

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH PALMER WELLS

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
LGBTQ Oral History Series
Interview with Palmer Wells
Conducted by Anne Graham and Heather Oswald
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INTERVIEWER: It is Wednesday, December 10th, 2014. This is Anne Graham and Heather Oswald, archivists with the Kennesaw State University Archives. We are interviewing Palmer Wells in the studio of Audio Video Technology Services, at Kennesaw State University. Thank you for coming back, Palmer.

PALMER WELLS: Good to be here.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about the organizational structure of Theatre in the Square and how it evolved over time?

PW: In the beginning, as I frequently said, it was Michael, me and an answering machine. And it took us a while to build up enough steam, if you will, and resources to be able to hire our first box office person and bookkeeper. And usually a lot of these things were rolled into one person, but we did have to have somebody to answer the phone and we outsourced our accounting eventually. So, it started out very meagerly that way until Michael in a couple of years was able to devote full time to the Theatre. And then a few years later, I came on board full time, but it was essentially a skeleton staff. And of course, we had to have a board of directors, a five-member board of directors to start off with in order to get our 501(c)(3) designation.

Michael acted as artistic director and I acted as a managing director in those early years. And essentially our roles were interchangeable. The final artistic decision was left to him, of course. But we collaborated on everything. And he did as much as far as the business side of those things as I did actually. In the beginning, I was the one writing all the checks. So that was the basic structure. It took a while until we were able to build up a staff, technical director, of course a box office manager, props department person. It was a very long time before we were able to hire a marketing director. And Michael and I both had journalism backgrounds, and we had a smattering of marketing know-how and ability. So we could handle that part of things.

And we eventually hired our own business manager and we continued to outsource our bookkeeping and accounting and that kind of thing. But basically that was it. When we closed the Theatre, we had a staff I think of

about twelve. And that was box office personnel, business, technical, and the props and costumes, a managing director, a marketing director, and a development person. That didn't come along until much later in our existence, probably the last ten years of our thirty-year existence, I guess if you will. And that essentially was it as far as our staff and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: And can you give us some of the names of some of the early people and maybe the staff that you ended with?

PW: Well, let's see, where should I start? If I can remember names going back that far, it's been over thirty years. I do well recall that Kathy Mascarella was our first -- I take that back. It was Diana Collins, was our very first box office manager. Kathy Mascarella came on as a combination business manager box office manager, marketing director, you have it. A mainstay of the Theatre really became Jean Bradley, who is something of a local personality. And she became sort of jack-of-all-trades for us. She looked after costumes, tended to our, we called it our flower alley, which is the brick alleyway alongside the Theatre. And generally kept order around the green room, maintained costumes. Kathleen Parrish was our props person.

Our last marketing manager was MJ Conroy. And our -- I'm having trouble remembering our -- There was quite a turnover in our development director area, but one of them who was with us longest was Allison Victor, who now works for Kennesaw University I might add. And Raye Varney was our managing director. And up until Raye Varney came along, and this was about five years before we closed, about ten years after Michael's death. I had served as both artistic director and business managing director. I had basically been juggling those two responsibilities throughout Michael's ill health, which went on for probably three years or so. And we did hire someone for a short period of time immediately after Michael's death, but that didn't work out. So, I just assumed both responsibilities as producing director, that which incorporated all of those responsibilities.

So, at the time we closed, I was still producing director, but we had a managing director who had come along and assumed a lot of the administrative responsibilities. So, I was only responsible for choosing the programming, picking the programming and directors, and all of the artistic side of our production. So of course, we had a technical director who was responsible for hiring outside designers, and the people who handled the technical side of productions.

Also wanted to mention one other person, we did have an artistic associate, an actress primarily, Jessica Phelps West who was quite valuable at reading plays. This is an ongoing process. Reading plays, seeing plays, keeping up with New York Times with what's going on in

the New York theater world. And major regional theaters, what's going on there. It's just keeping up with the theater scene in general. And we were both doing that. And we frequently made trips, not only to New York, but to regional theaters as well to scout shows, and just to see what we thought might be important works that we might be interested in.

So that pretty much sums up our staff unless I left out any holes that I might need to fill for you.

INTERVIEWER: No, I think that's fine. Can you talk a little bit about where you went to scout new plays regionally, and maybe some of the things, the productions that you saw that you brought back?

PW: Yeah, I frequently saw shows at Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia, which is within driving distance. And one of the shows we picked up from there was *Keep on the Sunny Side*, which was a work that they developed. And it's about the Carter family, gospel singing, well I don't know if you'd call it strictly gospel, maybe.

INTERVIEWER: Gospel country?

PW: Yeah, gospel country. And that family, they're quite well known of course. They had developed a show, and they're from that local area. And so we secured the rights to that to bring it to our theater, it was quite successful. I had --

INTERVIEWER: Get some water.

PW: I had been interested in doing a show about Patsy Cline. And so I saw a production of *Always Patsy Cline* in Louisville. And that proved to be one that we added to our programming. Another was a show about NASCAR racing called *Trading Paint*, which Barter Theatre has also done. And sort of in conjunction with this was some collaborating that we did with some regional theaters. And one was Etcetera Theatre in Cincinnati. And we did a co-production with them, an original work, by Lee Blessing.

And of course, we were back and forth, all that. And the theater in Anniston, Alabama, we co-produced a show called *A Walk in the Woods*, another show by Lee Blessing. We co-produced a work by them and we collaborated as much as we possibly could with other theaters. And there's frequently an exchange of ideas and directors, those kinds of things with local theaters, as well as some other regional theaters.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about balancing the personal and professional aspects of your life with Michael?

PW: Well, it was hard to say where one ended and then the other began. It frequently followed us home when we were working at the Theatre. Our life at the Theatre became as much as our home life as ever. And of course, we took trips frequently to New York and other places, to see theater, strictly theater. Trips to London, of course, neither of us had ever been to London. So getting familiar with the London theater scene was quite interesting. And going to Louisville too, for the Humana Fest there, which is all original work. So they have a festival in the spring every year.

