogue; you have a wider range of perspectives on the same event or the same text or something like that. That's fun in the class discussions. When it works, it makes for a richer dialogue, and it can just keep you awake and off your cell phone.



AC: Yes, off your cell phones, not studying for other classes, and all those wonderful things we've all fallen for. Thinking about it as a general education requirement, I know that you can either take art, dance or music, and I just see theatre, I guess, as something that's more hands on, something that you would really have to do to open you up? What do you think about theatre as a general requirement compared to taking the option of music or art or dance?

MB: They approach it differently. I think ours is more hands on. It's partly because we can be because theatre in some ways is less specialized. Somebody can get up and perform a scene, but they can't get up and start playing a violin concerto. But I think all of them are trying to connect students to their own [discipline]—to look at the arts not just as, "Okay, here's the specialty thing that only special people can do"; but, "Where do we see this in your daily lives, and how can it connect and make meaning for you in your own world?" So all of them have a component of going and experiencing the art form, whether it's [musical] concerts or a dance concert or something [else]. Ours has a little more of a focus on doing, but that's just the way we've always done it, and so it makes it a little chaotic sometimes. But chaos is good.

AC: It was. It would have been no fun without it. So let me ask you, what was the theatre program like when you got here? When did you come here exactly?

MB: I came in 2005. That was my first year; that was when I was an adjunct. I taught a couple of classes. I taught TPS 1107 and Intro to Theatre Studies. Then I think I started full-time in 2005-2006. It was originally [1996] the Department of Theater. [In 2004] it changed to the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies [2004]. That was one of the things that attracted me to the department because it broadened that notion of performance and gave us other things to think about. Also I was very impressed by the range of works that they were doing. They weren't the usual fare for a theatre department in terms of the performance works. They had a big emphasis on new works, and that was something that I benefited from.

My first three years here I had a play—I also nearly pulled out my hair!—but I had a play each year that I developed with students. The first one was the *Roland's Song* piece that I told you about. Then the next year was the Year of China [at KSU], and I got asked to adapt a piece called *Monkey King* that was adapted from a Chinese folk novel. We ended up taking that piece to China, to Shanghai, with a group of students, and that was fun. We got to perform their stories for them, which was an interesting experience. Then I did the piece for the Year of Kenya called *You Always Go Home*. That actually was one that I was inspired by TPS 1107 again. I knew I wanted to do something. Karen and I talked about doing a piece together, and we were thinking about doing something on Kenyan folktales. Then I was teaching 1107 in the summer, and I had a student from Kenya who was wonderful woman. Kind of like you, she was just about to have a baby or she'd just had a baby. That summer her father had passed away, and she was trying to figure out if she could go back or not go back. She determined that she couldn't go back for his funeral. It was moving to me to hear her talk about it because she said how important it was for her father that she came here and got an education and that she knew he would have wanted her to stay.

Then I discovered that there were all these Kenyans—in fact, at one point Kenya had the highest number of international students at Kennesaw. There are 40,000 Kenyans living in the Atlanta area. At one point, the nickname for Kennesaw was “Kenyasaw.” So that’s one of those things again about what I love about what I do because once you start to make a play, things show up, and you realize, “Oh, wait, the guy that just did my emission testing—he’s Kenyan. And this person is Kenyan.” Things start to coagulate around it. I ended up interviewing a number of Kenyans—some students and some staff members, some family members who came over—and wrote this piece that was looking at the folktales, but then also looking at what it’s like to leave your home. Do you go back home? What are all those questions that you have to deal with when your village comes together and gets all of this money to put together to send you to America to go to school? What are the challenges, what are the joys, and how does it make them see their lives differently? So that was a fun one. I got to go to Kenya.

AC: Oh, so you did go over there for that too?

MB: I did. Part of the “Year of” is that they have a faculty learning community. I went, and then we came back and performed that piece as part of an International Conference on the Role of the Kenyan Diaspora on Kenya’s Development. We performed it, and there were 300 Kenyans in the audience, and they were all getting up and singing along and dancing. It was really fun.

AC: Oh wow! So that was a bunch of oral histories that you got and you put them together and created?

MB: I wove them together with the traditional stories. I had them tell stories that they remembered of their childhood and stories from their ethnic community or tribe, and then wove those together with their personal stories of coming here and then wrestling with that question of do they go back home where they may not have the same chances to support their family or do they stay here and support their family, but they don’t get to go home. So all those questions that we don’t have to deal with, but that they do, and how they say they’re from Africa, and people say, “Oh, do you live in trees, and do you have elephants in your backyard?” Just what is it like for them to live where they are now?

AC: Let me ask you, how do you find—you put together this amazing piece and all these real-life stories—how do you find people that you really feel comfortable [that they] are going to portray that story like it should be? They’re talking about sometimes very depressing, sad things that these people have gone through. How do you find the right actor to bring that emotion to your story that you obviously want?

MB: Well, fortunately, when I’m working on a piece, I’m rarely working alone, I’m rarely directing at the same time, and the more I write the more I realize it’s not a good idea for me to do it at the same time because it’s just too much. You have too much going on in your head, and you need some distance. On the pieces that I’ve done here, we work with student actors. A lot of times it’s more about finding the right combination of people for the right ensemble, and then figuring out ahead of time what are your guidelines. We knew going into that piece that we wanted it to be non-traditional casting. Even though we were performing the lives of Kenyans, there were whites, blacks, Asians, and Middle Eastern people in our cast. That became part of the aesthetic of the piece. The nice thing

is when I'm developing a piece like that, I actually involve students in taking the interviews and have them transcribe the characters. Transcribing, as you know, takes a lot of time, but what the students found is that as they were transcribing, they got to know the rhythms—they got to hear [the sounds]—and so their ability to step into those characters was a lot stronger than if I had given them a script and said, "Here, become this person."

In my professional work the pieces that I did with Horizon, both [plays] involved actors at various stages of the process that helped me. That's how as a playwright you get to hear your play. You get to hear it in front of an audience, and you get to go back and make changes, and it's a much more collaborate way of writing than, say, if I were a novelist. I think that's one of the things that draws me to it. It also can feel very vulnerable at times because everybody's giving their two cents about your play, and you're like, I really don't care what you think, but I'm going to pretend like I do. But it is valuable. For example, in *Night Blooms*, my most recent play, some of the actors who ended up being in the final production had been in workshops of that play for four years. So they know those characters. They in fact helped me form those characters, and our discussions helped me think about them. It's great to work on a play with actors because they will stand up for their characters.

I worked with Harrison [O.] Long who teaches here, he's the [coordinator] of acting. He helped me develop a character in that play. For the first workshop that Harrison participated in, I didn't have any lines for that character. I had not written anything, but I knew that I wanted to write this character as the brother character. I knew he needed to be in the play, and I just had Harrison in the [workshop]. He would say, "Well, if I was in that room, this is what [I would say]." If I was coming back and taking part in this march I would be scared shitless that my family is going to find me." So it helps make those characters real. Especially working in a piece I would say that is a more realistic way of storytelling. It's helpful to have those living beings in the room.

AC: You went to China too. You mentioned that briefly and you did some things for them.

MB: That was the *Monkey King* piece. That was another piece that we developed with students. That was one of the most theatrical pieces I've done. It had probably thirty-five characters in it, but we performed it with an ensemble of eight student performers. They all played multiple roles. It has monkeys like surfboarding on clouds, and you have gods, and you have all of this different stuff going on. That was a fun piece to develop with an ensemble. I worked with Karen and then Ivan Pulinkala [professor and, in 2015, chair of the Department of Dance] did some amazing choreography for that. Those were a little bit different because you're working from a structure of stories. In that case that novel [*Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en] is 100 chapters long. It's a huge epic. So it's about condensing down and trying to figure out what part of the story are you going to tell and also how to do it in a way that's going to speak [to different audiences]. Any time you take a work that is from another culture, you are bringing yourself to it. You're bringing your own culture to it. It's a way to look back and reflect, "What does the story have to say to us?" When I say us, I'm talking about someone from America. It's a certain sector. When we did it, we got feedback from some Chinese dramaturges and artists along the way, and they kind of gave us permission to play more. They said, "We

know the story. Everybody in China knows the story. We're interested in your take on the story as Americans and what you have to bring to it and how you see it imaginatively." So that was really freeing, and it made it a lot of fun to work with.

AC: You said you worked on the last two with students. What do you think about working with students versus working with professional actors?

