

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH PALMER WELLS

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
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Interview with Palmer Wells
Conducted by Anne Graham and Heather Oswald
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Location: Audio Video Technology Studio

AG: Studio of Audio Video Technology Services at Kennesaw State University. Hi, Palmer.

PW: Hi there.

AG: Can you start by talking a bit about your family and background?

PW: Yes. I was born in the small mining town in Keokee, Virginia, which is in the very southwest corner of Virginia and a tiny little mining community, my father being a coal miner, of course. My father died, unfortunately, when I was three weeks old. Mining conditions, being what they were at the time, especially a small coal mine -- Working conditions were poor at best, and he worked in water and that kind of thing. He was asthmatic, and he contracted pneumonia, which left my mother with myself as an infant, and I had two older siblings. This being 1937, she had to basically fend for herself. I'm sure she had a strong support group around her but she managed to support all of us through door-to-door selling, I think a variety of things.

She often found time to do one of her first loves, which was gospel singing. She traveled around with a friend of hers and actually went into Tennessee and North Carolina singing. I don't know where she found the time for it, but she managed to eke out survival for us and herself through these variety of things that she did. Of course, this being the Depression, things were really tough, but I have to admire somebody like that who's able to it.

As I say, I had two siblings. The age gap between us was fairly large. They were closer together, the older sister and my brother who was seven years older than myself. That's it as far as my family.

My mother remarried when I was three years old, and we moved from southwest Virginia to basically just across the mountain. This is very mountainous country, as you may know. We moved from there to Cumberland, Kentucky, which was also a coal mine-supported community. My step-father worked at -- Coal mining is unbelievable as an occupation and brutal, but conditions were better here. It happened to be a union operation, so that was fortunate for him.

So, that's where I grew up, in Cumberland, Kentucky, which was a town of about 5,000 people. Everybody knew everybody and knew about their business. Actually, it had its charms, even though it was mainly a dusty, little one-street town. At the end of Main Street, there was a church with a steeple, and so forth. So, it was somewhat picturesque. That's basically where I grew up. Well, it is where I grew up and went to high school there. Was editor of the high school newspaper and developed a strong interest in both journalism and theater in my school years and decided to go from there. Of course, my parents couldn't afford to send me where I wanted to go to school, so I went from high school to Berea College, which is in Berea, Kentucky. They have a labor program where all students work, and so this enabled me to go to college. The pay was quite low. I was making something like -- I believe it was a ridiculous amount like eighteen cents an hour working in the print shop, and running presses, and just doing whatever jobs were available in the print shop.

I had intended to major in English there. Had I gone back for the third year, I would have been a secretary for one of the English professors as my employment, but I decided that I would go from there to the University of Kentucky. I managed to get work there also in the print shop, which enabled me to continue on and to pursue a degree in journalism at the University of Kentucky.

My other love was theater, of course. I got started actually when I was in junior high school. For one thing, I think all kids like to perform and do different things to entertain others, and I was no exception, including the fact that I was quite the entrepreneur. I had created a little movie theater in the shed we had out back and had a home movie projector and charged a nickel to kids in the neighborhood to come see the movie. And we even did some little performances. Then in junior high, I was in a play. In high school -- Even when I went on to Berea College, I was in the production there. So, I went from there to University of Kentucky, after which I came to work at the newspaper near my hometown and a daily newspaper in Harlan, Kentucky, The Harlan Daily Enterprise, doing feature-writing photography and court reporting, a variety of types of reporting.

I knew at that time there was the selective service, the draft was still in effect. So, I knew that I didn't have very long before I was going to be drafted. I managed to work there for two years. Also, during that time, a community college had been built in my hometown in Cumberland, a two-year junior college. I taught basic English and a beginning journalism course there while I was essentially waiting to be drafted, which did come in 1962, I believe, if dates matter. Of course, I had basic training at Fort Knox near Louisville, Kentucky. From there, I was assigned to Fort McNair, which nobody had ever heard of. Guys were going off to armor, to infantry, to Fort Hood, to Fort wherever, but nobody had ever heard of

Fort McNair, and neither had I, of course. I since learned that it was in the nation's capital, right in D.C., just a few blocks down from the capital. It was a very small post at the juncture of the Anacostia and Potomac rivers.

I was to be editor of the post newspaper, which didn't sound like a bad deal to me. You have it better than infantry or armor or something like that I thought. Of course, this was prior to the beginning of the Vietnam War and before those things happened. So I was delighted with this assignment, and it sounded pretty good to me. As I found out, I may have said this -- It was a location for General's Row, and N.C.O. Row, and it was home of the National War College, and there were a couple of armed service colleges there as well as a number of high ranking officers and, of course, the generals. A lot of people assigned to this base worked at the Pentagon. It was a lovely place to be. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

It also gave me time after being on duty to do whatever I want. I was pretty much free after maybe 5:00 or so. So I took advantage of that, certainly. I had various jobs. I worked at a newspaper in Alexandria, Virginia, doing all sorts of things, primarily sports writing, which was new for me, but it was a good experience. I was covering mainly high school sports. Football, basketball, whatever.