And we did one show, excuse me, from there called A Piece of My Heart, which is about Vietnam veterans who were telling their individual stories. It was quite a success for them. And we did a production of it ourselves also. And some shows by -- Now I forget the author's name, Jon Jory was the artistic director at Humana Fest. And he is rumored to have been the author of these plays that we did.

And we did a couple of works by him that had premiered at Humana Fest. I'm trying to say there may have been others, but those are the ones that I can remember. We worked with the Alliance Theatre on some things. They have a wonderful props and scenic department. And I remember on one occasion, they had let us know that they were clearing out a lot of items and come have a look if we wanted things. So of course, we left at that opportunity and managed to bring back a good bit of scenery and that kind of thing that we made good use of.

INTERVIEWER: How was Theatre in the Square perceived in Atlanta?

PW: In Atlanta, or Marietta, or just the whole metro area?

INTERVIEWER: Those would all be wonderful to address.

PW: Okay. Well, I would like to think in a positive light in all three areas. We drew an audience from a wide geographic area. From as far north as Cherry Log, way up in, I think Gilmer County. Dalton, we even had a couple of subscribers from Chattanooga who used to tell me that they would come down and spend the weekend in Marietta and go see the show. We had subscribers from as far south as Morrow and Peachtree City, of course. And of course, in Decatur and DeKalb County and Norcross, over in there. So, we drew from a wide area and metro region. Quite a few from Buckhead and Atlanta proper.

So that was a good testimonial to our being a regional attraction. And of course, the major part of our subscriber base came from Marietta and Cobb County. And our shows were reviewed -- the Gwinnett newspaper reviewed our shows, at that time they had a reviewer. And as well of course the Atlanta papers, Southern Voice, Atlanta Constitution, Creative

Loafing, and later on there were others. And for a time when NPR WABE had a reviewer, we were reviewed by them. And I was quite pleased with the positive attention that we got from the press.

And like I say, we had some quite sophisticated members of our Theatre going on. People who used to tell us about shows they had seen in London or someplace, and say, "Check this out, y'all look into this." And of course, on occasion, produced results. One was Shirley Valentine, which was a huge success for us. And someone had told us about it, they had seen it in London and said, "You ought to check out the show." And we did it with a local actress, Brenda Bynum who is quite well known locally as an actress.

And so shows came to us in that manner frequently. People would tell us about things they had seen and enjoyed seeing at other theaters outside of the local area. But I think we were generally perceived in a positive light by locals in Marietta, Atlanta, as well as the Atlanta metro area, I'm happy to say.

INTERVIEWER: You had many successful productions. Were there any productions that were less well received?

PW: Oh yeah, there were. Like to forget about those. But they were very forgiving. I had someone tell me that we trust you, you bring such variety to the Theatre and the programming, that we like being surprised. If we're not familiar with a show, we'll trust your judgment. Sometimes it happens to go awry.

But again, not every production was well received a hundred percent. If that happened that would be unheard of I think. But generally speaking, most of our productions were well received, and we had those patrons who weren't shy about telling us, "Well, that one fell a little short."

And especially our more sophisticated theater-goers. They would not hesitate to tell us that they didn't really care for that show. Sometimes it had to do with subject matter. Sometimes it had to do with language within the show. But more often than not, like I say, our subscriber base in particular was very sophisticated and they were not bothered by those things, especially if a show had credentials. Like had been a show that had won awards in New York or London, or some place.

And that was one thing that always factored into our choice of programming. We didn't try to purposefully inflict a challenging show on our audience just for the sake of doing it, of course. But we liked to think that a show had merits that would make it a standout production. And some ended up being pretty challenging. But I think in the long run, our

patrons appreciated the breadth and depth of programming that we offered over the years.

INTERVIEWER: So were the subscriber or audience comments unsolicited? Or did you have a mechanism for them to submit comments?

PW: Well, they had both. Some are uncivilized. And then to get feedback, we had for a long time, up until probably the last five years of our existence, we did our own awards ceremonies. We called it the Jenny Award, which was named for one of our very first board members, Jenny Tate Anderson, who was a local patron of the arts, and quite an outstanding civic leader. And we talked to her in the beginning. She became one of our first board members. And I have to say largely instrumental in being a liaison with old established, if you will, Marietta community. And she was very important to us in the beginning, so we named the award for her.

We did the awards all those years, we had our subscribers vote for their favorites. The best acting, supporting acting, and technical areas categories. And so this gave us some feedback on the type of shows that we were doing. And frequently they would add comments to their ballot that they submitted about shows that we had done. They were mostly positive. But now and then we'd get a criticism, constructive criticism, that was valuable to us as far as feedback. And just being present at the productions, people offered their comments about the most recent show or the show they had just seen.

And for a long time, Michael and I used to be present at all the shows and especially at the end of the show to say good night to patrons. We were there not only at the beginning to make a curtain speech, but also to say good night to patrons as they were leaving. And sometimes we could get an idea about popularity or how well the show had been received. Another interesting area of feedback, excuse me, was from a local restaurant owner. Because so many of our patrons of course would have had dinner prior to the show, or after the show.

But it got to be a metric for the restaurant owners. They would say, "Well, this show is not doing quite as well," or "That show was great." Although they hadn't seen it, it was bringing them good business. So they could tell pretty much how well a show is doing for us. And word of mouth was the best marketing tool you can have. And that's why we always look to show that even the worst ones, the ones that were, not worse, but not as well received, would build an audience draw by the end of it. We started out with three week runs, then we built up to four and five, and eventually six weeks runs.

And by the end of the run, in most cases, except for the least successful shows, we were filling houses, and turning people away. So that indicated to us that word of mouth had been an important factor in that. So there were a number of methods of determining how well our shows were doing. Not only the reviews, which were also important, I think, but -- And then we had people like a patron from Kennesaw, well several from the theater area who would frequent the Theatre. And we would talk to them on occasion about shows we were doing. So again, there was the wide area and we valued the feedback, negative or positive, we always wanted to hear from our patrons.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned restaurant owners. Was there a lot of interaction between local Marietta business owners?

