

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: LOUIS LA RUSSO II

INTERVIEWER: CHRIS O'CONNOR

LOCATION: WILLOW TERRACE, HOBOKEN

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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

CO: You live on Willow Terrace, which is this amazing, historical spot in Hoboken. How did your family end up here? How did you end up here?

LL: My mother was born in this house, in 1900. Her parents were, literally, fresh off the boat. But she was born here, which just lends to the magic of the house. I didn't live here. It was my grandparents' house. People always get confused about that.

CO: They think you were born and raised here?

LL: Well, when I say my mother was born here, they presume I lived here. My mother lived here. When she went out on her own and got married, we lived elsewhere. This was my grandparents' home. When both of them were gone, she took it over.

CO: Which was --

LL: Which was in the late '50s. She lived here until she passed away in '69, at which time I had spent those ten years in Boston. The entire decade of the '60s I spent in Boston. I was kind of a maverick/n'er-do-well/wannabe/this-and-that. I thought of myself as a writer.

CO: But that was before you found success as a writer.

LL: Yes. My mother passed away in June of '69, and it really messed me up. At the time my brother was living with me up in Boston. We drove down in the middle of the night. She held on until we got here, and she died. Boy, did it hurt. It hurt a lot.

CO: Was it unexpected?

LL: Yes. She had a heart attack. Anyway, she was only sixty-nine, a very healthy woman. But it made me realize the urgency of life. Up to this point I was basically partying. Boston's a great party town, especially in the '60s -- the beginning of free love, hippies -- it was wonderful. But when my mother passed away, the urgency of life just struck me, and I kind of got together with the facets of my soul, and said, "What are we going to do? Are we just bull-shitting ourselves about having this artistic drive, or are we going to pursue that?" And I knew I had to do it.

I used to say, back in those days, that my mother made me a playwright. Because if she were still alive, I'd still be partying someplace, I think.

CO: Well, it's life events that turn you into an artist.

LL: So I went back to Boston and liquidated everything. She had left this house to my aunt, Angie, who lived, then, with my sister, around the corner. So I bought the house from Angie, and basically began the struggle. I

moved back in October of '69, and that was my thirty-fourth birthday. By my fortieth birthday, *Lamppost Reunion* opened on Broadway.

CO: So that was --

LL: A six year struggle.

CO: Six years. That's not bad.

LL: Not bad at all. I came back and sort of isolated myself, doing all kinds of shit jobs -- tending bar; driving taxis; whatever I could get that didn't require my mind. I'm sure you know what that's all about.

CO: Saving it for your work. Yes.

LL: I started writing. I don't know why I was so confident, because I look back on the writing now, and it was so simplistic.

CO: The writing after you came back to Hoboken?

LL: But something made me believe.

Something deeper than the results of my work kept me believing. After two or three years of writing garbage, I discovered something about myself. My problem as a writer was that I wanted to write from my imagination; from what I considered was an incredible hipness. I wanted to write from that core. So the plays I was writing were all about how hip I was and how clever. They were high-concept ideas. The worst kind of writing. Hollywood writing.

CO: The worst kind, especially, for a playwright.

LL: Yes. But what happened, as the years were going by, in just a short couple years, I started to write about my family and Hoboken, and things that meant something to me. It was such a snap, from the bonds of what I believed to be who I was. I came to life. I came to life in this simple dialogue of my people.

The first play was *Momma's Little Angels*, and it changed my whole life. It was a play about my mother's passing. It changed my whole life. All of a sudden people were reading my work and passing it on. You could

feel the different energy, and I understood what was going on. I understood that I had found myself; that I was, after all, not this half-brilliant, far-out, abstract, self-proclaimed genius. I was just this "merchant of the streets." And when I was able to connect with that, beautiful things started to happen.

CO: Everyone connected with you, with your work.

LL: Yes. So here I am now, in my late thirties, and I had all these plays I was beginning to believe in. A couple of my friends had done a trilogy of one-acts of mine, called *Hello, Thank You, and Goodbye*. I thought it was kind of amateurish, not because people liked me or whatever, but it seemed [?] -- beyond the people that it [?] -- But it seemed that people liked them. I didn't. I thought they were like the beginning.