I also got involved in theater there and worked with a number of avocational groups around the D.C. area in Bethesda and the environment of D.C. Also managed to get a walk-on role at Arena Stage, which was also just a couple of blocks down the street from the barracks. That was a very nice experience. That was a professional job. Even though I was doing the -- I sang in the chorus, of course, but it was basically a walk-on, this part-of-the-scenery, if you will. That was a great experience, also.

It has its moments of precariousness, having been a part of the Army. That was my primary responsibility, of course. Now and then these situations come along where there were alerts, and everybody has to be present and accounted for and ready to react. And one of those came up, of course. I had a performance that evening, and I pleaded with the N.T.O. in charge and told him I would call in every few minutes and everything. So, he finally relented and let me go for the few hours I would be away doing the performance, but it was so touch-and-go there for a few minutes. This love of theater continued right on up through the time that I worked for IBM.

I left the army and went to work for United Press International in Louisville, Kentucky, again doing general reporting and writing radio news and different things for the wire service. From there, a friend persuaded me to come to work at the Daily Newspaper in East Tennessee, which was not far from my home in Kentucky. I went to work for the Kingsport Times News after I left UPI. I was doing feature writing there,

primarily education reporting, and also got involved with the local theater group and in directing, acting, and the technical side of things. I was there for a couple of years and went from there to White Plains, New York.

Why White Plains? Well, I had no connection there whatsoever, but I had wanted to try to get back to Washington. I loved D.C., loved the D.C. area. I applied for a job there through a federal agency. I didn't get the job, but - I don't know exactly how this happened, but I expect that they kept my resume on file and somehow IBM got it. Because I got a call from IBM to see if I would be interested in an interview for a job in White Plains, New York. So the next thing I knew, I was on a flight to New York for an interview for a job as a technical editor and writer.

My brother-in-law-to-be, who is an engineer, and my sister were also employed to IBM. She, she was an instructor for the Office Products Division, and she happened to be there in White Plains when I came for an interview. And, of course, IBM being very tradition oriented, the uniform de rigueur was a white shirt and tie and fourteen pounds of wing tips. I showed up for the interview -- It happened to be on a Saturday morning, I showed up with a blue shirt and a tie and the suit. I went to the interview and came back to have lunch with my sister afterwards, and she said, "Did you wear that to the interview?" I said, "Yeah," but she said, "Well, good luck with getting these jobs. Everyone wears white shirts around here." Fortunately, I did get to a job.

Again, theater played a part in extracurricular activities with IBM. They happened to have a very fine theater group that their drama club, which was also supported by the company, had charge of. So, I got involved with them. I did some directing, and technical work, and some acting. I fortunately got to continue on with my work in theater, my second love, in addition to the writing and editing that I was doing for IBM.

I remained there for fifteen and a half years before I actually I met Michael Horne who was new to IBM. He was in White Plains for -- He was also in the information area as a writer and editor, and he was in town for classes, an indoctrination period, if you will. So, we got to know each other within the circle of friends and found out that we had a great deal in common. Our lives were sort of parallel. He had majored in journalism and also had this great love of theater. And he had worked for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution prior to this. We soon found out that we did have so much in common, and saw a number shows in New York. He was, at the time, assigned to a division in Washington, D.C., but he wanted to get back to Atlanta. So, he encouraged me to also apply to get a transfer to Atlanta, which I did, of course. After a long series of events, it finally developed that I was transferred from New York to Atlanta. That was in 1980, I believe. So, that's how I got to Atlanta.

AG: Well, actually, let me just take an opportunity to backtrack a little bit.

PW: Okay, sure.

AG: Going back to your childhood, did your mother and stepfather have any additional children?

PW: My mother and stepfather, yes. I had two sisters. I was very close to -- Actually, there was less of an age gap between the two younger sisters, half-sisters, than there was between my actual older brother and sister. My older sister, of course, married when I was very young and started a family. My brother, when we moved from Virginia to Kentucky, somehow manipulated -- He was only 16 years old, and he managed to somehow wrangle his way into the military service because he didn't want to go from -- He was very unhappy with the limiting new school, being at that age. It was quite a disruption in his life. So he managed to get into the Air Force at the age of sixteen, and with the aid of a few forgeries and that kind of thing.

I basically grew up with my two half-sisters and felt probably closer to them than my older siblings. My two half-sisters are still both living. My older brother and sister, of course, passed on actually at a pretty young age. My sister was fifty-two, then my brother was forty-nine. I'm still very close to -- certainly one of my half-sisters, I'm very close to. We do a lot of traveling together, and I spend holidays with them. So, we're very close in that way.

AG: And did they stay in Kentucky, or where do they live now?

PW: My one sister lives in East Tennessee, in Kingsport, and the other lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

AG: Can you talk a bit more about your relationship with your mother and your stepfather?

PW: My early -- ?

AG: Your relationship with your stepfather, growing up?

PW: It was a very happy relationship, actually. I was three years old when my mother remarried, and he was the only father I ever knew. There with a bit of resentment, I think, because I realized that he wasn't my real father. Then the two younger half-sisters came along, and I guess I sort of felt shoved to the side because of that. Something of maybe the stepchild syndrome figured into it, I suppose.