PW: Yes. We always had an opening night reception after all of our shows. And we worked with the restaurants in doing those after-show receptions, and they would offer a deal for theater-goers. Bring your ticket stub and get 10% off, or free dessert or something like that, as well as advertising in our playbill. That was a form of support that we got from a number of businesses as well, other types of businesses, other than restaurants as well.

PW: Other than restaurants as well, but we had good relations with all them. They valued what we meant to the square, the traffic that we brought to the square.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about how you and Michael financed the Theatre?

PW: In the beginning, it was our own money. I think it was probably about \$3,000 that we used to buy mostly lumber and stuff to build the platforms for the stage and the risers and those things. I know we did get a substantial, for us at the time, grant from IBM to buy lighting equipment. And this was our startup stage and this was quite unusual for them to make a grant to a startup organization, but it helped us enormously to buy the lighting equipment for our very first production.

And we had no individual contributions at that time. I remember the very first unsolicited contribution we got was from a woman who later became mayor of Marietta, Ansley Meaders. And it was a check for \$250. And I thought, wow, this is really terrific. But prior to that, we had just been going on ticket sales alone. And we used to be cited by not only the Georgia Council for the Arts, but we were frequently mentioned by local theater writers for being able to largely support ourselves through ticket sales. For a long time, our ratio of contributed income was very low and our earned income was very high. And we were frequently cited as a model for this because the normal ratio was more like fifty-fifty

contributor to earned, or higher for contributed. Most theaters were more dependent on a contributed income than from ticket sales. So that made us a bit unusual, I think, but the economy figured into that equation as well.

But generally, even to the very end, we were much more independent on ticket sales than from contributed income.

INTERVIEWER: Can I just ask, was that a conscious decision on your part?

PW: No. We would love to have had much more, and we worked hard at getting contributed income. We had some very devoted patrons who were regular contributors, but it was never quite enough. We would love to have had a larger contributor base than we had, but we were overjoyed when our shows were successful, when we sold a lot of tickets of course. But it always seemed that we could never quite get enough of the contributed income. One was the corporate community. We felt that we were never able to get enough response from them as we would like to have, but there were things like the Georgia Council for the Arts, even the National Endowment for the Arts. We got support from them. And there were some large, large local contributors, but our contributions were mostly of the smaller variety. But we worked hard with that, as well as working hard at selling tickets. But it just became a fact that we were largely supported by ticket sales.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about the development and growth of the subscriber base?

PW: The development and?

INTERVIEWER: Growth of the subscriber base?

PW: I remember that after our first production, I think there were fewer than two hundred that first season. And that grew incrementally over the first few years. We got to as high as 4,500 subscribers. And then we took a dip at the time of the Cobb County resolution and controversy. And we lost over a thousand subscribers at that time. And by the time we closed, we were about 3,500 subscribers. And like I said, that came from a wide area. But by the time we enlarged the Theatre to the capacity it was when we closed, it pretty much remained around 3,000 or 3,500 in there.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about the expansion of the Theatre over time?

PW: The Theatre's growth was pretty much organic. It grew in increments. We started out with eighty-five seats in the old train depot of the Marietta Railway Station, and we outgrew that after three years. And by that time, there was a store that housed a furniture showroom, which was just down the alley, the next block over. And it had been originally a building that

had been built around the turn of the 20th century, early 1900s, and used as a cotton waystation, and eventually became various things. An automobile showroom, I was told that at one time it was even a bowling alley and it had enough height that we could add risers to accommodate the theater-goers, patrons.

And so, at the time we were looking at locations to move the Theatre to, because we'd obviously outgrown the eighty-five seats. We couldn't accommodate everybody. And by that time, the furniture show and came available. And we rented that and renovated that and had 165 seats in there initially. And that worked well for us until we saw the possibility of expanding that and adding another sixty-five or so seats to bring our capacity up to 225. And in the meantime, we had begun to devour other parts of this building, knocking out walls and expanding into what used to be a bridal shop and what used to be a redwood furniture manufacturing area, which eventually we also developed into a performing space and we called it our Alley Stage, where we were doing, I guess you'd call little more smaller scale works even than what we were doing on our main stage. And a little more adventurous works, if you will, a little more challenging, a little more leading edge kinds of works. And we had over a hundred seats in that second space.

We had expanded inside the building where we were in. We took over some upstairs areas for office administrative spaces and a rehearsal space, and also a place for classrooms. So we just began to spread our tentacles out throughout the building, because over the years, these different activities had become something of a problem, finding a space big enough for rehearsals. We rehearsed off site at Southern Polytech and we also performed at Kennesaw University as well. And we even had rehearsals in our living room at our house, which was only a couple blocks away from the Theatre. And classrooms, having more space for classrooms became a bit of a problem. Board meetings, things like that, and just finding the space. We had some board members, of course, who offered their own board rooms for whenever that was possible, but finding spaces for the different activities sometimes became challenging, but we found a way.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall the approximate years you made these expansions?

PW: Well, the first one came after three years of our existence. Then, the next incremental expansion was 1985. And then the next large expansion came in 1993. That was going from 160 seats to 225. And then we added our Alley Stage in like 1990 or '91. And I forget, well, we added some administrative spaces again, like in 1993.

And then we had one major capital campaign. We'd never had a capital campaign until trying to remember the year. It must've been 2004 or 2005,

when we had a drive to raise over a million dollars to expand our lobby area, which was minuscule. It was tiny. And on a rainy evening, when we had a performance, it was really difficult to get everybody into that lobby. Otherwise, people were able to spill out. And if the weather was nice we would spill out onto the outdoor area, it's a brick courtyard area, but we saw that we needed the expanded lobby. So having that campaign allowed us not only to increase the size of our scene building shop, upgrade the dressing rooms for the actors, add administrative spaces and a large marquee, which had the lighted what's it called? The moving marquee with the lights and everything. It was very spiffy for us.