CO: You mean these one-acts.

LL: Yes. But it got me into a position where I now felt I had to get a play done, a full-blown play.

CO: Was that at *Momma's Little Angels*, the full-length?

LL: Yes, it was.

CO: Was that before or after --

LL: Well, it was written before, but I hadn't done it yet. *Momma's Little Angels* wasn't in the mix yet. It was written, but so were a few others I felt good about by now.

CO: But you didn't feel these one-acts were anything to crow about.

LL: They were like a stepping-stone. They left me hungry.

So now I have this best friend I grew up with my whole life, Nick Barry, who was a painter. I was bugging him to help me find a location in Manhattan where I could do a play, in 1974. We're driving up and down the West Side in midtown, stopping at everything that looks like a loft or a garage that could be used for a theatre,

and we're getting nothing but negatives. We come upon this church, St. Benedict's church, on 53rd between eighth and ninth. We pull over, go into the rectory, knock on the door, and this Puerto Rican priest answers the door. He speaks some English, and I tell him -- He has a rectory that's at the back of a courtyard, and they had a church, a small church, that, if you came in the front it was a church, and if you came around the side, it was a bingo hall. So I said to the priest, "I'd like to rent the bingo hall as a theatre," and he said, "Well, the Pastor, that's his pet project. He has bingo Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. There's no way he's going to alter that. That's his baby. He brought that when he came here, it's very successful, and there's no way." I said, "Can I speak to him?" He said, "Well, he doesn't speak English, but I'd be glad to have you meet him." He came out and we chatted. He was a nasty little guy. But I made my point, that I was so desperate that I would do my play on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday -- his off-nights. Then he said, "Fifty dollars." I'm thinking he hates me. He says, "Fifty dollars" -- in English -- and I said, "It's a deal." That quickly, I went from being a panhandler with nothing to a guy with a theatre on 53rd and Eighth Avenue. It was like a miracle.

Now I had to come up with \$50.00. So we hustled around and we got the \$50.00, and started. I had done a couple of projects when I first got to New York from Boston. I did a film project, "Rock the Rain," [this is unclear on the tape] and in it I put together some actors. One of them was a bouncer at the Improv, named Danny Aiello -- which was the beginning of our long history -- and George Pollock. So now it was time to go to work, and I bring these guys back into my life. We started out with a play called *Thanksgotten*, because it was November by then, and we were mounting our first production. This was a Thanksgiving play. It's unlike anything you would expect from me. It's magical.

CO: How's that?

LL: It's like this silly fantasy about this grumpy old guy having a visitation from some ghost.

CO: Sounds like *Ghosts of the Soul*.

LL: I wish it were as good. It was very simple.

CO: But not a realistic drama.

LL: No. But, anyway, it was a way of getting everybody together and getting the ball rolling. The next play I did -- that got me nowhere, that play; we did it, and it was completely uneventful.

CO: Were you able to get anybody in to see it? Anybody in the business?

LL: Yeah. We got some good reviews. But reviews, at that level, can be had by just being kind to the critic. It was not a very good play. But then I realized, again, why did I do that? Just because it was November? So the next play I did -- I did each play four weeks. That's what they allowed you at Equity. I did *Momma's Little Angels*. Again, it changed everything. People started to come. People started to believe, and I was headed in the right direction. I did a play called *Wheelbarrow Closers*, which I starred Danny Aiello in. I did a played called *The Poets* [? unclear to transcriber] -- and then I ended the season with something I had written for these actors, as we were working month after month. That play was called *Lamppost Reunion*.

So it's now, like, May, into June. We mount *Lamppost Reunion*. All of a sudden we have producers coming in saying, "We want to bring this to Broadway," and it was like, wow.

CO: Wow. Was this in the first year? Of this theatre?