Basically, we got along very well and -- It got much better over the years. He really became very much like a father to me. Of course, my mother, whom I admired as well as loved, as much for her desire to keep the family together and keep going prior to her remarrying, if anything, it was quite a struggle for her. But all in all, I think I basically had a good childhood. Yeah. I was happy. We had our struggles. There were ups and downs with the -- As far as my stepfather's employment, he continued to work for the mines up until he retired. And he had developed black lung by that time, of course, and had his health problems. But he lived to be like eighty-seven and my mother that preceded him in death by about a year. She was eighty-six when she died. But again, I think my childhood, basically it was good. I have happy memories of it.

AG: Can you talk about your perceptions of being gay or what that meant as a child?

PW: It was something that I don't think I was ever conflicted about it. In growing in grade school and so forth, I had my sweethearts and everything. And there were girls involved, but I always, in my mind, I always knew I had this other attraction. But it never manifested itself, really, but -- until I got into high school and even then it was -- I suppose, my feelings could only be described as bisexual. Like I say, I was never conflicted by my feelings either way and I never really was open about it. I never felt the need to be, although as the years went on and I had a long-standing relationship with Michael Horne and we had bought a house in Marietta together and our lives were just intertwined.

I know I could have discussed this with my mother if I had felt the need to, but I just, there was an unspoken understanding, I think. And so I never, she was never confrontational about it and neither was I. And I do remember that when Michael spent Christmas with us and I have a little small cabin in the mountains in north Georgia, and one year we had Christmas there together with both our families. And when Michael died, in fact, the family loved him dearly. And when he died, I called my mother and told her, and of course she just burst into tears. You know what I mean? No, like I say things were unspoken, but I think everybody, there was no secret about our relationship and we didn't try to make it secret. And that was the way it was, I think, in our relationship throughout the time that he was alive. We were together for probably eighteen and a half years before that happened.

AG: Going back to your time in college, can you talk more about what prompted your transfer to the University of Kentucky?

PW: By that time, I really felt like majoring in English wasn't going to do for me what I had wanted it to, which was to work for a newspaper. And as

much as I loved Berea College and my life as a student there, I really wanted to pursue journalism and felt that the only way I can do this was going to the University. So, I dropped out of the semester and then enrolled at the University of Kentucky to get the degree in journalism.

AG: And then a couple of questions about your experience in the military. One, how long were you in service?

PW: How long? Two years. The draft was for two years at that time.

AG: And did you, what was your experience as a gay man in the military?

PW: I never really had any gay experiences while I was in the military. For one thing, I was well aware of the Army's policy about this. In fact during the time that I was in service, I know an N.C.O. who was assigned to the unit I was in, had been court-martialed for being gay. And he was ultimately discharged, finally discharged of course. But I knew I was aware of others there who -- I was, you know, the old gaydar thing. I was just sure that they were gay. A term that wasn't used, by the way, at that time. But I was just certain of those kinds of things. And I've developed a very strong friendship with one of my army buddies there. He worked in the craft shop and we were practically inseparable, but it was just strictly army buddy type things and stuff.

AG: You talked about your decision to take a job at IBM. Did you have any reservations about leaving the field of journalism and moving to the corporate world?

PW: I had reservations about it, but on the other hand, the lure of being near New York City, White Plains is very close to New York City. It's a very short train ride into the city. That was quite attractive to me. And being able to see Broadway shows and take advantage of the wonderful restaurants and city life was very appealing to me. So, I had reservations about it, but still this new life and everything was also had its element of excitement about it.

AG: You talked about how you and Michael met. Can you tell us a little bit more about Michael in general?

PW: Michael is from Durham, North Carolina. He went to the University of North Carolina where he was Phi Beta Kappa. He was a brilliant guy, he really was. And very charismatic and has also some experience -- He won Soapbox Derby one year in Ohio, and also was a Randolph Hearst Award winner and just an outstanding person. Essentially, he was quite different from us. He was much more outgoing and much more charismatic than I was. I think that was one of the things that characterized our relationship

that worked. He was more outgoing and I was somewhat more reserved. He used to call it, he used to say that he was the flash and trash of the theater and I was the heart and soul. That's the way he put it. But he essentially his connection with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution I think was one element that was essential for the growth and survival of Theatre in the Square, which we formed in 1982.

And that developed of course through the love that both of us had for theater. He was, had worked at an avocational theater in Smyrna where he had lived prior to going to IBM. And when we both got together in Atlanta, this continued and he was working across town in Decatur at a dinner theater there. By that time, we had bought the house in Marietta I just loved the Square in Marietta. I just fell in love with it, my first visit. And of course, Michael was familiar with it, of course. And, but I just wanted to be a part of it, we both did, wanted to be more a part of it than just living two blocks away.

He was working way across town in Decatur, of course. And I had done a little work with the Smyrna theater also. And we started looking around for a place to do something in Marietta. A shop or, or something. What are we doing now? We both loved theater. This place needs a theater. People told us we were crazy, of course, but for wanting to try to start a theater in the suburbs of Atlanta, which is somewhat new. I don't think suburban theaters were quite as common as they are today.