MB: I think both have their advantages, and both have their challenges. Working with students is great in that one of the classic laments of a playwright—the biggest challenge—is, “How are you going to get your work produced?” Also, because theatre is such an inefficient art form and it's so expensive to do and it takes so much time and it takes all of that, there are limitations in the professional theatre world that, for example, it might say no more than five characters. You couldn't do a play like *Monkey King* in a professional theatre. So I think working on plays with students is the opposite. You need to cast lots of people because you have all of these students that need to get cast. You can think big with your imagination. The challenge is they don't necessarily have the same tools that professional actors come with. I couldn't have developed the play *Night Blooms* with students because I needed an intergenerational cast. I needed people with a lot of experience. It would have been less helpful for me too. I'd involve some students in that process, some of the younger characters, but that's not the kind of play that I would choose. I like having the structure of a university to think about what are the kinds of plays that I can do here and how can I use these resources and how can I work with students and develop works that then maybe [I could] take to a professional community. I did a piece called *Tom Thumb the Great*. It was a theatre for young audiences. I started it as a class here at Kennesaw working with students and then developed those ideas and ended up taking it and working with a theatre in town, Georgia Shakespeare, for their family classic series. I think there's a lot to be said for starting ideas on campus because it's a safe place. You don't have to worry about reviews. You have resources. You have time.

AC: Is there anything you're working on right now or you're looking into working on here in the near future?

MB: I have a number of ideas of things that I want to start. Right now, I'm still working on this project about water that is called *Without which Nothing*. That is a collaboration with Out of Hand Theater, and they're local. They do interesting, experimental, spectacle theatre work. They've got this flash-mob inspired performance happening this week at Woodruff Arts Center that I'm going to go to. I am excited about that. We're actually applying for some grants with the National Science Foundation. They've been working with the National Science Foundation, and I think they're interesting in finding these connections between science and art and how to use the art as a tool to communicate what is happening in science and how to look at some of these big global issues like water and sustainability and things like that. That's a piece that I'm not sure what the next phase will be, but I'm hoping to still continue working on that. Then I have some other ideas of pieces that I want to make. For Kennesaw in the fall I'll be directing a surrealist piece by an artist, Jean Cocteau [*Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*], and collaborating with a guest artist, Michael Haverty, who does really interesting work for

the Center for Puppetry Arts—so working on a piece with students that will be weird and strange and delightful.

AC: Oh, I'll have to come to that!

MB: Yes. Come see it! We're calling it *The Cocteau Hour*. It should be fun. Then I have some other pieces—there was an Atlanta story that I may work on—another oral history piece about a plane crash that was a very terrible tragedy in the early 1960s [June 3, 1962]. A big group of [106] art supporters from Atlanta had gone on this trip to France and throughout Europe, and they were like the top art supporters and patrons in Atlanta. On the plane coming back there was a crash [on the takeoff from Paris's Orly Airport], and almost everybody on the plane died coming back. It was a huge deal in the Atlanta community. There's never been a theatre piece about it. There's been a little bit written about it, but some of the people who were family members are still around, and it's a story that interests me and, I think, will be one that would be really relevant to this community. That's my next thing that I'm thinking about.

AC: Wow. So this seems like a 24/7 job. I was about to ask about how long one of these works takes, but as you're explaining, it seems like it's a 24/7 constant something that you're working on.

MB: Yes.

AC: So it's just all the time it's going. How long would you say on average it would take you?

MB: To write a play?

AC: Yes.

MB: If I weren't teaching full time, I would say a full length play would probably take me anywhere from a year to two years. Teaching full time I think it doubles that. But again, it depends on the project. If I'm making it from scratch that takes a lot longer, but the fun thing is dreaming up what the next project is going to be, and I'm always excited about that. I'm less excited about going in and tidying up the . . .

AC: Finishing it?

MB: Yes. That's always the part. It's like writing the paper versus doing an interview. That's the fun part. But I also get so much out of the teaching and feel like that's such a big part of what I do that I'm okay with the fact that it takes me a little bit longer to make a play because I think I've learned so much from teaching. With 1107 I'm constantly reminded of, boy, we have to make theatre relevant to people or we won't have audiences. And we need audiences in order to pay actors. So how do you make it sustainable? And also not just from an economic standpoint although obviously that's very important, but how do we integrate the arts into the community in a meaningful way? I think we can always do a better job of that because it's easy for people to say, "Oh, let's cut the arts; they don't do anything; they're not essential; they're a luxury." My feeling is, no, they're not a luxury. They're part of how we become good citizens, how we become good family members and friends, and how we look at our society and our role in it. So that to me is one big part of the puzzle. It's always good to be reminded of.

- AC: Yes, it definitely takes a lot of resources to get that done. Let me ask you, you already told me what the department was like when you got here, but what do you think about how it's changing or where it's going in the future? I know KSU in general as a college is moving forward very quickly, and we're doing lots of new things. I just want to get your perspective on the actual Theatre and Performance Studies [department] as a unit itself.
- MB: Well, I think part of it is even since last year we've had a name change. It's now the Department of Theatre, Performance Studies, and Dance, and we've had this whole explosion of another part of the program.
- AC: And that was just last year?
- MB: Yes, starting this fall we became the Department of Theatre, Performance Studies, and Dance which is a long title. But also we've had a huge explosion—I think now we have over two hundred Theatre and Performance Studies majors. When I came there were probably about 140, so it has . . .
- AC: Doubled?
- MB: Yes, almost doubled in size. The quality of our students, I think, has really risen. The quality of our performances and our production season and all of that, I think, has risen. We always feel like we're going 100 miles a minute because I think we're trying to do too much. But I'd rather be doing that than, "Boy, we can't think of anything to do." Now we're doing an online version of TPS 1107, so we're learning about distance learning and all of that. It's a fun place to be because things are changing and growing. It seems like they're all new connections coming a lot more—possibilities opening up for interdisciplinary work, which is really interesting to me—connecting with folks in the science department, connecting with folks in American Studies, and thinking about integrative learning, so that we're not in our little isolated bubbles, and that we're connecting and also helping students connect to make the connections between all of these [areas].
- AC: What do you think about our program versus some other programs that are out there? What would make students want to come to Kennesaw to experience our program?
- MB: I think that our program is the most interesting undergrad—knowing what I know of theatre programs around the country and performance study program. The fact that it has combined both makes it one of the unique programs for undergraduates in the country. I think the level of faculty involvement here with students is amazing. In a lot of places, some bigger universities or even more well-funded universities that have been around a long time, students may have a lot of contact with adjuncts or with teaching assistants, but they wouldn't have the same kind of contact with full professors. That's one of the things about KSU that I think is still an amazing deal for students that they get that much face time, especially in our department, with their professors, and how much the professors care about the students and are willing to go over and above to help them out. That I think is great. I think also just the production seasons, the level of work we're doing and the range of works that we're doing, are more diverse than you're going to see in most theatre programs. I think that, including story-telling, we have such a range of

performance opportunities for students and design opportunities and now writing opportunities. So I think there's a lot here for the student that is looking for something to do, not just in the theatre department but also from outside.

AC: Speaking from outside, as far as KSU's grown, we have our new residence halls. Do you think that helps some too with the students being able to be on campus?

MB: Yes, it starting to feel more like a true university in terms of the campus community, and I think Dr. [Daniel S.] Papp has done a lot towards that. Certainly the learning communities in the first year program, I think, really help with that—that sense of connection that it is not just “we come and we take our classes and we leave.”

AC: Right.

MB: That's fun to see, and I'm hoping that the arts will continue to play a big role in that on the campus.

AC: Right. I know I was required to go to some performances for your class, but do you see students just walking from residence halls over to the black box theatre? Anything like that?

MB: Right now I think it's still very much the classes that are required to come. They come. I think it's starting, but I don't know that people will just go out of their way to come until they come to a show and say, “Oh, yeah, this is worth it, and maybe I'll come again.” It's always gratifying when you get a student who is a former 1107 student and says, “Yeah, I just came and auditioned.” Or ““Hey, I came and saw that play!” I'm thinking, “Yes, that's good! We got one!”

AC: “I brought my dad, and he liked it too.”

MB: Yes, exactly. In our world today we're so overcommitted and overstimulated that fitting in one more thing, it's easy to say, “No, I'm just going to go home and watch a movie.” I mean, I'm just as guilty of that as anybody else, but I do think that helping people open themselves to, “Wow, maybe I'll go see a performance.” Or “Maybe I'll go listen to poetry” or “maybe I'll go visit that art gallery while I have five minutes before my next class.” Just opening and reminding people of those possibilities, I think, makes it worth it.

AC: So to close up, let me ask you, what keeps you here at KSU? You've obviously done so many positive things, and I'm sure you've had plenty of other opportunities, so what keeps you here?