LL: I never looked back. After that it was all up. I never looked back. My whole life changed. I went from a cab driver to a Broadway star. Literally. I was the toast of Broadway. So the play opened in May and ran till June. It got picked up by some jerky guy who could produce it for Broadway. He did, and it got great reviews. Everything changed. And I never used the churchyard playhouse again.

It all happened so fast. One year. One season.

CO: So with *Lamppost*, you're writing from your own experience. You're also writing for -- you know the voices of these actors you're using.

LL: Yes. It was a great combination. First of all, because of my partnership to Hoboken, I was able to interview the guys who actually were those people.

CO: Oh. So they're -- I recognize, of course, the Frank character; or, the Fred character.

LL: I didn't interview him.

CO: Right. But those other guys are actual Hoboken guys.

LL: Well, they're members of the Hoboken Four.

CO: Oh. Okay.

LL: They were real pissed off at him, so they gave me all their gripes. And, of course, having my own actors to write for went to the heart of it. It was just a magical moment, when *Lamppost* opened. We were a bunch of baby-pantsed nobodys. We were treated like kings.

CO: So you and Danny took this ride together, huh? From obscurity to --

LL: Yeah. He won the Theatre World Award for "best newcomer on Broadway." We then did a play called *Wheelbarrow Closers*, which we had done at the churchyard playhouse, and got murdered. The third collaboration we did was a play I wrote for him, called *Knockout*. Again, I based it on the life of one of my heroes as a child, a local fighter. And Danny was so good in that. It was the play that really made him a star.

CO: So it did well.

LL: Yes.

CO: Was it Broadway? Was that Broadway?

LL: Yes. It was at the Helen Hayes -- the old Helen Hayes. The big one. It was a hell of a production. It ran about a year. Ed O'Neill came out of that play.

CO: Really. He must have been pretty young.

LL: He played the villain. He was great.

CO: Now, with *Lamppost*, you've got these guys, the original group that you interviewed -- did you ever hear anything about Sinatra's response to it? Any controversy?

LL: Well, there was a lot going on at that time. First of all -- I guess there's no way for you to know all these things, but the guy who played Fred Santoro was Gabe Bell. Well, Gabe Bell was a very prominent Broadway actor at that time. He was originally one of the Dead End Kids, a wonderful actor. He was the one who survived the Dead End Kids. He got great reviews in *Lamppost*, and he was a maverick. Gabe Bell was a hippie. He was a hippie who just wasn't up for following anyone's path. He just wanted his own life. He was kind of an abstract, very bright guy. One night he was cussing everyone. We were all leaving the theatre together, at night. We were all newcomers to Broadway, and we were all depending on each other. The little theatre where it ran was on 44th Street. That theatre is now called the Helen Hayes. We used to walk around the corner, through Schubert

Alley, to Charlie's, which was a restaurant where everyone hung out, in the business. So this one night in particular, we go in, we have our usual hamburger, fries and coffee, hang out a couple hours. I used to park my car down on Ninth Avenue and 45th. Gabe Bell lived between Eighth and Ninth, on 45th. So it was customary, at the end of the night, for he and I to walk down that street together. He would stop at his place, and I would walk the extra thirty yards to the parking lot. This night, we're on the corner of Eighth Avenue, and he says, "I've got to meet a friend." I said, "Oh. Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to Jilly's." You don't know who Jilly was, probably. Jilly was Frank Sinatra's bodyguard, right-hand man, and he had the hottest restaurant in New York, on 52nd, between Broadway and Eighth. It was a great hot spot. And I said, "Are you crazy? Walking into the mouth of the enemy?" There had been all kinds of rumors about how pissed off they were about the show. He said, "Hey, I'm not gonna live my life in fear because of these assholes." All right.

I get a call about 6:00 in the morning, from the stage manager. Gabe Bell is in the hospital and needed six stitches, all over his face. He went there, he bugged them enough that they followed him and slashed him.

CO: Jeez.

LL: So it there was a lot of shit.

CO: Oh, my God.

LL: No one could prove any of it.

CO: What happened to Gabe after that?