But we persuaded Bill Swearingen who was the owner of the Depot restaurant which had been – he had established in the old train depot alongside the tracks in Marietta. And off just to the back of the restaurant was the old baggage storage area for the depot and which served as the banquet room for the restaurant. And we persuaded him to let us start a theater there. And we had eighty-five seats and we were there for three years. The restaurant, in the meantime, we outlived the restaurant, actually, but what Swearingen had hoped would develop with it -- and it worked for a long time -- We would provide patrons for his restaurant and the patrons for his restaurant would have a place to go after the meal. So it was a good synchronous, or a synergistic relationship.

So, but things being what they were, the restaurant closed and we course continued on. And after he left and we encountered such things as leaky roof and different things that we had to contend with because we happened, at that time to be the only tenant there, which had a new owner by that time. So, I remember we were both still working for IBM in those early years of the Theatre. And I can remember coming up at lunchtime to try to repair leaks on the roof, including putting down plastic on rainy days, and hanging buckets from the ceiling to catch any drips and so forth.

AG: Going back to your transfer to the Atlanta area, you mentioned it took some time. Had Michael moved to the Atlanta area first?

PW: Yes, he was here before I managed to get my transfer through.

AG: And why did you select Marietta as the place to settle down?

PW: We had looked a number of places in both Atlanta and Marietta. Michael had a number of friends that lived in Marietta proper. Well, they had friends in Atlanta as well, but a realtor friend that lived in Marietta. And tons of places that she wanted us to look at. We both, when we found this place near the Square, fell in love with the house. It's historic, it was built just after the civil war in 1868. And we both just fell in love with it when we walked into it. So, we said, "This is it." And I know Mike's father was in particular he couldn't believe it he said, "How old is that house?" He thought we were nuts for buying an old house. But we both just adored it. And so, it was located two blocks from the Square, which seemed ideal to me. And that's how we came to be in Marietta. We had looked at places in Atlanta as well, but the place in Marietta just seemed to be just perfect for us.

AG: We're just going do a quick break.

VIDEOGRAPHER: If you could start a couple of those sentences, say that because she was talking really loud.

AG: Can you just repeat on what you were saying about purchasing the house and I just have an additional question if you want to answer it now? Was it a fixer-upper? Did you need to – so, talk a little bit more about --

PW: No, it wasn't at the house itself the previous owners had done quite a bit of renovation work and it appeared to be in good shape. There were things that we wanted to do ourselves and of course we didn't know at the time that buying an old house, particularly one that's over a hundred years old has one problem after another. And it continues to this day. It's all to be expected. It's built into the situation of buying an old house.

AG: Did you have any reservations about moving to a small town and buying a house with Michael being a gay couple in the deep South?

PW: It never entered my mind, actually. I just, like I say, I just loved the house. I adored the location and didn't give it a second thought. And we never made any effort to try to conceal our relationship or try to disguise it in any way.

AG: So can you talk about the arts scene and Marietta when you arrived?

PW: Well, there was the ballet was there and they had a symphony orchestra. I believe there was an avocational theater. We had not been a part of that, but what we had hoped to do when we started the theater was make it a professional theater. And in the strictest sense we did. Even though the pay for our first production was the top pay was like \$25 a week. And so hardly a living wage if we will. But that was pretty much it, as far as the art scene. There may have been at the time, the beginnings or the germ of the museum, art museum, which developed a much larger organization. And I think it's now pretty much doing well. And the ballet is still there, of course, the symphony and so forth. Like I say, we were told we were crazy for wanting to start a theater in Marietta, but fortunately we ignored that.

AG: So can you talk about how you got involved in theater in Marietta? What was the local climate for theater and in any support or lack of support that you got?

PW: Yeah. When we started things, of course we used our own resources, our own money to do the initial pay for the initial cost, startup costs and so forth. The restaurant kicked in things like chairs, the straight back chairs that we used, but to any – like, the platforms for the risers were we had to finance with our own money. And we did get some financing from IBM, which was quite unusual, actually. We got a fund for community service grant from IBM to buy our lighting equipment. And so it's quite unusual for them to fund anything for a startup organization, but Michael being as persuasive as he was, and as charismatic and so forth, he managed to pull this off and get us the, I think it was something like \$6,500 for, which is a good bit of money at that time for the lighting equipment.

And, then we used our own funds for getting some basic sound equipment and some other things. But it remained until after we were well under way before we got any kind of local support, financial support. And I remember when we got our first contribution with \$250, and it happened to be from -- She wasn't mayor at the time, but Ansley Meaders who became mayor of Marietta. And I thought, Jesus, it's wonderful. A contribution. But we found that there was a great hunger for live theater and especially done well, which we thought we were doing pretty well. We had some pretty ambitious programming those early years, and we not only caught the imagination of the audience that's in Marietta and beyond actually, as well as the Atlanta theater community and which is where most of our talent came from.

And so people decided, or actors decided that it was worth the trip, fighting traffic getting up here from, from Atlanta to Marietta, to participate in this new theater, which I think they thought of as pretty gutsy as well as we did. And so we pulled off some pretty ambitious programming during those first couple of years. Of course, we opened in

1982 with *On Golden Pond*, which had been released not long before as a movie. And so, it had some built-in recognition, but we had quite a credible production of that, even in this small little space. And which was barely thirty-five feet wide and maybe sixty-five feet long. And the actual stage entrance was the back door of the building itself. So when actors -- And by the way, the dressing rooms were outside and upstairs. So the actors had to get dressed and come in makeup and costume around the building to the back entrance to make their entrance on stage.