So that was quite an undertaking. It ended up being well over a million dollars that we raised. Some of it in large contributions like Woodruff Arts Center and some majors on it that made large contributions, but that was by far the largest renovation. But again, looking back on it, it was all incremental, slowly, slowly.

We even took over the building that we were in. I may have mentioned that the front part of it had been an automobile showroom at one time. And in the rear, it had also been a automobile repair shop. And there was a very large industrial elevator that went from the first floor up to the second floor. And the repair area for the automobiles was on the second level. So, they would drive through and take the elevator up to the second level for repairs. So, we took over that driveway area, which had been a bridal shop. We took that over for administrative offices and even had the engineers look at the elevator to reinforce it so that it was permanently situated, because [inaudible] it wasn't used, it wasn't functional. So we had reinforced and used it for our dressing room on the first level and storage area on the second level.

But these things happen incrementally. When we would get ahead enough we would go ahead and make improvements or, on occasion, borrow money like Downtown Marietta Development Authority at one point was a good source of funds for us to make improvements. And we got loans from them on a couple of occasions, and even a couple of occasions, mortgaged our own house. On one occasion it was just to get operating money. On another occasion, it was for improvements to the Theatre. By those occasions, those points in the Theatre's existence, we had the confidence that we would be able to repay those loans and repay the mortgage on our house. We had enough confidence in the success of the Theatre that we knew we weren't going to lose our home, at any rate.

INTERVIEWER: So you mentioned educational programming that you offered. Can you talk about how your tentacles spread out to other activities that weren't production-related?

PW: Yes. We had ventured into some children's theater, for one thing. It was indicated to us fairly early on that there was a need for classes, not only for adults, but for children as well. And our first classes were for adults. And we fortunately had a number of actors who had taken on those activities as well.

And then we got into the area of classes largely for children and some summer camps. And it was a while before we hired on a staff person as an education director. We eventually did do that, but we would just usually hire somebody to, an actor. And we even had classes in playwriting. Phillip DePoy, a local playwright, had playwriting classes for us. But it was never much of a money-making proposition, as much as just being a good resource for our parents, and for adults who were interested in learning more about theater or more about acting or playwriting, or I think we even had a class in directing and stage fighting and acrobatics and that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: So can you talk about your decision to move from using amateur actors to using union actors?

PW: Yeah, I think it was like five years into our existence before we ever hired professional actors. Because it was something that we felt eventually, if we kept pace with what was happening on the theater scene in Atlanta, more and more actors were joining the actors union. And we wanted to give those actors a place to work. And as well as a lot of them who had worked for us before they became union actors, we wanted them to continue to work for us. So, it was a matter of preserving the quality of what we were doing and keeping up as a theater scene in Atlanta, and Actors' Equity by that time had a program called Small Professional Theaters, a contract. They had various types of contracts. You could do a guest artist contract where you didn't have to have a seasonal contract with Actors' Equity, but you could just hire on an individual actor, say, for one production. We started out that way.

So it was slowly. We started out with guest artists, and then Actors' Equity had this small professional theater contract for a seasonal actor in which you hire a percentage of your actors, and the requirement was that you had to hire a percentage of your actors who were union actors. And of course there was a scale, the union scale and so forth. So it's something that we always aspired to. It took us about five years before we thought we were in a stable enough position that we could go ahead and become a part of the actor's union.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about the makeup of the Board of Directors? So initially, and then how that changed over time?

PW: Well, we started out with five board members at the beginning, and that's the basic requirement actually for your 501(c)(3). But of course, we wanted to expand that to more influential community leaders. People who could hopefully help us out with our finances as well as give us professional support. We wanted an accountant, we wanted lawyers, we wanted people with different areas of knowledge, as well as different spheres of influence. Bankers were always helpful. Of course, we had a number of professional people, to say medical professional people and corporate officers, and just, across the board, all types of professions.

But we had always hoped that they would not only be able to bring us to port through their knowledge of business and whatever professional they were in, but also to help us out with using their knowledge of the community, their professional contacts and so forth, in securing not only patrons but contributions as well. By the time we closed, we had, I think fourteen or fifteen, maybe sixteen board members. Of course, when you run into an economic downturn like we had in 2008 and 2009, it's hard to get people to come onto the board because they are afraid maybe you're going to go under, you're going to collapse or because you don't have the amount of contributed income that you might need to continue. But generally, it was fairly easy to get board members, and good ones.

INTERVIEWER: Did you notice a change in the makeup of the board after the Cobb County resolution? Or did it stay --

PW: Notice a change?

INTERVIEWER: In the makeup of the board?

PW: Not really. We lost some board members as a result of that. Some of them wanted to shy away from the controversy because the controversy continued, and the Theatre seemed to be the lightning rod for a lot of it. It continued long after that initial resolution was adopted because there was a strong effort to have that resolution rescinded. And there was a local organization that was formed just for that purpose. And a number of them were reluctant to be a part of a theater for whatever reason, their own profession, their own personal opinions. I suppose there were various reasons, but we did lose at least two board members directly as a result of that.

INTERVIEWER: And the organization that you mentioned, the local organization, was that Cobb Citizens Coalition?

PW: Yes. Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about the community reaction to Lips Together, Teeth Apart and how that kind of got the whole thing started?

PW: First of all, our patrons largely were very supportive. I mentioned earlier about the Jenny's Awards and the audience voting. They voted that their favorite show of the year. We had so many of them who had seen it and said, I don't understand this. It's such a wonderful show. And they just couldn't understand what it was all about. As far as the community, like all of those things, it has a way of becoming confused. I remember one anecdote that was told to me, and this is kind of an indication, the way things can get distorted. I guess it was in a beauty parlor. One lady was overheard to characterize us that theater down the street shows us porn movies. And yeah, this was her perception of what she had just heard. It's like the old game you play, Gossip. It goes around and ends up being a completely unrecognizable story at the end, that it gets changed along the way.