LL: They flew him out to L.A., to this plastic surgeon, who fixed it up somehow, and he came back and only missed one performance.

CO: No kidding.

LL: He was an ornery guy; he wasn't gonna let them close the show.

CO: So that's all you heard directly from the Sinatra camp.

LL: No. There was another incident where we got word that Jerry Weintraub and Mickey Rudin were coming

in to see the play. Now Jerry Weintraub was Frank Sinatra's personal manager, and Mickey Rudin was his lawyer -- a real high-powered lawyer in L.A. They flew in to see the show. So everybody was real interested in what was going to happen; if they were going to sue us, and that kind of stuff. So the night comes; they come to the theatre; somebody points them out. Of course, they have the two best seats in the house. So we watched them. They don't get up for the intermission. They just sit there. When the show is over, they get up, they head down the aisle, and they're, like, looking to see -- This dumb usherette points to me. They ask her a question, and she points directly to me. I'm at the stage door, at the lobby/stage entrance. I'm frozen there, now. They came over, and Jerry Weintraub said, "You Lou La Russo?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I gotta tell ya. That's the best fuckin' play I ever saw in my life."

I was shocked. He grabbed me, he hugged me. Mickey Rudin said, "You're smart, kid. You're smart. You did it in a way that nobody could hurt ya." Jerry Weintraub ultimately signed me to a personal management contract. That's how I wound up in Hollywood.

CO: Wow.

LL: So there was a lot going on, as a result of the Sinatra camp, and "Hollywood."

CO: Well, it's not like the play really indicts him, either.

LL: I didn't think so.

CO: The ending is wonderful. They just come together --

LL: I wrote a play about one of my personal heroes, and the torment he must have been going through; that people in his camp saw it otherwise, shocked me. I've always been a big Sinatra fan. I never intended to get into that kind of mix.

CO: So the incident with Gabe was -- No one had seen it. There was just the assumption that it was --

LL: Well, that's right. Although there were rumors that Sinatra came in, incognito, but just rumors.

CO: Did you ever meet him?

LL: No. One of my regrets. I adored Sinatra. I was shocked when all this negative stuff started to arise.

CO: Well, before you came home, in '69, you were in Boston. So what were you writing about? What were you doing up there? Were you writing plays?

LL: I was writing one-act plays, maybe. I was writing screenplays, which I never got produced.

CO: Were your one-acts produced?

LL: No. Everything was terrible. But it never bothered me. It never made me think less of my chances. Call it retardation.

CO: I guess you didn't really wake up until you came back here.

LL: I just believed there was something in me that was special, as a writer, and I was going to find it.

CO: Well, talk a little bit about how you found yourself in the theatre, of all places.

LL: Well, when I came out of the army, I was on the GI bill. I had the GI bill, which is something they gave you in those days, to further your education.

CO: When was that?

LL: Fifty-six. I went to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, thinking I might want to be an actor.

CO: Had you done any theatre or anything?

LL: No. It was all tenacity, founded in nothing. I just thought myself a good-looking guy who would probably get laid a lot, if I went to acting school. So I did, and I did. [Laughter] It was fun. It was a lot of fun. After my second year, one of my teachers was directing summer stock in Groton, Connecticut. So he invited me. He said, "You're a young kid, you ought to do small roles, but it's really good for you to do it, and you should do it."

So the first role I got was Chooch in *Hatful of Rain*, which was a nice role. Harry Guardino played it on Broadway, a small, interesting, kind of guy.

I hated it. I absolutely hated getting on stage, and being so completely naked. I went backstage after the show and I grabbed Harry, and asked for George, the director. I said, "Harry, I'm sorry to do this to you, but I can't do this. This is not for me. I gotta get outa here." He said, "Lou, you can't walk out of a show that runs a week. You've got to stick here for the week." Well, okay. That makes sense. I can't mess it up. I stayed the week, and I left when the week was over.

I come back to New York, my best friend -- Nick Barry, the painter -- had moved into Greenwich Village, in a loft, and was painting. So I moved in with him, and found myself writing plays.