But that first production was -- well, it's a lot of friends. I remember, as I mentioned earlier, Michael still maintained his relationship with a lot of people on the staff at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Helen Smith, who was, I think the primary arts critic or theater critic at the paper happened to be a good acquaintance of Michael's. She came out to do an interview with us, and we had invited a number of prominent Mariettans. We were told that this would be a good idea. And we agreed that getting on the right side of the old Marietta population would be good for us. So, we invited -- Our invitation was primarily these people, and we had sought some help in identifying those people. And our response had been not that good at the outset, and Helen Smith came and interviewed us and did a feature story, which appeared on the front page of the arts section on Friday, I think, and our opening night was on Saturday.

And boy, that did it for us. Our phone started to ring, and the response with immediate, and we filled up at that opening night performance. And I remember we had not only the present mayor of Marietta, but three future mayors of Marietta, who were there for the opening night, including, as I mentioned, Ansley Meaders, who was with me at the front door, greeting people and identifying them for me and giving me little asides about this one and that. It was quite an intriguing and fun if not gossipy experience in that respect.

And I remember also we had invited the then relatively new president of Kennesaw -- Kennesaw College at the time, I guess, Betty Siegel. And we happened to be from the same hometown. I didn't know her well, but I knew who she was. We both edited the high school newspaper and had some things in common, but we invited her and her husband, Joel, and she showed up. And she came around the corner, and I had known her as Betty Faye Lentz, her maiden name. So, when she heard the name, Betty Faye, I was pretty cheeky, I suppose, in calling her that when she was Dr. Siegel. She was taken aback, and I think she enjoyed it, but it was quite a stellar audience that night.

And I do remember that afterwards at the reception, which we had in the annex in the square courtyard in the back of the theater, I remember overhearing one of the people talking to another one, and said something

to the effect that we certainly have to hang on to this, that we can't let this go. And that made me feel awfully good. Yeah. And I knew that we had made it. We were in with Marietta at that time. And so, the support continued from there. And while it didn't produce a great deal of finances, we got a good, strong, loyal following, and a good deal of financial support.

AG: So you mentioned that your productions were considered gutsy. Can you talk about how you decided which productions you were going to put on?

PW: Oh, Michael and I made all of those decisions. And like I say, we both had a great love for theater. And while he was still living in Washington DC, for example, we had occasion to see this little show at Arena Stage called the 1940s Radio Hour. And after we started the theater, which was two or three years later, from having seen the production at Arena Stage, and we were putting together the programming, we said, we've got to do that little musical show that we saw at Arena Stage called the 1940s Radio Hour.

And so, we did it, and we scheduled it around Christmas time. And we had forgotten the strong Christmas connection that there was with the show. And there was a broadcast within a broadcast of A Christmas Carol. And of course, throughout the show, the use of all the sound effects devices. And of course, the wonderful 40s music and all of that, and the audiences just loved it, just ate it up. We had to add performances. It was just a huge success, so when we were putting together the next one, we said, "Well, let's try it again." We had to turn an awful lot of people away.

And so, we did. We did a second year. And again, it was just as popular, and we had improved the production values and all of this. And so, we continued doing this little show for twenty-five years after the Theatre started. And so, that was one of the shows we had chosen, but like I say, I think that I had done a production of A Thousand Clowns prior to this. That was added. We did, of all things, a Sondheim musical. And this was one that wasn't quite the success that the 1940s Radio Hour was 'cause Sondheim didn't have that big a following in Marietta. And while we had the talent to do the songs, there just didn't seem to be, like I said, the following for Sondheim.

And it was our second show, so it was pretty discouraging that it didn't do quite as well as we had hoped, but then didn't discourage us from still doing other things that we still believed in as good theater. And like I said, Michael and I did the choosing of the shows. And basically, they were things that we'd either seen, or in the course of things, we would take trips to New York to see new shows and regional shows and new works. One of the things I am really quite proud of in the history of Theatre in the Square

is that we did do so many new works. Either works that we had commissioned or had not been done prior to it.

In fact, we did over twenty-five original works over the period of our history, about half of which we had commissioned. So, there were world premieres and included things like, and of all things, a world premiere of a play by Maxwell Anderson, which we produced posthumously. And this came about through a relationship with one of our actors was a friend of a nephew of Maxwell Anderson. And he knew about this play about the last days of Queen Elizabeth. It was called Masque of Queens.

And I read it, and I just thought it was magnificent. It just read so beautifully. And we had an actress, Jessica Phelps West, who had done Elizabeth I in at least two other productions, other locations. So, we cast her in this as Queen Elizabeth, and just this great death scene thing, but we gave it quite a credible production. It was beautiful and put a lot into the production values of it and so forth. And I just loved it, loved the history. And the pomp and circumstance involved in it. And it was, as I say, a world premiere, and subsequent to that, his widow and the nephew arranged for publication of the script. And of course, we're listed in there as having produced the first, the premiere production, first live production of the work. And it listed all of our cast and everything.