MB: I think it's the people, my colleagues, the students, and I think that's number one. I would say number two is that I feel like ever since I've come here that it's a place of possibilities. I've never been told no. Well, maybe a couple of times, but it was probably for the best—

AC: Structure you're talking about.

MB: Right. But it seems like a place where if you have an idea, if you want to make something happen, that people are really open to, “Oh, that's an interesting thing; we've never tried that; let's try it.” There's a sense of, it's a growing place, and with that comes

a lot of possibilities. Things are happening, and you can be a part of that happening. I'd always rather be in a place that's growing as opposed to a place that's already grown. It's just not as interesting.

AC: Right. You have freedom to expand and be diverse.

MB: And to make an impact. You can be part of the change. You can be part of the development. You can be part of making something happen. I've felt that in this department. Even though I'm technically not a tenure track faculty member, I'm still appreciated. The sense I get from my colleagues and from the department chair and the dean and all of that is that I'm valued, and that there are possibilities for me to grow.

AC: Right. I talked to [John S.] Gentile [professor of Performance Studies and Communication and department head for twelve years], and he didn't have anything bad to say about the department at all. I mean, obviously, he wouldn't want to be negative, but just from talking and doing a few interviews, it just seems like everybody loves KSU because of the freedom that you have, the possibility you have to do something, whereas UGA is wonderful; it's a very established school; but you may not be able to go in there and say, "Hey, I want to do this; this is new." And they say, "Okay, no, we're sorry, we're already doing something that works." This is going to go into the archives for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Is there anything that you would like to say that I didn't touch on? Is there anything you'd like to put out there about Kennesaw or your colleagues or anything like that?

MB: No, I think that obviously I care a lot about the arts, and I hope that it will continue to be a big part of this campus.

AC: Right, continue to grow like the campus is. Well, thank you so much.

MB: Thank you, Ashley.



Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
KSU Oral History Series, No. 126  
Interview with Margaret P. Baldwin – Part II  
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott  
Tuesday, 7 October 2014  
Location: KSU Archives, Kennesaw State University

TS: This is an interview today with Margaret Baldwin, who is the 2014 recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award. Let's begin with your background. I know you were born in Atlanta even though you didn't stay here that long.

MB: I stayed here about sixteen years. My family moved to Virginia after that, so I finished high school in Richmond, Virginia. Then I went to the University of Virginia and got a BA in English Literature with an emphasis in creative writing. Then I also was a French minor and an Echols Scholar—I didn't get any money, but it meant I could take any class that I wanted even if I wasn't ready to take it while I was at UVA. The Echols Scholarship program basically was for incoming freshmen, but I had it my whole time there. It meant that I could get first dibs on classes, so I was able to take upper level philosophy classes and religion classes and all these things that went with [my major]. I actually had an early interdisciplinary major because it was a modern studies, so it meant that I had my English classes, but I could also take classes in related fields or in fields that interested me.

TS: How did they define modern?

MB: It was pretty loose. I think it depended according to the student, but it was basically anything twentieth century or late 1800s and early 1900s. My role influences both in terms of literature, but also starting as a playwright were Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, people like that. I took some wonderful classes; I had great teachers at UVA.

TS: Did the Echols Scholarship pay for taking any of these courses?

MB: No, it didn't pay anything, but fortunately I was an in-state student at that time. So it was a great education and very affordable. I had had some wonderful teachers, particularly English teachers, growing up. I went first to Trinity Presbyterian and then The Lovett School here in Atlanta until tenth grade, and then I finished . . .

TS: Trinity Presbyterian had their school?

MB: Yes, they had theirs through fifth grade, and then I moved to Lovett. I was in Lovett from sixth through tenth grade, and then I finished my high school at St. Catherine's, a girl's school, in Richmond and had some wonderful teachers there.

TS: These were all private schools.

MB: All private schools

TS: Until Virginia.

MB: Until Virginia. Then I lived out west for a while in Montana and did theatre out in Montana, which was a strange place to do theatre, but that's the way it worked out. Then I got my master's.

TS: I would think that Montana is as good a place as anywhere to do theatre.

MB: Well, you certainly had a lot of people that appreciated it because there wasn't a lot of competition, shall we say.

TS: Not a lot of people live in Montana.

MB: Yes, so I remember being excited because people would drive five hours to come see a play, and then turn around and drive back.

TS: Because there's nowhere else to go?

MB: Because there's nowhere else to go.

TS: Where in Montana were you?

MB: I was in Missoula, Montana. The university is there. I wasn't part of the university.

TS: Oh, the University of Montana is in Missoula?

MB: Yes, so it's a college town. I'm a big fan of college towns. Then I got accepted to the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, and I did my master's there and completed that in 2000. My master's is in theatre arts with an emphasis in playwriting. Then I moved back to Atlanta. So I did the big loop.

TS: It sounds like it. How did you get interested in the theatre and particularly playwriting?

MB: Well, I'd always wanted to be a writer. From a very young age I wrote short stories, and I was always putting on plays in my basement and bossing people around and telling them what to do. I think . . .

TS: Your friends were in your plays?

MB: Yes, I would direct them, and we would perform shows for our families.

TS: And they put up with it?

MB: They put up with it. I was a big fan of playing dress up. In fact, my grandmother's house—my grandmother is from Selma, Alabama; my mom grew up there, and we used to go spend all our holidays there—I would play dress up for, I don't know, ten hours a day. But I always thought growing up—nobody in my family had done theatre, and I thought it was a flaky thing to do with your life, so I didn't allow myself to pursue it as a major.

TS: Did your parents go to plays?

MB: Not really. They did somewhat, but they really weren't theatre goers. I did have a great-great-aunt from Union Springs, Alabama, who had taught at a school for the dramatic arts in New York during the 1920s and 1930s. Apparently, she had an apartment above Carnegie Hall and could listen down and hear [Arturo] Toscanini on the stage.

- TS: Did you have much contact with her?
- MB: No, she passed away when I was very young, but my great-aunt Frances and my great-uncle lived in Falls Church, Virginia. He worked for the Pentagon. They were big opera fans, and he had actually wanted to be an actor when he was a young man, and he had gone up to study with great-aunt Lucille. Of course, that didn't work out, but I stayed with them the summer that I graduated from Virginia, and I did theatre.
- TS: I think I saw in the [KSU] catalog that that was 1990 when you finished at Virginia.
- MB: Yes, 1990. I stayed there with them and actually performed in a play, so even though I thought it was a flaky thing to do, I was still drawn to acting at that point. I think it was my last year at Virginia, one of my fiction writing professors [was] a wonderful writer and teacher, John [D.] Casey, who was a National Book Award winner [for fiction in 1989]—he wrote *Spartina* [and was a] great teacher. I had written a story for that class, and he says, “This doesn't work as a story, but it could be a play. You should try playwriting.” I took a playwriting class, and something clicked. I never turned back. I thought this is really the way.
- TS: What did he mean by that? Theatre is built on stories too, isn't it? So what was it that worked in the theatre that wouldn't work on paper?
- MB: I've always had a knack for dialogue and for creating a theatrical moment, but plot has always been difficult for me, making things happen. I've gotten much better at that. Even in my plays that's always been a challenge for me, but I think that he meant that he could really imagine the voices. That was something that came very natural to me. I remember this relief when I started writing plays because, before, I would get so caught up in trying to say everything in the narration about what was happening to somebody when they were going across the room from one place to another. In theatre you don't have to do all that. You just say, “She exits.” I think the other thing that I realized once I started writing for the theatre is that I'm a collaborative writer. I like to write in the room with people. When I first started doing theatre, I worked mainly with ensemble theatres, so I was writing and acting and directing and stage managing and selling tickets and doing all kinds of stuff, cleaning bathrooms.
- TS: Lots of work.
- MB: Yes. I was still doing all the aspects, but that's really shaped how I work as a playwright because I'm not the kind of playwright that's going to write a play and then send it off to a theatre and hope maybe one day somebody will say, “Oh, I'll produce your play.” I really want to be involved in that whole process. It's hard for me to finish anything unless I know that it's going to have a production. I've been fortunate to have a number of those.
- TS: Well, that makes sense. I think there are a lot of stories where you almost have to imagine it being performed to really catch the sense of what the author is trying to say.
- MB: I think too growing up in the South, my family were big story-tellers. When I lived in Montana that was actually the first time I was commissioned to write a [play]. To back up a little bit, when I got out of UVA, my playwriting professor, [Leonard D.] Doug Grissom at that time, who became a colleague of mine—he asked me if I wanted to

collaborate on a project with him. This was early 1990s at the height of when date rape hit the cover of *Time* magazine [June 3, 1991]. He had been commissioned by the Sexual Assault Resource agency in Charlottesville to write a play that would be an educational piece that would tour around to colleges. He wanted to do it, but he also wanted to work with a woman, obviously, and he asked me to work on it with him. That was one of the first pieces I did that was working with stories of real people. In that case they were not oral histories, but that process of working with a collage of voices and that sense of the power of putting people's real stories on stage really stayed with me. I think the other thing that that project did is it showed me the power of theatre and performance. Doing a play about rape—it's not this flaky pursuit that I had in my mind of, "Oh, well, people that do theatre are flighty, and somehow theatre is just about entertainment."