CO: Had you written before?

LL: I had written short stories, poems.
I've always written.

CO: When you were a kid.

LL: I was published when I was five.

CO: For what?

LL: When I was in kindergarten, the teachers asked all the kids to bring in a Christmas project. Most kids brought in crayon drawings of Christmas landscapes and Santa Claus. I brought in a poem called "Christmas Bells." They were so shocked that a five-year-old kid could not only write, but rhyme, that they sent it to the local newspaper, and they published it. So I was published at five.

CO: [Chuckling] You've had a long career.

LL: So, yes. I've always written poetry and short stories and things like that. It was always a part of my everyday life. I never knew it was going to be a career, until that time. I'm living in the loft with Nicky; he's painting; I'm bored to death; I start writing. And now because of my couple years at the American Academy, I'm writing plays. It just felt natural.

CO: You'd been studying plays for two years, basically. That was a two-year program, so you got through the program.

LL: Yes.

CO: Were there playwrights who influenced you?

LL: Well, the playwright who influenced me the most was Eugene O'Neill. I just had to look at Eugene O'Neill's work and faint, he affected me so dramatically. I couldn't believe that a man could say such magical things.

CO: It's interesting, too, that you say Eugene O'Neill, because you talk about a playwright who writes about his own experience, writes about himself --

LL: Right. He, to me, is the greatest playwright of all time. Higher than Shakespeare, Ibsen, Moliere. There's nobody higher than Eugene O'Neill, to me. I love them all, but O'Neill is unbelievable.

CO: So when you first started writing, did you model your writing style on him? Did you write about yourself when you first started? Or did you write, maybe, about what you thought Eugene O'Neill would write?

LL: I don't think so. I don't think so because I didn't really know Eugene O'Neill yet. It was in the middle '50s when I first saw *The Iceman Cometh*, with Jason Robards, and that fucked me up. That put me away forever.

CO: That humbled you? Or --

LL: It didn't humble me --

CO: You were awe struck by it.

LL: It just made me realize that there were people of untouchable comparison, and he was the man. I knew I couldn't say all that so perfectly. Yes, it humbled me. How could it not humble you?

While I was at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts we used to get twofers to all the shows, and I saw *Long Day's Journey into Night*. You know what my

favorite is? If we were having an intellectual conversation about the brilliance of writing, I would say *The Iceman Cometh*. But the play that, for some reason, that touches me the most is *Moon for the Misbegotten*. It kills me. It just kills me. When Jason did it, I saw it eleven times. He did it with Colleen Dewhurst. Eleven times. I couldn't see it enough.

CO: Did you see the revival a few years ago, with Gabriel Byrne and Cherry Jones?

LL: No. Did you?

CO: Yes.

LL: Was it good?

CO: It was good, but I think Jason Robards, you can't touch his --

LL: Jason Robards and Eugene O'Neill were somehow the same person. I can hear Eugene O'Neill -- I can hear his pain, when Robards does it. That's not to say I

wasn't influenced by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller.
They were the guys of my time.

COD: They were all great writers of that
era.

LL: I was very impressed with them. I still
think the greatest poet on the American stage was Tennessee
Williams.

CO: Yes, no one really touches his
lyricism.

Well, what about when you were a kid? What
was it like growing up in Hoboken?

LL: It was great. It was great. It was a
blue-collar town. My father was a longshoreman.

CO: On the waterfront here?

LL: My mother worked in a coat factory, a
sweatshop.

It was great. We were poor, but nobody knew
it. We wanted for nothing. We ate great. Our homes were

clean and warm, filled with love and camaraderie. The streets were crawling with friends who really loved you, and you were protected by the neighborhood, when your parents were at work. There were so many people in the neighborhood keeping an eye out for you, if anybody was sick. It was great. It was really wonderful. We got in trouble once in a while, did something we shouldn't have done, but we didn't go the wrong way. No, growing up in Hoboken was something I wouldn't have liked to miss. If you learned anything, it was friendship; "forging" friendships.

CO: What part of town did you live in?