So, quite proud of that. But there were a number of other things that we did that as far as things that we commissioned, including a play about the establishment of the first Black church in Marietta, and one of the very first in Georgia, for that matter, prior to the Civil War, called Zion. And that went on to have productions at [inaudible] theater in New York at Riverside Church. And there was a production of it in Miami, and we also produced it at our theater at a later time as well, but it's certainly a wonderful production. And they actually have plans to do it again at the church in commemoration of, I think, the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Zion Church, if I'm not mistaken.

But it's quite a thrill seeing that produced in New York at Riverside Church. I was there for the opening. And I just remember now one of the opening lines, or the opening, I think, is a voiceover saying, "It was 1848 in Marietta, Georgia." And this just sort of sent a chill down my spine, hearing this, knowing that I was in New York, and this little play that we'd developed and brought to the stage was now being produced elsewhere, and to very, very good success. Frank Rich reviewed it. And it got a number of reviews up there and was quite well received.

There were other things that we produced over the years. In fact, our very first season included, our second season, I think, included a new work by a local TV personality, Zeke Segal. Michael had adapted a script about Joan

Crawford, her biography. And that's another story too. We were in production for that show, and the author of some other biographies was interested in doing something about Joan Crawford -- Anne Edwards. I think she'd done biographies of Judy Garland and Katherine Hepburn and Vivien Leigh, Margaret Mitchell, and she showed up one night. We had no idea she was there, but this turned out to come back at us a few years later when we wanted to do another show. So, we got in touch with an agent in New York. Michael wanted to adapt a movie script of, I think, Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte, or something. So, he asked the agent about that. And he said, "No, this is not available. I wonder if you might be interested in a script about Judy Garland."

So, Michael said, "Yeah, let's take a look." So, we went up and saw the production of it at Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey. And it was called One More Song, and it was by Anne Edwards, who had seen a show at our theater, which we were totally unaware of. And we offered to do it at our theater, and she agreed. And it was a new work, so she wanted to do some tweaking and so forth anyway, but the star who played Judy Garland at Paper Mill was a Tony nominee, Donna Theodore. And we talked her into coming down to Marietta, said, "It's a little theater," to do the first production of it here, also.

And it was quite well received, so that just illustrates how sometimes you never know who's in the audience. I remember Mick Jagger came to a production. It happened to be a Noël Coward play that his wife at the time, Jerry -- She was a model. I can't remember her last name.

AG: Jerry Hall?

PW: Jerry Hall. Yes. She was interested in doing a production of it elsewhere. And so they wanted to come see this play, so we were rehearsing something else in our back space, in our rehearsal space. And somebody came back to the rehearsal space, just beside himself. He said, "You'll never guess who's in the audience, Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall." So, Michael being ever the entrepreneur and charismatic person that he was, went home to get dressed into something a little flashier before intermission, so he could say hello to Mick Jagger.

But no fuss was made over him and everything. And he was quite cordial. And I think they enjoyed the show. They seemed to, but it was quite an experience for all of us and gave a number of his fans, and the costumer in particular was just absolutely enthralled and beside himself that Mick Jagger had come to the theater.

But what was the question? I think I veered off there. So, deciding on our programming was a collaborative experience. We based it on a lot of

things, audience input, things that we saw in New York or within the region. And of course, we read voraciously. And Michael was always eager to adapt something new. He adapted the original script for Enchanted April, not the movie script, but the play. And that was quite a hit for us also. Quite a success.

And Zion, of course, later, and this was after Michael's death. I had read the memoir that Celestine Sibley had written called Turned Funny about her beginnings in newspaper and life at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. And she was quite a remarkable woman, I think, as not only a pioneering newspaper woman, but a personality with just a huge support base. So, we talked Phillip DePoy, or I did, talked Phillip DePoy into adapting her memoir, and this was after her death. And that was a huge success for us, and led to another adaptation by Phillip called -- It was about the great train robbery, which actually took place between Marietta and Kennesaw.

I think I'm correct on that, but I know the group of Union guys spent the night at Kennesaw Hotel, which was right across the street from where the theater is located. And so, it had that immediacy about it. And again, people thought we were nuts for trying to take on doing a stage production about the stealing, about the great locomotive chase. And we had done another show a little earlier in the season, a show that I had seen that Barter Theatre in Virginia called Trading Paint, which is about NASCAR racing. And the director had staged in such a manner that you really, I think, got caught up in the excitement of an actual race, and just through choreography, and just the kinetic movement and staging.

And so I thought --that gave me the idea -- Somebody else had proposed, we had a board member who wanted us to do a show about the great locomotive chase. And I said, "You're crazy. We can't do that on our stage." And so, after having done this, I said, "Well, maybe that's a possibility we can." And so I talked to Phillip DePoy about it, and he said, "Yes, let's give it a try."

So, we did stage the show. We called it Stealing Dixie, and it turned out to be quite successful. And Phillip, also having an affinity for music and particularly folk music, incorporated that in the show. And it was quite a success for us.