For the first couple of years after I got out of college we kept working on it. Then we developed it [under the title of *But I Said No*], and then we toured it around theatres all over Virginia and the Southeast. I was one of the performers, and I also managed the tour. We were all trained by the Sexual Assault Resource agency as volunteers. So we would do the play. The play was about forty-five minutes, and then we would have a talkback. Sometimes we were doing it in a lunchroom because the set was just six chairs, and we could move it anywhere. There were six of us performing, and we played multiple roles. Then we would have a talkback with the audience. Inevitably, every single time that we did that, I saw people transformed in the audience, and I saw people really struggle with hard things. I had people coming up to me afterwards saying, "Oh, this happened to my sister," or "Oh, this happened to me, and it was the first time I've heard anybody recognize that." Or people that said that, "I never thought about this before, but I get it now." It showed me that power of live theatre, which I think has circled back in a beautiful way with my teaching, which is theatre can give us a space to deal with the things that are so difficult to deal with in our human experience. The Greeks knew that.

TS: You could say things on stage that you wouldn't say otherwise?

MB: Yes, that's true, but because it's live, you can have a conversation. You can have a dialogue, and it creates a space for dialogue about things that otherwise people would shut down on.

TS: You know something that has always freaked me out is if I have to speak where there are stage lights, and you can't see the audience. Anytime that I can't have eye contact with the audience, the class, I feel very nervous about it because I take my cues from the reaction that I'm seeing. You're talking about a kind of theatre where you actually see your audience instead of being blinded to what's out there?

MB: Yes. I mean, sometimes we would have the lights, and sometimes we wouldn't have the lights, and sometimes we performed in theatres, but, regardless, after the performance we would sit around and open up the circle and have a conversation. I think there's something about the fact that we had just been performing those characters that gave—to me theatre is all about vulnerability and giving people the permission to be vulnerable. That's how we create the space for a true dialogue, and the space to change not only other people's minds, but even our own minds and to be moved.

TS: Right. So this audience engagement—and we talk about on campus nowadays community engagement—that really becomes the model for what you've done ever since, doesn't it?

MB: It does and I don't think I did it consciously, but it's funny looking back and saying, like, that was such a seminal event for me, doing that play, and it was also a very personally cathartic piece for me because I didn't realize it at the time, but through the process of writing the script, I realized that that had also been my experience. So I had my own healing that came about through that process. That also gave me the power of transformation, not just of, “Oh, I can take something that in my life had been a negative and a destructive thing, and I can turn it into something positive that can also positively affect other people's lives.” So that stayed as well.

TS: When I listen to the interview that Ashley Criswell did with you—she was one of your students.

MB: I know! She was a great student.

TS: That really helped her interview, I think, but I just automatically assumed that you had collaborated with a woman on that project. How did Doug Grissom get that grant to do the project in the first place?

MB: You know, I think it was just a conversation. Since he was the playwriting professor in the theatre department, [perhaps] they approached him about, “Hey, we want to do something educational, but we don't want to give people a lecture because they'll just shut down. We want something that college students can relate to. Would you be interested in writing something?” He said, “I would, but I'd only do it if I could work with a woman.” I guess from my work in the class—we had collaborated on some other things. At that he had a theatre called Offstage Theatre that he and two other playwrights had started [Mark Serrill and Tom Coash]. Now it's all the rage here in Atlanta, but they would do works in sound spaces. I had performed in a couple of their pieces, so it was a fit.

TS: That's great. This was in the 1990s that you're doing this?

MB: Yes, this was 1990 to '94.

TS: Right, so twenty plus years ago. There's been a lot of focus on college campuses on sexual assaults, very recently.

MB: Recently, yes.

TS: A lot of colleges have really been lambasted for supposedly covering things up.

MB: Yes, it's interesting, in fact, just last week somebody was talking about it with me and said, “You should really pull out that play again and see if there's a place for it here.” Maybe. I think a lot of the cultural references were specific to that time and would probably need updating, but unfortunately I don't think the stories are that different. I think they probably still apply.

TS: Yes, but it was very pioneering twenty-odd years ago, I guess.

MB: I guess so. It just seemed like it was the thing to do.

TS: Sure. Do you think the situation on college campuses is worse today than it was twenty years ago or about the same?

MB: I don't think it is worse. I suspect—and this was even the case when we were doing that project—that part of it is that people are now developing an awareness and a willingness to talk about it, whereas before it was so taboo that people wouldn't admit to it.

TS: Hence the great reaction that you got from the audience.

MB: Yes. We didn't always get a great reaction! I remember we did it for the entire pledge class of fraternities at UVA on a Sunday afternoon during a Redskins game. Oh, it was awful.

TS: And they had to come?

MB: They had to come. They were forced to come, and it was not my favorite experience. But then we had some other really positive ones with fraternities. I remember we went to a national conference in Memphis for the Pi Kaps [Pi Kappa Phi] fraternity, and they were just incredible. So much of it has to do with the leadership and how they're brought into it.

TS: Okay, so you're out in Montana.

MB: Out in Montana doing crazy experimental theatre. I formed a theatre ensemble called the Blue Moon Beggars. We would pull a performance together, and we were beggars because we had no money, and we were going for the [Jerzy] Grotowski's "poor theatre" aesthetic. We did a lot of plays based on mythological themes. I did a piece that was inspired by the *Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*. We did pieces about dreams. At the same time I started working with people with disabilities, particularly adults with mental and developmental disabilities, and I would drive all around Montana to these towns with no stop lights and pull out my CD player and my masks and my instruments and would do performance workshops with these people. That was also pretty transformative.

TS: Were you doing this for a government agency?

MB: It was through a grant program. A friend of mine started it. I've forgotten what it was called—something Arts—but he had met through this governmental agency these people with disabilities who were incredibly creative. They didn't have the cognitive skills or abilities to function through the general marketplace, but they could paint, and they could draw, and they could tell stories, and they could do all of this. He said, "The government is paying for them to live, so they are like people with a trust fund. Why don't we get them to do something interesting instead of just putting together potholders?" He started this program, and I became the theatre teacher for it. It was a delight; it was so much fun; it was crazy—crazy story. While I was out there I was commissioned by an American Theatre Festival and the NEA program that was based on storytelling in communities. I got commissioned to write a play. I collaborated with a folk musician [Kathleen Guehlstorff]. We wrote a piece about people living in communities in Northeastern Montana. It was called *More Precious than Gold*, and that was my first oral history experience.

I did about forty-five interviews, so I had ninety hours of interview material going around and interviewing people that had moved out there. The Fort Peck Dam was on the cover of the first issue of *Life* magazine [November 23, 1936]. It was the first WPA project. The people who I interviewed—their stories were so powerful and so amazing! They were people who had moved out there because the government had started this project. They said, “Okay, we’ll bring ten thousand men out here to work on the dam, and it’ll put people back to work.” What they didn’t realize—they built barracks for the men, but they didn’t think about anything for the families because they thought that just the men would come. But this was in the Dust Bowl, and the families couldn’t survive. It was people living in sod houses and chicken coops, and this is a place that gets 120 degrees in the summer and 60 below in the winter. Talk about pioneers! And especially the women that I interviewed were just unbelievable! That project, I think that’s where I really started to get this pull to, well, first off to go to graduate school, but also pulling back to—it sounds a little bit cliché—my southern roots, to come back to the storytelling tradition.

TS: And the importance of place?

MB: The importance of place and my own family stories. I did a number of plays in college that were more experimental, more theatrical, because that’s my other love, that work. But then one of the last pieces I did at the University of Iowa once I got accepted there was a play based on oral histories going back to the story of my great-aunt and uncle. I did about five days of interviews with her, after the death of her husband, and it was all focused around this memory I had of listening to *Madame Butterfly* with her on the screen porch. When I moved to Atlanta, I submitted it, and that play was accepted by Horizon Theatre.

TS: What was the name of it?