LL: I grew up on Sixth and Monroe, right around the corner from the city dump -- a pretty low-class area.

CO: Okay. That's pretty far out there, on the west side.

LL: -- right before the railroad tracks.

CO: -- where the garages are; where the car pound is.

LL: It was great. It was all Italian.

CO: Was pretty much all of Hoboken Italian at that time?

LL: No. It was Italian and Irish.

CO: Thus, the character of Mack [in *Lamppost*].

LL: Mack, yeah.

CO: Was there rivalry between the two groups, that co-existed?

LL: The generation before mine, they really were bitter enemies. But not in my generation. We put it together. We were in the same streets, in the same schools, and we put it together. And we were friends. I never heard a bigoted word in my house. I never heard my parents say anything about being Irish, and to my Irish friends, I don't have that kind of feeling. That wasn't a part of their thinking.

CO: When I first visited you, you talked to me a little bit about *On the Waterfront*. How old were you when that happened?

LL: Let's see. I was seventeen or eighteen. Yeah, *On the Waterfront*. You know there is no more River Street. It's now Marine View Plaza. But it was the toughest street in New Jersey. It was the Barbary Coast.

CO: Really. So what was down there?
Taverns, and -- ?

LL: Wall to wall. There was nothing but. Well, maybe the occasional restaurant, that fed the longshoremen. On one side of the street was the docks, and the other side was wall-to-wall saloons. It was wild. It was really wild. And the making of *On the Waterfront* was such a wild time, because who knew about movies? And here were these kind of "wintry," bundled-up geniuses in our midst, making this movie. We were all watching and what not, but we had no way of making sense of what they were doing. From my own, personal perspective, I hated Marlon Brando.

CO: Really?

LL: I was jealous. I was a seventeen-year-old kid. All the girls became crazy in love with him, and all they talked about was Marlon, Marlon, Marlon. And me, being as insecure as I was --

CO: -- and being a good-looking guy --

LL: I don't know if I was good-looking. Maybe I thought I was. But it was a very perplexing time to be who I was, because I'm harboring all these ill feelings toward someone who was soon to become my greatest hero. It was an odd time.

CO: So you hated Marlon Brando when he came to Hoboken. You really didn't hold those feelings [for him] as a movie star, before he insinuated on your life.

LL: Once I got by making the movie -- and I met him a couple of times. He was a very friendly guy. I got by it. But when he first got here, I wanted to punch him in the face.

CO: Was that a feeling felt by other young guys?

LL: Some. I had a lot of friends who were much more together than I was at that time. I think they were okay by him. I was very insecure.

CO: Was everybody trying to get into the movie?

LL: I wasn't really aware of that. I'm a kid -- seventeen -- and I'm dealing with all my own frustrations about who is this guy? But I was there every day.

CO: You mean there on the set, watching.

LL: They were shooting it on location.

CO: What time of year was it?

LL: It remember it as being winter.

CO: So they hired all these local guys as background.

LL: Yeah. That's what my play, *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here*, is all about. It's one of my favorite plays.

CO: Yeah? I'll have to take a look at that one, too. Did you have friends who worked on the film?

LL: Yeah. Tommy Hanley was a friend of mine. He was in the movie --

CO: The one who was so disappointed in Marlon Brando?

LL: Yeah.

CO: Did he have a career in film?

LL: He works the docks. Every time they do a revival of *On the Waterfront* they invite him, and he loves it.

CO: And Elia Kazan? You have a story about him?

LL: Oh, I do. I probably told you already.

CO: I want to hear it again. It's a good story.

LL: Now this is 1980.

CO: Which is what? That's twenty-six years.