Let's see. There were a number of other things. We did an adaptation of some Christmas stories by Kennesaw professors, as a matter of fact. Stage readings about Christmas stories. John Gentile put those together for us, but those were just some of the original works that we either commissioned or staged ourselves, and something that I was especially proud of having done.

But in the course of things, we did countless regional premieres as well as world premieres, most of which were quite successful with our audiences. And a lot of this was part of our original intent in starting a theater, which was to do works that had relevance to the region, and either authorship or subject matter or just had to do with the South or particularly as much of the local history as we possibly could. And a number of things we did incorporated folk music, like Zion incorporated a number of spirituals. And we had another Kennesaw professor Oral Moses who worked closely with us on that, so that was part of our original intent also. So, we'd usually actually have one Southern work or work associated with a regional theme or author or subject matter of that nature.

AG: Can you talk about the original organizational structure of the theater and how that evolved over time?

PW: Well, in the beginning it was Michael and me and an answering machine. That was pretty much it. For the first couple of years, that was pretty much literally it. We were both still working for IBM, and we had no money to employ anybody else. And we did fairly early employ somebody who could answer the phone for us and help to run the box office. And I ran the first box office, or the box office in the beginning. And Michael, neither of us were involved in production, so we didn't want to give the impressions of the vanity theater.

So our involvement in any acting or directing was put aside in those very early days, because we were so heavily involved in getting the theater started. But like I say, it was just Michael and me until we got enough resources, enough finances that we were able to hire a bookkeeper and a box office manager and two other part-time people like that. But another thing I was proud of is that even though our pay structure was what it was, we never missed a payroll. Never in -- I mean, number of times Michael and I would forego any pay for ourselves, but we always paid the actors and technicians from the very beginning.

But we -- Of course to get the 501(c)(3), you have to have a board of directors and we had a five member board of directors at the time. And that was pretty much it early on. Michael of course was artistic director and I was managing director from the outset and I was pretty much a bookkeeper and whatever I can remember -- Our house being so close by served a number of purposes in our early stages also. We not only built the platforms and scenery for the very first productions in the driveway of our house and transported them to two blocks away to the Theatre. And we all our living room, a number of times served as the rehearsal space and I can remember peeling up the masking tape from the floor and pulling up the finishing on the floor. And having to deal with that little minor renovation

project, but it was just sort of make do as well as you possibly could in the very early, early stages.

AG: So how did the focus of the Theatre change over time? Or did it?

PW: I don't think it did. Like I said, I think we started out at the outset doing something -- We wanted to do something, like I say, with -- that had local or regional relevance. And we wanted to do something that we could sell as an educational offering, a classic, if you will. I think our first year, first season, we did a production of Molière's *The Miser*, and -- which by default, I had a minor cameo role at the end of because we kept trying to get somebody to do this little minor role where the father comes in at the end. But we did that and then wanted to include something like that classic in each season, something with the regional relevance.

We wanted them to at least attempt to do a musical and of course by the third or fourth season, we saw that we could not do a season without doing the holiday show and that was the 1940s *Radio Hour*. And aside from that, we would do things that -- off-Broadway type things. We knew that space limitations and certain limitations prevented us from doing anything on a large scale, like a Broadway type musical, but small-scale musicals were well within our capability. And then one came along in, I think it was 1990, an actress who works for us and worked for the airlines, had seen a show at Lamb's Theater in New York. And she came back raving about the show and said, I think you ought to do it. The audiences here would love it, but, you got to promise me that I could do one role, the mother, and the show was *Smoke on the Mountain*.

And this was like a new radio hour for us it was a show that the audiences just could not do enough, get enough of. And of course, it was Southern mountain gospel music essentially, and set at a rural Baptist church in North Carolina during the depression. And of course, everybody loved the music and all the actors were musicians as well. So they were playing the guitar and bass and we even had a fiddler, of course piano. And it -- they were not only good actors, but they were good musicians as well. And subsequent to offering that we -- That became almost an annual production. And afterwards we were going to a reception and Michael was talking to the -- One of the authors, probably, about a sequel. And he said, how about doing -- the gospel singing family was the Sanders family. How about doing a show about the Sanders family at Christmas time? So that planted the seed for a follow-up to *Smoke on the Mountain* called *Sanders Family Christmas*. So at one point we were doing them alternately. One year we would do *Smoke on the Mountain* and the next year we would do *Sanders Family Christmas*. And there even was a third in the series called the *Sanders Family Homecoming* and all of which were enormously popular with our audiences.

But where was I going with that?

AG: We were just talking about the focus of the theater not changing.

PW: Oh, right. Oh, okay. Yeah, a question I got frequently was -- We did a show in 1992, I believe it was or '93. A show that Michael and I had seen in New York written by Terrence McNally and the production we saw had Nathan Lane and Christine Baranski called Lips Together, Teeth Apart. And we loved that show We just thought it was absolutely wonderful, we've got to do it, even though it had to have a pool of water that the actors could jump into, or at least one of the actors could jump into and it represented a swimming pool, of course. And this was one of the major challenges of doing that show. And we had 1100 gallons of water. A local swimming pool company had devised this liner specially made for us that was, you know, contained the water. And so we were OK on that, but the show dealt with two married couples who were spending 4th of July weekend at Fire Island in New York. And one of the-- The wife of one of the couples, this was the home of her brother who had died earlier, had died of AIDS. And so they were spending the weekend there, but it -- And they were surrounded by -- they had gay neighbors and this kind of thing.