MB: It was called *Her Little House*. That play, we got an AT&T:OnStage grant for the production in 2003, and it was a great experience working on that play. That was the first play that I did with Horizon. It was a family story play, so that pulled me back in.

TS: Maybe we can talk about Horizon along the way because I got on their website today, and in 2003-04 that was the 6<sup>th</sup> annual New South Play Festival where *Her Little House* appeared. But a couple of years earlier [2001-02 season] your name was there for a New South Play Lab. So I guess that’s the development of a play over several years? And then in 2002-03 the play appeared in the New Horizons Off-Night Series—so essentially about three years in a row.

MB: Yes, they were a big supporter of my work when I moved back. In fact, I think one of the things that they do that’s pretty unique—although I think other theatres are doing this more now—is they find playwrights that they really want to support, and they continue [to do so]. So it’s not just new plays, but “let’s take this playwright and work with them.” That’s actually my connection to KSU because Karen Robinson was the director of *Her Little House*. She got pulled in by Horizon to work on that, and we clicked. I think in 2004 she said, “Well, we need some part-time theatre professors for our general education theatre class in Arts and Society [in the Department of] Theatre and

Performance Studies, and I think you'd be a great candidate. Would you like to come teach with us?" So I applied and started working here part time.

TS: You say that was 2004?

MB: The fall of 2004 is when I first started here part-time teaching. I taught two classes, and I developed the first piece that I wrote for KSU's season for Theatre and Performance Studies, and that was great, very fortuitous as well. Dr. [John S.] Gentile who was the chair at that time—it was the Year of France, and he said, “We want to do an adaptation around the *Song of Roland*. I see that you have a French minor and that you do theatre. Would you like to write this piece and develop it with students and perform it?” I said, “Well, of course.” Not knowing anything about the *Song of Roland* really, but again with that project I worked with oral histories.

TS: How did you do an oral history on that?

MB: I read *Song of Roland*, and it was this French Epic war poem. It was not too long after we had invaded Iraq, and I thought, “I can't do an adaptation of this story that doesn't somehow bring into the picture the contemporary experience of soldiers.” One of the things that I learned about coming here was that several of my students had members of the military in their family. I had grown up in a very privileged world where nobody was in the military because they'd all gotten out of it, but also my boyfriend at the time who later became my husband [Paul Pendergrass]—his father had been career military. I just started thinking about that six degrees of separation—how could we find even among ourselves just ordinary people who have been to war and hear their stories compared to [those of medieval France]. So it became a piece where you have the more heightened epic stories and then juxtaposed against the everyday soldiers' stories. It was a great experience. I had also moved into an apartment where one of my downstairs neighbors had returned from the first Iraq war and had PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder], and I think that also sparked something. Again, the power of those personal stories and interweaving them.

TS: So the play [*Roland's Song: A War Story*] was not so much about a French epic hero as it was about the Americans involved in the War in Iraq?

MB: No, it was just about soldiers' stories—trying to find places in the tale that connected with stories. My father-in-law was in Vietnam. I also interviewed my mother-in-law and got her perspective. We had students whose grandparents had been in World War II. So it was all different perspectives. It was more just about being a soldier and the contrast to the epic hero versus the reality.

TS: Or the not so heroic?

MB: The not so, right? Or more the everyday heroism.

TS: How did you get a storyline out of that?

MB: Well, that's one of the great things about adaptation is you have the structure, you have the plot, so we followed that basic plot, but we would shift out, almost like a shift in perspective, and get the stories that seemed to fit along that general trajectory.



- TS: We've jumped over a lot of things, so this may come out a little disorganized, but let's go back if we can. The University of Iowa seems to me like they turned out a lot of great folks over the years.
- MB: Yes, one of them just won the MacArthur—[Samuel D.] Sam Hunter is a playwright from my program. He was after my time, but he's just a great playwright. Just won the Genius Award [as one of the recipients of the MacArthur Fellows for 2014].
- TS: Wow, so I guess I don't need to really ask why you went there. It sounds like the place to go.
- MB: Well, no, actually it was a very conscious decision because it took me three times to get into graduate school applying because my work was ensemble based, it was production based, but I didn't really have scripts. I wrote the scripts as the after-effect, so it didn't fit the mold for most playwriting programs.
- TS: They wanted you to be an already experienced published author, so to speak?
- MB: Either that or just more traditional narratives, and my pieces were more experimental at that point. Then I had gotten late listed at Texas and at Columbia. I had gone around and looked at all those places, and when I looked at Iowa I didn't even think I'd like it because who wants to move to Iowa? But I went there, and I was so impressed by it. One of the things that struck me at Iowa was you were guaranteed and required to have either a workshop or a reading each semester. It was a three-year program. At other places like Columbia you weren't even guaranteed a thesis production. Going back to the way I had started theatre, I couldn't imagine writing a play without seeing it produced because so much of it was about that physical life. Also, at Iowa I had the option to teach, which meant that I could get in-state tuition, and then I could get a fellowship for teaching, and that began my teaching career at the university. In fact, I have to give a shout out to Alan MacVey who was my thesis advisor there and who is now the head of the fine arts there [chair of the Theatre Arts Department and director of the Division of Performing Arts]. He was my thesis advisor and my advisor as a grad student teaching. He was a big influence. He and some of the playwrights that came in were huge influences to my teaching.
- TS: You mentioned in the earlier interview Erik Ehn.
- MB: Erik Ehn, yes, he was one of my heroes.
- TS: And he was at Iowa?
- MB: He was at Iowa. When I was at Iowa they did a really neat thing where they would have different playwrights come in, and each one would stay for a semester. Then they had ongoing professors who were the dramaturg and [did] other playwriting. What was nice about that was we got people who wrote in all different styles. I got Erik twice. He was my first semester, and then he was also my last semester. He influenced my work tremendously. In fact, I'm going to use one of his exercises tomorrow morning with our theatre learning-community students who are doing adaptations of some folk tales. I have a great exercise I've now used [on], I don't know, a couple of thousand people.
- TS: When you say an exercise . . . ?

- MB: It's a writing exercise about how to take a story and turn it into a play. He borrowed it from the Living Newspaper which was again part of the WPA project, the Federal Theatre Project.
- TS: It's long before your time, but I used a novel for years in my Georgia History class entitled *Jubilee* [Houghton Mifflin 1966] by Margaret Walker, and she wrote that as her dissertation in the Creative Writing program at University of Iowa [PhD awarded in 1965]. It is the African American counter narrative to *Gone with the Wind*, a story of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. She basically did it on oral tradition from her family—the stories of her ancestors. So they must have a fabulous arts program at Iowa.
- MB: They do. The Writers' Workshop is the fiction and poetry. They were on the other side of the [Iowa] River, and the playwriting was much smaller. I think there were twelve of us total, and there were one hundred of the others, but they kept it small intentionally, so that we could each have production opportunities. We'd work with the graduate, but also undergraduate actor and directors. I had a wonderful experience.
- TS: How many years were you at the University of Iowa?
- MB: I was there for three years in Theatre Arts. I had gone there one year before. I hadn't been accepted to the playwriting, but I went and did a year in a program they had there called Intermedia, which was more an early multimedia program, very much about performance art. I spent about a year there, and at the same time I took a few classes in the Theatre Department. Then I reapplied, and I think at that point they knew my work and understood it enough that they said, "Okay, you're in."
- TS: So basically four years?
- MB: I spent four years, and then I stayed about half a year after that and taught part time. Then I moved back here.
- TS: You came back to Atlanta because of the fact that this seemed to be the creative center of the universe?
- MB: Well, you know, it is funny. I didn't know where I was going to go. A lot of people from Iowa end up going to Chicago. I've almost moved to Chicago four times in my life, but I think now I'm done. I'm not going to move there; it's too cold. But also I was definitely felling that pull to come back to the South. My sister and her husband had married, and they had two kids that were two and four. I had been out West for so long that I hadn't gotten to know them. I thought, "Well, I'll go check out Atlanta and see if there's enough theatre happening here that I can imagine myself living here." I came and visited, and I went to see a few shows. I thought, "Yes, this is good; I can do this."
- TS: That explains why I didn't see you before the 1990s with Horizon Theatre, and all of a sudden you were there all the time.
- MB: Yes, I moved back in 2001. At that point Horizon had picked up an earlier play of mine [*Sunday Morning 2 Men Cooking*] as a part of their New South Play [Labs]. Lisa Adler [co-artistic director and co-founder] liked the play, but she said, "This isn't really our style. Is there anything else that you have?" So at that point I showed her the play, *Her Little House*, which was called *The Charm of Good Speech* at that point. That [title] was

actually based on a lecture that my Aunt Noonie, my great-aunt that had taught theatre, used to give on elocution around the country. [Her name was] Aunt Lucille, but everybody called her Aunt Noonie. I shared that early draft of it with them, which was very different at that point. They said, "We like it. Let's develop it." So that started my relationship with Horizon.