So I'm sure there was that element of what the local perception was, and there were those supporters who were generally opposed to, well, it became a thing about homosexuality, of course. Yeah. And that was the primary driving force behind the commissioner who instituted the resolution, who was responsible for bringing it before the Board of Commissioners. I remember that at the hearings that the commissioner held on changing the County's -- or adopting the resolution, it was pretty much even. Very polarized. It was essentially two camps on either side of the Board of Commissioners' auditorium. And one side was very supportive and one side was very anti. It was quite alarming and interesting, and a bit upsetting as you could well imagine, because we had no intention of getting into a controversial area or such as that.

And all we wanted to do was produce -- Because Mike and I had seen Lips Together Teeth Apart in New York and loved the show, and said, "Oh, we've got to do it." Even though it had its challenges, not subject matter but things like having a pool of water with 1100 gallons of water that served as the swimming pool. And that was the setting. And so, it had its challenges, but we still felt this show had tremendous merits and it had won several awards. So, we felt that it was well worth doing and so did our patrons, our regular patrons. We had those who criticized us for doing it, but they were very small in number.

INTERVIEWER: And did they experience, with that production and with the resolution, did it at all change how you selected future productions? Did you shy away from anything for a while?

PW: No, we didn't. We had done shows prior to that that had homosexual characters that dealt with, maybe not thematically, entirely thematically

about homosexuality, but touched on homosexuality. But we continued to do shows. Tru, which was about Truman Capote, a one person show, the Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, those are two that come to mind immediately. Independence, a show by Lee Blessing had a lesbian character in it. But yeah, we not only programmed those types of shows that included those themes and characters, but a lot of social issues across the board. Alcoholism, adoption, abortion, just a whole range of social issues that our plays touched on. We didn't shy away from it, we thought those were important enough that they deserved to be seen by our audiences.

INTERVIEWER: And you also mentioned losing board members and subscribers because of the resolution and the controversy. Did you have any personal repercussions from that?

PW: Personal?

INTERVIEWER: Things that were non- Theatre related? Did people change towards you or Michael?

PW: Oh, not perceptibly. I don't think so. We had a lot of people we didn't know who, in a sense by the developments, that they felt like reaching out to us and saying, "Bravo, and here's a check and thanks for what you're doing and keep up the good work," those kinds of things. I don't think we were ostracized in any way, or at least that we could perceive of. And we just kept going about our business as we always had. We never made any claims to be anything other than what we were. We didn't try to conceal the fact that we shared a home together just off the Square. We didn't feel the need to look like heterosexual men and have dates when we went on different occasions. We didn't feel the need to do any of that.

We just kept doing things as we'd always had done. Again, like I say, there was nothing directly directed at us. I think if anything, it gained us friends. And I think, especially for actors, because we had people tell us on more than one occasion that they would go for an audition and on their resume they would have that they worked at Theatre in the Square in Marietta, Georgia, and that would immediately be a conversation starter for them. So, it was helpful in some ways like that for people.

INTERVIEWER: So, can you talk about your perceptions for the motivation behind the anti-gay resolution in '93 and as well as the cutting of the arts funding?

PW: It was interesting that just prior to the time that our show opened, I guess the timeframe might have been like March or April, there was a large meeting of some conservative religious leaders in Marietta, and they were quite vocal about wanting to insert themselves into what they considered

an arts scene that was immoral and being a bad influence on the public. I think this show sort of played into the hands of some of those religious leaders. I think you have to remember also that it was not only here, but throughout the country, that this was prevalent because it seemed like the conservative religious organizations were looking for, well, for lack of a better way of expressing it, looking for causes to fire up their base to get contributions for their religious organizations. So, the best way to do that and get attention was attacking what they considered pornographic or immoral artwork, performing arts, as well as other artistic works. Robert Mapplethorpe comes to mind.

That's been a while back and I can't remember others, but there were a number of others as well. And they attacked the National Endowments for the Arts for funding these organizations. And so, getting to the county was a way of also getting it funding, because at this point we were getting funding from the county, which amounted to like about \$25,000 which is a sizable portion of our budget. And by far the largest amount that had been granted to arts organizations in Cobb County. By this time, there was a granting organization in the county that oversaw the funding and how the funds were distributed. So, we were one of the largest beneficiaries of the funding.

I think this was seen by religious organizations as a way to implement their efforts to diminish the influence of arts organizations they thought were bad for their community. And by getting to this one commissioner, they were able to succeed, in our case, they were able to succeed. But like I say, this whole effort across the country was pretty pervasive, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about attending the commission meetings? You've already mentioned how polarized they were, but maybe talk a little bit more about the experience of attending them and something about your involvement in the protests about the resolution.

PW: Well, of course we were there for all the protests. If there was addressing the crowds or whether we were a part of that, and of course being present was something I felt was important. As far as attending the meetings, we spoke to the commissioners on our behalf and on behalf of arts funding, preserving arts funding, it evolved into a thing where there was strong opposition to arts funding as well as the anti-gay resolution. So, there were those two prongs to the thing. Of course, we continued to be outspoken as far as supporting arts funding, as well as the right to produce the kinds of shows we thought were important for our patrons and important to bring to the community and not to be censored. Censorship was also a part of it.

We felt very strongly about being opposed to any kinds of censorship, very definitely. I think probably stronger than proposing abandoning the

funding for the arts organizations. But to me, it was a very stressful time, I think, particularly for Michael, who had been diagnosed as being HIV positive probably a year or two before that. I think that the stress of all of this certainly hastened the worsening of his illness. He contracted pneumonia a few months after that and was hospitalized for over two months and was in ICU and on a ventilator for a long period of time. I attribute a lot of it as being brought on by the stress of this.

People contacted the press. It was a constant thing dealing with the press. We had bomb threats. People offering their criticism and calling us and it was just a very stressful time all around. And attending the meetings, the commission meetings, which were pretty volatile certainly by virtue of bringing up opposing viewpoints. I remember at one of the rallies that were held in the Square, of course, a number of opponents they had signs like, I remember one in particular, "Thank God for AIDS" and things like that that were just very repugnant, very repulsive.