So there was no discussion of -- It wasn't about homosexuality it was about a number of things. One of the husbands had -- knew that he had terminal cancer, there was a different revelations that ensued in the course of things. And it was just a wonderful play, but one of our patrons had seen it and complained to the County Commissioner about the show and some of the references in it to gay neighbors and that kind of thing. So it had developed in this patron's mind that this was a play about the homosexual lifestyle. And this commissioner, I guess was looking for a cause at the time. And so he took on Theatre in the Square and at first proposed that -- At that time we were getting funding from the County and he proposed that nothing be funded by the County that was not approved. And so we certainly felt this smacked of censorship and objected very strongly to it.

And when -- From there it got into the papers and then became a thing where it was the Commission was attacking the Theatre as having a gay agenda or with a anti gay, so-called anti gay resolution that was passed by the commission and even got into, this was just prior to the Olympics coming to Atlanta in 1996, even got into an issue there of a venue for, I think women's volleyball, it was. And so there was a huge demonstration about that. And so as a result, the county lost that volleyball venue, it was taken to another location, I think, but this whole thing came about, got enormous publicity to it throughout the country. And certainly locally there were several editorials in not only the Marietta paper, but the Atlanta paper and papers across the country and even foreign press.

There were papers that were written about the whole issue and censorship. And it was quite a development for this small little theater in Marietta, but a question we got afterwards was, is this going to affect your programming in any way when you do other plays that deal with, well, this play didn't deal with homosexuality, but, that might refer to homosexuality? And the answer of course was no. We did a number of things later on, Tru which is about Truman Capote. We did Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, which is about, of course, the infamous Oscar Wilde trial for being homosexual.

And just a number of other things incorporated gay characters in different ways. So it didn't deter us from doing the programming that we thought -- If a show had merit and certainly credentials, and we wanted to do it, we would do it. But as result of all the controversy, we did lose county funding. And at that time that amounted to like \$25,000. So it was significant, it was quite a large chunk of our budget and so It was quite a blow to us financially, but it also generated a windfall of support for us, financial support for us also from well Joanne Woodward who has a very strong Marietta connection. She went to high school there and so forth. She had gotten wind of it and we had this patron who -- Well, she said that she would, she and Paul Newman would contribute \$25,000 if it could be matched.

And so we had one patron who came forward and said he would match the entire amount as well as some of our own patrons who also ponied up and to the tune of about, oh I think about \$35,000. And then in addition to that, there was a group of Atlanta businessmen who were connected with Alliance Theatre who banded together and came up with another \$30,000. So it was quite a windfall for the theater as a result of all this. And luckily, because we lost more than a thousand subscribers, as a result all this, and that was quite a blow to us also since we only had about 3,000 subscribers at the time. So we lost about a thousand subscribers.

We lost at least two board members and an advisory board member and one of the board members had donated an oriental rug that we were using in the lobby. And of course, they came and -- they resigned from the board and also came and yanked the oriental rug from our lobby. So we lost a number of things, but I think in the long run we benefited greatly from it because long after we would hear from actors who said that they would go to New York, places like new York or wherever. And if their resume included something from Theatre in the Square, it would prompt a conversation with, so it's kind of an opener for them. So they were grateful to us in that respect, but that was quite a trying time for us and it was also a time that Michael had developed AIDS and was HIV positive, but diagnosed as being HIV positive by that time, and was going through some pretty rough times.

And I strongly feel that this was debilitating to him also it was, it was very stressful and I think it worsened his situation. He later on that same year developed pneumonia and was hospitalized and was on a ventilator for a long period of time, a long hospitalization period, he did manage to recover and come back and did some other directing for us and so forth. And it would -- He'd had a good productive period after that. And after he recovered, he died in 1996, I think.

So that production and the subsequent events, had so many reverberations. It was just unbelievable. You know, I had a binder full of clippings from -- People would send me from around the country from Canada, San Francisco, from London, where people had written about it. We were interviewed by NPR and there were a number of students -- post-graduate students that had written papers about it and so I was interviewed a number of times about that and asked to speak at the Southern Theatre Conference about it. So it generated widespread interest and it's not the right way I would like to have got on the map, but we got on the map despite ourselves.

AG: Actually, just because of timing. I know that Griff has to get the class.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Okay. I just asked Jennifer if there's anyone else who can take my place and if she says yes, then you guys are more than welcome to stay 'cause I don't think there's anyone else in the studio this afternoon, if that's something you're interested in.

AG: Well that's, how are you feeling?

PW: Oh I'm fine.

AG: Are you sure?

PW: Yeah. I don't know what time it is.

VIDEOGRAPHER: She says, give him the option. So if you guys want to stay that's more than.

PW: It's entirely up to you.

VIDEOGRAPHER: You're at about an hour and forty-five minutes, a little bit, actually about ten to 12:00, so two hours.

AG: Well, I mean, there's two ways to look at it, is we have a good number of questions left to ask.