TS: You mentioned Lisa Adler, so Lisa and Jeff Adler are the co-founders of the Horizon Theatre.

MB: Yes, they started it with their wedding money.

TS: Oh, really?

MB: Yes, they did, I think thirty-something years ago; so they're intrepid.

TS: So they liked your play.

MB: They liked my play, and we worked well together. I think Lisa and Karen and I worked really well together and spent maybe three years working on that play, and then they produced it.

TS: That's what I meant to ask you earlier, but it looks like when they help plays develop, what exactly does it mean that you're featured in the New South Play Labs? Is this like, do you get financial support or they give you a chance to put it on?

MB: Basically, they give you dramaturgical support. A dramaturg serves many functions in the theatre. The French called it "dramaturge." It means essentially the study of plays. A dramaturg is like an editor. For a new play a dramaturg is a cross between an editor and a psychologist and a midwife. They help you keep track of what's the through line of the story you're trying to tell, and are you really telling it. Production dramaturgs will help, for example, if you're doing a classic play set in 1920—you're doing a version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but you're going to set it in the 1920s in New York—so how can you study and help the actors and help the designers and all of that create the world you want to create.

TS: This is a service they provide?

MB: Yes, they provide that—so a lot of conversations, a lot of sitting around the table and talking about the play. But I would say equally importantly they give you actors. They pay the actors to work on your play. I might get a weeklong workshop. Some of it may be, "Well, I haven't written the scene yet." So we sit around and talk about the scene with the actors. Then I go home and write it, and then I can come back and hear it the next day. With that play we had a few, but certainly with *Night Blooms*, the second play I did with Horizon—that one went through maybe four years of re-writes, and we had public readings throughout where we would get audience feedback.

TS: You know, I actually found four New South Play Labs with your name on it.

MB: Probably.

TS: Your first play, 2002-2001, was *Sunday Morning 2 Men Cooking*.

MB: That's my Beckett meets Southern cooking. I would actually say it's a play about faith. It's a play about God and cooking and how do we define God. It's a more surrealistic in style than realistic, but, yes, I like that play. We produced it at Iowa, but it's never been produced here fully, and I would like to see it.

TS: Oh, so that actually started in your graduate work?

MB: Yes, that started in my graduate work.

TS: Then *Her Little House* becomes the next one, and that actually goes through three stages, I guess, because first you've got the lab, which you've explained; and then the next year it's part of the New Horizons Off-Night Series, which I take to mean that it's to a more limited audience?

MB: Yes, maybe a little bit more rehearsal time; no production value, but it's still in its infancy.

TS: So it's still a work in progress?

MB: It's more of an adolescent at that point, yes.

TS: Then it becomes a part of the New South Play Festival. I guess that's a big thing?

MB: It's evolved over the years. I think for many years it was a certain time of year they would do it. They would have two or three plays and then several readings. The readings would be plays at earlier stages of development. Then they would have the full performances of two featured plays that had grown up through the labs. It was a big deal for me, and we had also won a national AT&T:On-Stage grant for *Her Little House*. I think we got \$40,000 to put on a full production of that play.

TS: That's pretty good.

MB: I think I got \$5,000, which was part of what brought me back. I said, "Okay, I can afford to live here."

TS: With \$5,000?

MB: Well, for a couple of months, yes.

TS: So you're not married at that time then?

MB: No, I was not married.

TS: So you've got to support yourself. Did you serve as a waitress at a restaurant or something?

MB: When I lived here before for a number of years to support myself and help pay off my loans I worked as a receptionist and then an office manager for a family that had been sort of surrogate parents to me. My best friend growing up was a Van Winkle. Fritz and Faye Van Winkle, but Fritz and Alex had an ad agency, still do, Van Winkle and Associates, and I worked for them. Fritz and Faye are the parents, and then their daughter Martha was one of my best friends growing up.

TS: So Martha and Margaret.

MB: Yes, everybody confused us, even our parents. But I worked as their office manager for a number of years.

TS: So that paid the bills.

MB: That paid the bills. Then I worked for a short stint as hostess at Restaurant Eugene when they were opening.

TS: So part-time at Kennesaw didn't seem too bad, I guess.

MB: Well, when that started, actually, I did a bit of overlapping at Van Winkle, but I'm much better cut out for teaching than office work, and I'm a terrible waitress. Restaurant work is not my thing. It's a lot like theatre, but I'm not a good multitasker, and teaching is a better fit.

TS: Okay, so you're back in Atlanta, you're doing whatever it takes to pay the bills, you're developing a reputation with support from Horizon Theatre, and you meet Karen Robinson, and you end up at Kennesaw. I think I saw by 2007 you were full time?

MB: Yes, and that was a lucky accident for me. The history theory professor, Mardia [J.] Bishop, who's a wonderful teacher, ended up leaving unexpectedly in the spring of 2005, and I was teaching part time at that point. It was late enough where they didn't have time to do a full search to replace her. So Dr. Gentile called me up out of the blue and said, "Would you be interested in teaching history and theory?" I said, "Well, I can try. I know I took history and theory, but. . ." It was a wonderful experience. It nearly did kill me, but teaching—because I got to co-teach with [Lendley C.] Lynn Black at that time.

TS: Oh, yes, he was our provost [and professor of Theatre].

MB: He became our provost later, but at that point he was vice president for academic affairs.

TS: Right. And his background was theatre, that's right.

MB: Yes, he had a PhD in theatre. We co-taught the class, and he took some of the load off of the lecture prep. I got to know him, and he was just such a wonderful mentor and supporter. I did that for a year, and then right about that time was when we were getting into the QEP [the Quality Enhancement Plan] for Global Learning [to meet a requirement for SACS accreditation]. At that point Karen Robinson got offered a half-time course reassignment to become the Global Learning coordinator for the College of the Arts, which meant that her job coordinating the general education classes, the TPS 1107—she needed someone to do that. My second year of temporary full-time work they asked me to do that. So I became coordinator. As long as she was getting funded part time through the [Office of] Academic Affairs through her [role as coordinator of] Global Learning, they had the money to keep me as a lecturer. I became a lecturer at that point.

TS: When do you become a senior lecturer?

MB: I became senior lecturer, I think, after five years.

TS: Oh, so two or three years ago?

MB: [The year] 2013 was when I became official.

TS: So you're in your second year now of senior lecturer?

MB: Senior lecturer. I don't have to make another portfolio for a while.

TS: Have you ever applied for or tried to move into tenure track or are you happy with senior lecturer?

MB: I think that's a complicated question. I would love to have a tenure track position, but there's not one available in our department for what I do. Partly it's because at KSU playwriting is under the purview of the English department.

TS: Playwriting is under the English department?

MB: Yes. That's the way it happened a long time ago, and then you know how things go.

TS: I think one thing that I learned that I was delighted to learn is that I thought you had to be tenure track to get these awards.

MB: Certainly, I was thrilled to get the award, but it is a testament to Kennesaw. If they say that they're about teaching, and if the focus of lecturers is to teach, the fact that they allow [lecturers to receive the Distinguished Teaching Award] is great. I didn't realize that either for the first many years that I was here, so I think that's a great thing.

TS: I like the way you put it. It does sound like we're trying to maintain a focus on teaching even though it's harder and harder to do so with each passing year.

MB: Right. But, no, I would love to have a tenure track position, but also I love my colleagues, and I love the work that we're doing in our department, and it's worth it to me to stay there rather than to try to find other jobs.

TS: There's a lot to be said, too, to be a senior lecturer where you can stay forever, as I understand it, and you don't have to worry about going through the tenure process.

MB: Yes, so there's that too.

TS: Okay, so you come in to teach the general education course, and then you're coordinating it.

MB: Then I'm coordinating it. It's helped me as a coordinator to have come through the back door because I really know how difficult it is to be an adjunct teacher and the demands, particularly when you're in the arts, and you're juggling five different [things]. We strive to always hire as our part-time professors theatre professionals, so they are all artists who are working in the community. I think that my experience coming from that helps me be more empathetic and understand better what they need and how I can support them.

TS: So basically you're not bringing in people that are trying to finish up a doctorate or trying to get into a full-time position so much as people who've already got jobs and this is a supplement?