And I remember one of the speakers at one of the commission meetings said somethings to the effect like, "This is not San Francisco. This is not New York. This is Cobb County." There was a very narrow view often expressed. So, it was really difficult to deal with. Again, a lot of good, loyal, devoted supporters and the formation of the Cobb Citizens Coalition certainly was heartening. Just hearing from a lot of our patrons and longtime supporters was also very encouraging for us, gave us good moral support.

INTERVIEWER: And did you get support from the metro-- like the Atlanta arts community as well or was it mostly local? You'd spoken about some national support that you'd gotten as well.

PW: Yes, we did. We got a lot of nickel and dimes, if you will, checks from various parts of the country, but also from people like Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman. Joanne Woodward, of course, spent a good deal of her early youth in Marietta, went to Marietta High School, I think. She came along and offered to donate \$25,000 on the condition that it be matched. It was not only matched by individual supporters, contributors, but we had one individual who came up and gave us the full amount, the \$25,000. The business community in Atlanta also stepped up. I remember we were invited to an opening night of the season opening of The Alliance Theatre in downtown Atlanta, and they took us on as the stars of the show, and a number of their individual board members and the mayor of Atlanta were there and were particularly praising us for what we had done.

These business leaders all kicked in over \$30,000 to contribute to the Theatre. So overall, as far as funding and financing, we benefited greatly. It was quite a windfall for us. But, it didn't last too long because we had

lost over a thousand subscribers, as I say, at least two board members. And of course, along with our subscribers went a lot of contributions that we had been dependent on. So, it greatly impacted us, initially in a very positive way financially, but that gradually caught up with us and it wasn't long before we were experiencing really stressful financial times because of having lost contributors and subscribers.

INTERVIEWER: How long do you think it took you to get back to that point?

PW: I would say it took us at least two or three years before we ever got back to that and back to the level where we were. Gaining back those subscribers that we lost, not the same ones, but building our subscriber base back up to where it had been prior to that, which was just about four thousand. So yeah, it was about that long, but it went on for years. I mean, and we still hear from people who ask us about it, question us about that, because it spilled over into the anti-gay resolution spilled over into opposition to Cobb County as being a location for a venue for the Olympics, which came along in 1996. And so, a lot of people heard about it that way, as well as having heard about it through the Theatre's production of Lips Together, Teeth Apart. So, we were in the press, needless to say, quite a bit, quite a lot.

INTERVIEWER: You said that that was a good thing for the actors. Was it positive for the Theatre or did it have its challenges being associated with Cobb County?

PW: Well, I think in the long run it was positive for us. We lost those subscribers and we lost those contributors, but we kept doing what we were doing. We kept doing what we thought was quality work and we built ourselves back up and whether or not they wanted to support us as a way of showing they were opposed to the commission's actions or not, I don't know. But I'd like to think it was because we continued doing just what we were doing before, quality theater and just trying as best we could to ignore what had gone on outside in politics.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk more about Michael's diagnosis with HIV and how his responsibilities with the Theatre transitioned as the disease progressed?

PW: Well, it went on for quite a while and before he was finally diagnosed, there were a number of bouts with different conditions, illness, and it was debilitating. There was a long period of hospitalization. And then, there was a period where he recovered to the point where he was able to come back to work full time and even directed a couple of shows before it became obvious that he could no longer work. Like I say, it was so debilitating that he was home-bound actually. I was his primary caregiver for a very long time, and so juggling that with responsibilities at the

Theatre and caring for him, before we were finally able to get a caregiver to visit regularly, it was very difficult. It was quite difficult for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever take a leave of absence from the Theatre while you were his primary caregiver? Or were you still there at the time?

PW: No, I think one of the things that helped is because I lived so close by, if I were needed to be there for him it was only five minutes away. And so, I was able to do that and not have to be present with him all the time. And up until, actually a short time before he passed away, he was able to do things for himself a lot. He just wasn't able to get out and go to work. He didn't have the stamina, of course, for that. Up until just before he died he was able to do quite a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Was it difficult on Michael to not be as actively involved in the Theatre?

PW: Was it?

INTERVIEWER: Difficult on Michael to not be actively involved in the Theatre? Did he want to hear about everything that was going on?

PW: Yeah, and he continued to want to do things. He had been co-directing the last show that he was involved in and it got to the point where he was writing. His voice was affected and, sorry, his speech was inaudible most of the time. And even his writing was illegible. But he nevertheless tried. He was trying to give direction. He was trying to still be a part of the thing. He still wanted to inject himself into what was going on at the Theatre. He had, like they all do, had this streak of vanity that he didn't want people to see him. He had become emaciated, considerably emaciated. Nevertheless, he appreciated -- some of the actors that he really liked and respected -- he appreciated seeing them and hearing them tell about what was going on and gossip and that kind of thing. So, he very much wanted to still participate to a point as much as he could.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a bit about Michael's death and how it affected you?

PW: Well, of course it was unbelievably sad and it was inevitable. I mean, the doctor had said that he had done everything he could, but of course it affected me and it affected everybody at the Theatre. It was quite a sad time for all of us. He was such a charismatic character. I mean, known throughout, I think, the community and certainly the theater community, it was seen as quite a loss and drew an overflow crowd to the Theatre for the memorial service for him. And of course, my personal loss. It's hard to estimate something like that. It was a terrible loss for all of us. It was.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like running the Theatre after Michael was gone?

PW: Well, we kept on. I mean, you just have to keep going. I remember he died like on a Saturday and we had a board meeting on Monday and I wanted to continue going ahead with the board meeting and it obviously it was overshadowed. His death was, overshadowed everything I think. But we went ahead with that and we just kept going. Yeah, we had to, had to keep going.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned you hired a new, I believe artistic director after his death, but it didn't work out. What led to the decision of you taking on those dual roles?

PW: What?