LL: -- later. I have my play, *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here* running in SoHo, starring Paul Sorvino and Janet Sarno. It's doing well. So I get a call from Max Eisen, the press agent, and he said, "Lou, I just pulled the most wonderful coup for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "How would you like Elia Kazan to come see the play?" I said, "What? I would do anything to get him to come see the play." Because he's such a hero of mine. So he said, "Well, I've arranged it, but there are conditions. You'll have to pick him up, personally, at his home, on West 69th; drive him to the theatre; sit with him during the play. He doesn't want to go backstage afterward. Then you just take

him home. If you agree to those conditions, he's coming." I said, "Max, any conditions. First of all, that's a double bonus to me, because I get to be alone with Elia Kazan, in that half hour it takes to get from where he lives to the theatre" -- which was a thrill for me. It really was.

Sure enough, I pick him up. I ring his doorbell, some guy answers and when he saw me he said, "He'll be right out." So I go sit in the car. Thirty seconds later he comes out. I jump out, say hi and blah, blah, and we start heading downtown. We get into this conversation about Hoboken and "How do you know so much?" and I kind of described who I was -- I was this kid, blah, blah, blah. But he was so taken by all the names I had -- because he remained friendly with all those guys.

CO: Really.

LL: He was that kind of a guy. Is that kind of a guy.

CO: So there were other Hoboken guys who were --

LL: They were extras in the movie.

CO: And he remembered these guys?

LL: He knew where they were, what they were doing, what they ate yesterday.

CO: He kept in touch with them, in other words.

LL: He stayed in touch with them, yeah. They called him, he would always take their calls. Quite a guy, despite all the things you hear about him.

So we get to the theatre. Of course, the cast was so excited, they know he's coming -- although they were forewarned that he was not coming back. We watched the play. There are lines in the play -- "That fuckin' Kazan had to come to Hoboken to make his movie. Ever since, we've got to strike, strike, strike --" There are a lot of those kind of lines. He's sitting through that fine. The show is over. And he's one of those kinds of guys who doesn't tip himself off. I couldn't get any reading on whether he was hating it, loving it --

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

CO: Okay. So you can't read him -- what he thinks of the play.

LL: So, finally, the show's over. He says, "You know what? I changed my mind. I want to meet the cast." That's a good sign. He doesn't say anything to me. He doesn't say, "Good show," "Bad show," "Loved it," he didn't say anything. He said, "You know what? I've changed my mind. I want to meet the cast." Oh, great. I run backstage, tell everybody that Kazan's coming, and I said we'd all meet onstage. Everybody was like children, gathering around him. He focuses on Janet Sarno and Paul Sorvino, and was very complimentary. But he seemed to have had a terrific time, and I think it was a reluctantly terrific time. I think he was coming to not like it, and wound up being caught up in it. But it was an exciting night, for me to spend -- And I had to drive him home. He didn't want to leave. But it was great for me to be alone, one-on-one, with Elia Kazan.

CO: Yes. He's legendary.

Now with the subject of *On the Waterfront*, the whole union thing, and organizing of all those workers against the corrupt union, but organizing -- it's a lot about the union. Was there a ripple effect, here?

LL: I think so, yes. I think the union guys were pissed off at how much reaction there was; how eager the word "Strike" became.

CO: So these guys were empowered by the film?

LL: I think so.

CO: Was the union corrupt, like that depicted in the film?

LL: Yes, of course. The Hoboken waterfront was shameless back then, in fact.

CO: Oh, really?

LL: I never was privy to any of it, so I can't say for sure this or that.

CO: Well, you were a kid.

LL: Yeah. But I worked at the docks.

CO: Oh, you did.

LL: Yeah. By the time I was eighteen I got my "bi-state" pass, and the coast-guard pass, and I was in a steady gang on Pier C. So I worked the docks.

CO: Is that pretty much what a lot of your friends ended up doing, when they got out of high school?

LL: Quite a few.

CO: And how long did you do that?

LL: A couple years. Until I went in the army.

CO: Did you enlist in the army?

LL: I pushed up my draft.

CO: So that was what year? Late '50s?

LL: Fifty-five.

CO: What do you mean, you pushed up your draft?

LL: They used to have a deal where, rather than wait until you were drafted, when there was a draft, you could push up your draft, to get it over with. So rather than being called, arbitrarily, when you were twenty-three, you could be called when you were eighteen or nineteen.