MB: No, many of them would like to teach full time, but for us the main thing is that they are working theatre professionals. It's not people that maybe did theatre twenty years ago,

and they're just talking about it now. That's true for all of our faculty, part time and full time. We're all working professionals. I think for our students that makes a big difference because we're all connected in the theatre community, and we can connect our students, and we're in the midst of things.

TS: I've noticed that CETL [Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning] now has an associate to work with adjunct faculty. How has that worked out? Have you had much relationship with them?

MB: A little bit. Although I think that's been in flux a little bit. I remember at one point I was thinking of applying for that, but then I wanted to keep doing more theatre, but I think that there's been more attention in the last couple of years trying to give part-time faculty a voice and trying to give them a little more agency within the system and to make it more hospitable to them. Frankly, I think the pay, particularly in the arts versus maybe in the business school or other places, is pretty retched, and there's not a lot of support within the system for part timers. I think they are overall taken advantage of. If there's something that I could change it would be that.

TS: Sure. Do you sit in on classes and give them advice?

MB: I do, I do. I observe, and I try to make it really collaborative. We do a cook out every year at my house in the spring, and we talk about what's working and what's not working, trying to have them feel like they really own the class because that's important. When you're not doing it for the money—I mean, you're doing it for the money—but I think most teachers, whether you're talking about elementary or high school or college professors, say, “I want to own what I'm doing.”

TS: Absolutely. What about office space? I know in history they've got one big office that the adjuncts all share?

MB: In fact, when I started, we didn't have an office for part-time faculty, so I would have to meet with students in the hallway. It was terrible. I remember going to Cracker Barrel to grade papers because I didn't have a place on campus to go. But it's gotten better. We now have an office for them, and I shared that office for a number of years, and then I got to move upstairs with the grownups!

TS: One thing I definitely wanted to talk about, since you won the Distinguished Teaching Award for this year, is your teaching philosophy. Can you talk about that?

MB: Sure. I think the main thing is that people learn by doing.

TS: Okay. John Dewey thought of that, I guess.

MB: Yes, he did. In fact, I read Dewey many years later, and I thought, “Wow, this guy is like a theatre maker.” Particularly with that large class, and some of this goes back to my first teaching—I love teaching theatre to people that don't think they know anything about theatre. For one thing they don't have a lot of preconceptions. But also you can see it's something that people performing or people sharing their voice or finding their voice or finding their body on stage or hearing their work performed—there's just such a great—you can see it; you can see the light bulbs go off. That's really fun. When I taught at Iowa we did that for the theatre class. It was a class called Art of the Theatre, and that

was a class that Alan MacVey had designed. They came in as a theatre appreciation class, and it was hands on. They had a unit on playwriting, a unit in acting, a unit in directing, and they did it. I think that's [a class] not just [for] people who want to make theatre for a living, but it's [for] people that want to appreciate it and become audience members.

We are the ambassadors for the arts, and these gen. ed. theatre classes are essential in that way. In fact, they are the most important classes we teach. That passion, I think, transmitted. But then I had the challenge of [large class sizes]. When I was at Iowa I had thirteen people in a class, and then all of a sudden I have ninety people in a class. How do you shake up the environment that is the lecture class that gets them engaged? That's where I think my skills as a playwright and theatre maker come in because I'm constantly trying to figure how can we experience this text or this idea or this debate—how can we experience it and embody it. It's been a lot of experimentation in terms of how do we do that. For example, the final project for TPS 1107 is they have to make a five-minute play based on something. In my class it was always based on folk tales from another country.

TS: Five minutes?

MB: And they'd have to work in groups of ten, and they would create that over the course of the semester.

TS: Oh, the group of ten would produce a five-minute play?

MB: Yes, and then we would perform them during the final exam period for the class. We still do that. That's one of the signature aspects of that class. It's fun. It's crazy. It's like a ten-ring circus, but it's a lot of fun.

TS: It's hard to figure out how to narrow it down to five minutes.

MB: Yes, and they all say after doing it, theatre's a lot of work.

TS: I can imagine ten people debating over what stays in and what goes out.

MB: Well, we could have given them the rules. That's the other thing, I think, if there's a maxim, particularly with regard to teaching creative work and working with undergrads or really anybody, but this was an Erik Ehn thing, which is structure is freedom. Creating structures that then give people rules that they can make something theatrical without overthinking it. If you give them the freedom to make anything, it usually ends up being pretty mushy and not very interesting. Challenging them because so many are young people, and everybody in our world is so conditioned by TV and now Internet and movies, but they think it's a much more literal way of thinking as opposed to theatre, which they think that if you've got to put a war on stage that you've got to have special effects and all this, whereas you can think metaphorically. Getting them to think outside the box is a big part of it.

TS: You've done the general education class; you've taught Script Analysis . . .

MB: Yes, I teach every semester Play Analysis for Production. That's looking at great plays, but then thinking about them using Aristotle's elements of drama to examine the plays through plot, character, language, music, spectacles, ideas, and trying to prepare them for



actually producing a work. Then I teach the Intro to Theatre Studies class for majors, which is their gateway course for the majors. I teach a Performance Composition class, and that's tied to our ten-minute play festival, so that's a creative class. I've taught Senior Seminar and History Theory and Performing Personal Narrative. I've taught a lot. I'm sort of the pinch hitter. I'll teach whatever's needed, right? But the main ones I teach are the Play Analysis, Performance Composition, and then the TPS 1107. Then I'll do special topics classes often related to works that I'm developing.

TS: So something like Ensemble Performance is a special topics class?

MB: Yes. One of the things that we've figured out in the department is that when we want to develop a work, we can put it in the framework of a class and have the students start to make the background level and be part of the production process.

TS: Right. On the line of learning by doing, why don't you talk about how these "Year of" celebrations on our campus have tied in with theatre because I know you took a group to China to put on a play?

MB: Yes. For about three years in a row I had a piece that was connected in the season with the Year of. The first of those was *Roland's Song*. The second was the adaption of the *Monkey King*. That was the one that we took to China. Then the third was for the Year of Kenya. Karen and I collaborated on a piece called *You Always Go Home*. Again, I worked with oral histories, interviewing Kenyans living in our community on campus and beyond and telling their stories of what it's like to be in Diaspora, what it's like to leave and then those questions around coming back. We then interwove those with folk tales from their region. That's probably still one of my highlights. We did it in the fall, and then we did it again in the spring in connection with the [International Conference on the Role of the Kenyan Diaspora on Kenya's Development].

We had I think maybe 250 Kenyans including the minister of finance and all of these people who had come over for that conference. They were in the audience along with our students, and it was just an exquisite experience. They were so into it and so excited about it. There are so many ethnic communities in Kenya. I think there are like thirty-seven different groups. Even in our interviews we had people who were Luo and Luhya and Kikuyu. So at the beginning of the play our different actors got up and said the name of the interviewee and then said "hello" in the native tongue of that community. There were people in the audience who were saying, "Luhya, Luhya, yea!" That project and the work with the Year of [Kenya] and the QEP for Global Learning for Engaged Citizenship helped me. Karen and I both had this "ah-hah" particularly with that gen. ed. class [about] the power of theatre as a tool for intercultural learning and global learning.

TS: Yes. How collaborative were these projects? Did you write the play and the students put it on or did they give their comments for the writing?

MB: They're there throughout the process. In that piece for example, they interviewed people from Kenya. They became part of that. They did some of the transcriptions, which was great because at that point we knew, "Okay, you're playing that role."

TS: That's a good way to learn it to transcribe it.