INTERVIEWER: You hired an artistic after his death and it didn't work out. So what led to the decision of not hiring another artistic director, but you taking on dual roles of managing and artistic director?

PW: I think by this time I saw that I could handle both, and it was also a problem of economics. There were both of those things. It hadn't worked out to the satisfaction of the other person, nor to the Theatre, and initially I said, "I'll just do it myself and see if we can make it work." Because the economics that was here at that point happened to be such that we couldn't afford to hire anybody else. So I just took on both responsibilities and offloaded a number of administrative responsibilities to other staff members.

That helped a lot as well. So, for instance our business manager took on some responsibilities. By that time we had a marketing and development person who took on some administrative responsibilities and dealings with actors equity. We had a staff member who -- A business manager who could assist with some of those things. So a lot of things that I had been doing as managing director were shared by other staff members and that enabled us also to keep the structure of the staff where it was.

INTERVIEWER: And you talked a little bit about, I guess, structurally how you took over being a producing manager but how did the process change for you because you had -- I assume you and Michael had bounced ideas off of each other. How did you go from that kind of collaborative experience to a more individual or did you find someone else to collaborate?

PW: Well, there was someone else, like I mentioned before, we hired an artistic associate to come in and that was enormously helpful. We could bounce ideas for shows off each other and having another resource on staff who was familiar with the theater scene not only locally but kept up with it

nationally was also helpful, as well as what I was doing. I could go out and see shows wherever -- scout, if you will, and the other person could do that as well. So even though we didn't have another person strictly devoted to artistic, it was someone who could share those responsibility.

INTERVIEWER: So, can you talk a little bit, you've mentioned earlier about theater and the course collaborations with Kennesaw State University and, also with SPSU?

PW: I think we did at least three productions at Kennesaw, and I really appreciate what Kennesaw did for us at those times. Being able to use the larger theater here and they were shows that were very successful for us. We wanted a larger space to handle the demand and the same thing happened at Southern Tech. It was a larger theater and was able to meet the demand. You know, we did a couple of holiday shows there and as well as at Kennesaw, The 1940s Radio Hour, as well as Smoke on the Mountain which were two of our all-time most successful shows. And we did the same thing at Southern -- SPSU. Holiday shows as well as Smoke on the Mountain, as well as, at one point we did a show -- We had a show that was running on our main stage, on the Square, and it was so popular that we decided to bring in the next show, which was a one person show about a banjo player. We decided to bring that in at SPSU and put it on their stage and continued to run the other show at the Theatre in the Square.

But in all cases the relationship was, it was very good. I think it was positive for both of us. I think a lot of citizens got to see it. We certainly made offers, special offers for students to see the shows that we had at the campuses. In that respect it was good too. As well as, I think fostering an amicable relationship between the different -- the academic world and the theater world. It was a good symbiotic relationship I think.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any collaborations with any faculty members?

PW: Yes, we did. JoAllen Bradham did some drama techie work for us. John Gentile did an adaptation of a Christmas show for us. Santa Claus Stories. We worked with Karen Robinson on occasion, and of course the number of people came to our shows. And we had offers for students, discount tickets and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: So you touched on it a little before, but can you talk about the changing economic conditions and how they affected the Theatre?

PW: Well, the impact that's quite striking, certainly starting in like 2008. And one of the first things that came along, I think was our children shows. You know we were bringing in busloads of kids for -- We had a student

matinee for one show a season. It was specifically designed to appeal to students -- Classic or contemporary work that was by an important author, that kind of thing. And so the economics had hit these schools, gas prices had skyrocketed and it was hard for them to afford to transport the students. So losing that was impact enough, but also we thought right away that it was affecting our level of contributions. The downturn was just dramatic. I don't remember the percentage that we lost but it was largely in contributions and in corporate contributions in particular, but it affected us enormously.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sorry, I just want to backtrack for one more question. Did your previous -- I don't know if it was a relationship with Betty Siegel, but do you think that that fostered a relationship with the school?

PW: I may have. We never talked about it ourselves, between ourselves. We always dealt with whoever was in charge of the theater. It may have, I don't know. I don't know if she had any influence in that direction or not. She was always a very good, very strong supporter of the theater, Theatre in the Square, and at one point her husband Joel, was on our board of directors. So our own personal relationship was good, as well as her support for what we were doing in the community was strong.

INTERVIEWER: So can you talk about the board's role in the decision to close the Theatre?

PW: Well, It all had to do with economics and boards can be a pretty unmanageable lot at times, somewhat like herding cats. And I've seen this happen in other theaters. I've seen boards not work so well and become so adversarial that it affects the demise of theaters. And I think that's obvious with us too. It may not be apparent to everybody but I certainly don't mind saying that it certainly was a part of ours demise because we ended up with a board that was largely made up of business types and many of whom I felt lacked an appreciation for what we were doing. And they felt, I think more strongly that we should be self-supporting and the economics had played into this of course, because our contributions were at such a low level. They felt a desperation, they felt a frustration that we weren't getting the kind of support we were getting. And I guess there's always a need to strike out against what you think is wrong. But I think a large part of it was that we had business types.

For instance, I think it was hard for them to understand that we needed a larger base of contributors and that we could not be self-sustaining. It's just an impossibility. And keeping our ticket prices as low as they were and doing the quality of work that we were doing, we needed other sources of income other than from ticket sales. And it was so hard for them as businesspeople to understand that. So I think it was a complex, it

was just a mixture of things. It was a complicated situation that created this adversarial environment. And it got to the point where they thought that the only thing they could do was just close the Theatre. We had an indebtedness of about \$300,000 and there were -- I had identified over \$300,000 worth of potential income that we could tap into that could keep the Theatre going but they preferred to just close the Theatre altogether and go into bankruptcy.

I was very strongly opposed to it and I told them that they were making a monumental mistake. I was just powerless to do it, even though I was a member of the board. The executive committee at that point had become the driving force for the board and they were meeting separately outside of the regular board meetings and making determinations about things that I felt should have been decision-making by the entire board. And I hate to talk about it, but I think the ending of the Theatre was pretty shabby, quite frankly.

It was done through a teleconference call, not an open board meeting. There had been an open board meeting on the previous Friday and they had wanted to delay closing the Theatre -- for one thing, to give me time over the weekend to try to identify some sources of funding, which I did, but they wanted to meet on Monday to make the final decision and to pull together a press release and announce it to press and develop a strategy to announce it to the staff, in the event that we close, and determine the direction they would move as far as bankruptcy, or at least one board member said, just let it dissolve. It was quite a blow to me personally and I was not only disheartened by it, I was quite honestly pretty bitter about it because I felt there was a means that we could've kept going.

INTERVIEWER: Can you just briefly describe what funding sources you had identified?

PW: What?

INTERVIEWER: What funding sources you would identified?

PW: Well, we had one major contributor to the Theatre in last few years of our existence. They just came out of nowhere and at one point were giving us as much as \$250,000 in one season. Which was significant when you consider that our budget, by the time that we closed, was 1.5 million, 1.4 million. So that was a significant chunk. And this was pretty much an ongoing source of contributed revenue for us. We used to have a good relationship and he appreciated us and obviously we appreciated him. It was a foundation, family foundation, but for some reason there was a period where we lost that source of income. And so out of desperation, I went back to him at this point, and tried to make a reconnection there. And

I did, I told them that the board was ready to pull the trigger and that would be the end of Theatre in the Square.

And I had identified some sources in the city, potential sources in the city and among the merchants. Notably restaurant owners who I felt that I could count on for at least \$100,000 and from \$100,000 to \$200,000 from this one contributor who had been such a big contributor in the recent past and a number of others. So, I thought there was enough that we could keep going, but the board had determined or some board members. I'm not sure how many of there were actually, it may not have been the entire board. It may have just been the executive committee or just a portion of the board members had decided that it was best to close the Theatre. And just to get rid of our indebtedness and then dissolve the whole organization.

INTERVIEWER: And was anyone prepared? Were the staff prepared or were you prepared for the closing of the Theatre?

PW: I don't know. I think I was in shock for a good while after it was announced. And I had proposed also that we go back to just a skeleton organization and try to, I guess with bare bones as well as we -- It was a drastic move but it was something that I thought could work but it had gotten to that point where I think no amount of reasoning I could do was effective at all. And it just felt helpless. There was nothing I could do. It was very a disheartening occurrence, it really was.

INTERVIEWER: And can you talk about the physical process of closing the Theatre? Just kind of the duties that were involved in that?

PW: Well, the board chairman came in and met with the entire staff on a Monday and said that the board has made the decision that we have to close and everybody will have to be out by the end of the week. And at that point the landlord was going padlock to doors. So that was quite a blow to the staff. Hearing that was just -- Really difficult day.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a bit about the community response to the closing of the Theatre?

PW: Well, it was a pretty sad occasion. Press and TV interviews, and people would stop by and -- One lady was outside the Theatre and stopped by and wanted to know if there's anything she could possibly do. You know, we just had that kind of response. The main thing was through the press, I think. Of course, I had countless phone calls and letters and notes from people on email and that kind of thing. Even now I run into people I haven't seen -- People who were regulars at the Theatre that I haven't seen since they were coming to the shows and they will tell me how much they

miss it and how sad it is that it had to close. And that's been over two years.

INTERVIEWER: And what have you been doing since the Theatre closed? Talk about life after Theatre in the Square.

PW: Oh, well I've just becoming an old retiree. Managed to catch up on some readings and I love traveling. So I've done some traveling. Got a trip to China. I've been, you know, Hawaii and South America, and of course trips to New York and Spain. And some reading I've wanted to do. Ever since college, I never read Moby Dick and I wanted to read Moby Dick. And I finally got around to reading Moby Dick and of course loved it, just loved it. And that's been one thing I've been able to do, reading something other than just -- I love reading plays, don't get me wrong, but there was also things like them classics like that. That I always wanted to do. I garden, I like photography and especially with digital and you can work with them and have your own -- Like having your own dark room kind of thing. So that's great fun. And I live in an old house, and I've been paying some attention to that. I have a cabin in North Georgia, in the mountains. That's a lot of fun. So I manage to stay busy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you now, or have you in the past belong to any social or community groups in Marietta or in Atlanta? Have you belonged to any social or community groups?

PW: Oh, no, no. I'm not that much of a joiner. At the Theatre, of course I used to attend chamber of commerce meetings and at one point we were active in Cobb Landmarks because I live in a historic home, off the Square in Marietta. But that's about it. No civic clubs or anything. I support different organizations like the Marietta Welcome Center and I was on their board for a while, but I don't belong to any civic organizations or clubs or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: So, final question. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to talk about or share?

PW: I'm sure I'll think of a hundred things after I leave, but I can't think of anything off hand, but I would just like to say that I appreciate you doing this. I appreciate your taking on the theaters, the collection of works and videos and things that we pass on to you and hope to preserve those, because I think we were a valuable part of the community, made a good, positive impact. And I think that's still evident today because people haven't forgotten us. And I'm just sorry that I had to end, but I think we had a good thirty year run that produced a lot of positive impact and a lot of good theater. And we were good for the community and I would hope

that someone would come along and resume that role as part of the community.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for sharing your time and your story.

PW: Glad to do it. Thanks for having me.

INTERVIEWER: Actually, can I just ask one more?

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Sorry. Do you have any advice for any future of theater owners in Marietta?

PW: No. Unless it's just like follow your -- I mean, it sounds trite, but follow your dream and follow your instinct. You know like I have said before Michael and I resisted what people were telling us, oh, you can't start a theater in Marietta. You're crazy. And we just ignore it that, we had this idea and this drive and wanted so badly to do it that we just kept on. And that's what I would advise that if you do, if anybody does have that drive and are crazy enough. Yeah. Go for it. That's it.

INTERVIEWER: All right, well thank you very much.

PW: Thank you. I appreciate it.