- MB: Yes. How do you get the rhythms of that person? I was in charge of the script, but I also did a lot of the movement work. It was more a performance piece; it was less of a straight play. Karen and I—when we work together, we work really closely. We co-directed that piece, but involving students in that creation process is one of my favorite things. That's where I feel I am so lucky to be here and to be able to do that.
- TS: So you're really integrating teaching, service—there's certainly a service element to all of this—and also creative activity.
- MB: Yes, yes. Unless you're one of a handful of people or you're [age] twenty and you don't care about health insurance and don't care about living as a nomad for your whole life, you really can't make a living as a playwright. So there are two routes. You can either go the route that many of my colleagues have gone from Iowa, and they've been very successful at it, is going and writing for TV and making a living that way. That's why there's such good TV right now because all the playwrights have moved over to TV because they can't make a living as a playwright! Or you teach. As long as I can remember, my twin loves have been writing and teaching, so teaching is a better fit for me. In order to continue to make work with a full-time teaching schedule, if I don't link them up, then I won't be able to make work. That integration has been something I've figured out being here, and I've been fortunate to be able to do that.
- TS: I know you did at least one article with Karen. Have you done much more of that?
- MB: No, that's where my lecturer comes in, which is I'll go to conferences, but I'd much rather spend my limited writing time working on a play than writing an article.
- TS: So maybe another reason to not be anxious to be tenure track.
- MB: Right. Although it would give me a different [teaching] load, which would be nice. I've enjoyed going to conferences, particularly related to general education work, and I've gotten a lot of support from Academic Affairs. They sent me to this wonderful seminar this summer called The Wye Faculty Seminar—the Wye River—run by the Aspen Institute [Queenstown, Maryland], and it's about engaged democracy and citizenship in a global world. I got to work with people who were from all different disciplines, so I've done some neat things that way. But writing articles, whoo!
- TS: I guess in theatre writing and producing a play like *Night Blooms* is the equivalent of a book maybe?
- MB: It is, although for our tenure track folks, they'd have to do both, so you'd have to do the research, and you'd also have to do articles or books. It is equivalent, but then again we are a scholar-artist model, so there is an expectation for scholarly work.
- TS: Right. What was *Night Blooms*? That's after you're full time here.
- MB: Right. *Night Blooms* is I think my most successful play to date. It is based on family stories. I mentioned that my grandmother is from Selma, Alabama, and my mom grew up in Selma. Growing up, I was very influenced by the relationship between my grandmother and her housekeeper, the woman who worked as her maid. I think she went to work for my grandmother at age nineteen and then ended up nursing my grandmother through her death.

TS: Wow. That's about as "traditional South" as you can get.

MB: Yes. Matilda Martin was her name. I had always heard growing up the story of on the day of the big march from Selma to Montgomery, which we're coming up on the fiftieth anniversary [1965], that she had come to work that day, and my grandmother said, "Matilda, do you know what's going on downtown?" She said, "Yes ma'am." So Granny Ruth said, "Do you want to go down and watch it?" So the two of them drove down in my grandmother's Lincoln Continental and parked on Lauderdale Street and watched the march go by.

TS: Together?

MB: Together. That story was one of the reasons that I wanted to become a writer because I saw the complexity of their relationship, and I thought, "I want to be able to tell this story." But it's an intimidating story to tell. So it took me a long time to get the courage to do it. But that was one of the great things about Horizon and my relationship with them because after we had done *Her Little House*, Lisa said, "What do you want to write?" I said, "I think it's time for me to write this story." My grandmother passed away when I was in college, but Mrs. Martin was still alive. I was still in touch with her, so I thought, "Okay, it's time to write this." I wrote and did a little bit of work. I wrote about twenty pages of that story and what I imagined to happen. We did a reading of it at Horizon, just table reading. Then I said, "Okay, I need to go hear Matilda's side of the story." I had never heard it. I'd never asked her about it. I went. At that time she was actually still working for my aunt and uncle two days a week, and they were all in their seventies, and now they're in their eighties. She just passed away. So we sat down, and I said, "Matilda, this is how I've always heard the story." I told her the story. I asked, "What was it like for you?" She said, "Well, that never happened."

TS: It never happened? They didn't go to the march?

MB: No, they didn't go to the march. That was one of those moments in life, and you can go to my website, [www.margaretbaldwin.com](http://www.margaretbaldwin.com), and there's a link to a TED Talk there that I gave. Have you heard of those?

TS: I think I have but I don't know what it is.

MB: Yes, look them up at TEDxAtlanta. It's Technology, Entertainment, Design. There's a talk that I give about that. But so in that moment I just felt completely like my whole life had been ripped out from under me. Then I was driving back with Paul at that point.

TS: Paul is your husband?

MB: Paul [Pendergrass], my husband, and he said, "Well, maybe that's the story."

TS: How could you have that big of a discrepancy? They either did go to the march or they didn't?

MB: Well, you know, I tend to believe that Matilda was right, more accurate. When I started to do the research, the marches happened every day for ten weeks. Maybe one of those days they were driving home, and they had to pull over on the side of the road while something was going on. Who knows? But somehow, as stories do in families, it had

grown and morphed. One of the things that was striking about reflecting on the story was that part of why it was so important to me was because it was a story that said, “Well, we were some of the good white people.” That part of it. I think looking at that time period in the South and all of the change, and so *Night Blooms* became a play about a family dealing with change. It's set in Selma on the day of the big march, and it's also connected [to] another family story. My great-grandmother had this really ugly plant called a Night Blooming Cereus that would bloom one night a year.

It blooms in the middle of night, and then it's gone the next morning. There's all these traditions around it. She would have these blooming parties, and people would come over and get drunk and watch the plant bloom. I conflated these two stories of the march happening and then this bloom happening and then the different generations and how they're dealing with the change. When I started doing research, I went back and I said, “Okay, I do need to figure out what could have happened that day, and how could those perspectives be so different? These two people had shared so much of their lives together and cared about each other. [How could] they see the world so differently?” I started asking my aunt and uncle. My uncle was the town pediatrician, and he was one of the first doctors to integrate his waiting room. My aunt said to me, “Oh, let me give you my file.” I had never asked her about anything. She gave me this file about this thick of material from that time—correspondence—and through that this whole play evolved.

TS: How about that?

MB: Yes, it was amazing. It was a great process. We did a reading of it in Germany last spring, [University of] Paderborn, as part of an exchange with them through the Halle Foundation. We're going to do a reading of it as part of a civil and human rights conference that's going to be here in February. It's also been produced in Virginia.

TS: Germany has its past with Hitler and the Nazis.

MB: Exactly. There are some really interesting resonances.

TS: With the South and segregation and slavery and what-have-you. When our student, Ashley, did the 2011 interview, you were working on a water project. Did that ever come to anything?

MB: We did one reading of it as part of Brave New Works, a series they do every other year at Emory, and that was a collaboration with Out of Hand Theater. It didn't click for me in terms of the material trying to make it into a play from there. That happens sometimes.

TS: I understand. I'm just thinking that we've got a Great Debate [program] on the water problem on Thursday on campus. I wondered if you were involved with that.

MB: You know, I think it's a really important topic. I found it difficult to find my way to make it a human story at least in that framework.

TS: The other thing that you told her that you were working on was on the Orly Crash that wiped out the elite of Atlanta about fifty years ago.

MB: It's an amazing story, and it's a tragic story, but that also was a project that didn't pan out. That happens. Right now, I'm working on doing proposals for a new adaptation of or

retelling of *The Bacchae*, the Greek tragedy by Euripides, in collaboration with Michael Haverty, who's a wonderful artist in town who teaches up here part time and is associate artistic director at 7 Stages [Theatre, Atlanta]. We're looking at doing some sort of co-production with that. We're applying for the [Reiser] Atlanta Artists Lab, so we'll see what kind of support we get. Then I'm working on a play called *In the Wilds*, and that is a story connected to this phenomenon [that is] happening all over the country of coyotes coming into the neighborhoods and eating people's pets, and connecting that with a story of a couple, particularly a woman, who is struggling with depression after a miscarriage. So those connections. It's a play about motherhood and wildness and what are the boundaries of our fears of wildness, but also our yearning for it. That one, I think, is going to have a reading at Actor's Express [Theatre Company, Atlanta] this coming spring.

TS: Well, I think it's pretty obvious why you won the Distinguished Teaching Award because you've really been involving students in lots of interesting things, and you've tied it in with your creative activity and what-have-you. I wonder if you have any insights that you'd like to add on why you think you won the award.

MB: I think it has to do with integrating those twin passions. The tools of theatre are really useful for teaching. Our students come in, and they think they want to be actors. What they really need and what they really want—they want to make something; they want to create. Particularly in our public school systems, [teachers are required to] teach to the test to get ahead and have this structured environment all the time. I don't think there's a lot of space for creative play that gives [students] an opportunity to express who they are and to challenge and to learn new things and shift perspectives. I think theatre does that in a way that nothing else does. Going back to those first experiences of working on *But I Said No*, that rape play, and seeing people transformed through that experience and even myself transformed through that experience—I'm a theatre missionary. I think everybody should make plays. Darn it, we're going to make them do it, whether they know it or not.

TS: Whether they want to or not.

MB: Yes!

TS: Well, you gave a good answer three years ago to what has kept you at Kennesaw. Why don't we throw that out again and see if you say the same thing now that you said then?

MB: Well, I think the thing that keeps me here is that I love our students, and I love the opportunities that I have in our department to involve students at all levels, both the gen. ed. classes and the majors in particular, in the process of making theatre.

TS: Great. Well, this has been fun talking to you today.

MB: It has been fun. I talked your ear off!

TS: That's my goal!

MB: Thank you. I think this is a wonderful project that you do, and I'm excited.

TS: Great. Thank you.

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