CO: Could you decide where you wanted to go?

LL: No. But you could get it over with.

CO: I see. All right. Where'd you go?

LL: In the army? I did my basic training at Fort Dix, in Jersey. Then I went to do MP training at Camp

Gordon, Georgia, and I ended up being stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas, in El Paso.

CO: And how was that?

LL: The army is -- when you're living it, it's not very pleasant. But when you look back on it, you laugh at all that stuff. While you're living it, it's a big interruption.

CO: Did you ever write about it?

LL: Yeah. Not enough, but some.

CO: And what's the subject of *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here*?

LL: It's really a love story, between Gracie and [?] -- held at bay for twenty years. And about a couple misunderstandings, set to a background of striking. He's in trouble --

CO: So these are older characters? It's not a young love?

LL: No, these are older characters. There were young characters in the piece. I'm a character in it, at age eighteen, and my friend, Nick Barry, is a character in it. In my plays he's called Richie.

CO: He occurs in other plays of yours?

LL: Yeah.

CO: Always as Richie?

LL: Yeah.

CO: Then what's the response from people you know, when they see themselves in your plays? Or, what are the responses, I guess I should say.

LL: Well, mixed. Some people are disappointed in my point of view of them. Others love it. They love the attention, or the tribute -- whatever. You never know. It depends on the person's deepest vanity.

CO: I've written a little bit, and mostly what I've written about is personal -- like I write about my family -- and I always have this tug going on with me, whether I should, or whether I can, write freely about them, without projecting any of what they might feel about it. Which, when I do that, I end up doing some self-editing, which is not very good. Had you struggled with that? Or do you struggle with that? Or is it just "to hell with it?"

LL: The first play I wrote about Nicky was called *The Artist*, and I gave it to him to read. He got so pissed off at me. He said, "You see me as such a namby-pamby?" I said, "I don't see you that way at all." "Well, that's what I'm reading." He hated the play. I'm sure it wasn't a very good play, but his reaction to it was shocking.

CO: Did that affect you, though, when you wrote it?

LL: Sure, it affected me. But it affected me in a way where I said, "Well, am I going to cater to his idiosyncrasies, or inadequacies, or am I going to tell the

truth?" I prefer telling the truth. You'll come to that, too.

CO: Yeah. I haven't written a lot, but you want to get everything out of the way that keeps you from putting something on the page freely, it seems to me.

LL: And the truth always works better.

CO: Well, you're a really good case in point. You're writing all this stuff, then you come back here, and you write what is your truth; what is real to you.

So how long was your New York ride, before you moved on? You ended up in L.A. for a while, right?

LL: Well, in 1975, I did *Lamppost Reunion*. 1976 was *Wheelbarrow Closers*, 1977 was a musical called *Platinum*.

CO: Who'd you do that with?

LL: Alexis Smith.

CO: Oh, really? Who wrote the music?

LL: Gary William Friedman, a good songwriter. In '78 I did *Momma's Little Angels*.

CO: Oh, you did it again.

LL: I did it again. In '79 I did *Knockout*. In 1980 I did *Marlon Brando Sat Right Here*. In '81 I did *Dreamgirls*, with Michael. So I did a show every year from '75 to '81. Then I went to L.A.

CO: Did you go to L.A. just to test the waters?

LL: No, I had so many offers.

CO: Were they pulling you there?

LL: I went to L.A. with my own suite of offices at Universal. Oh, they gave me everything.

CO: And did you just start writing screenplays? Or did you start doctoring?

LL: Well, in '77 I had doctored, while I was still here, *Saturday Night Fever*.

CO: Oh. Okay.

LL: So I had a reputation already as the guy you wanted to write your dialogue.

CO: Yeah, I have a few friends who, that's how they got into the business as screenwriters. One friend of mine said for a little while they called him the Surgeon General of Hollywood; he was fixing everybody's scripts.

LL: I did quite a bit of that. If you're a playwright, if you're a dialogue writer, that's what they're going to ask of you.

CO: It's so much different to write films than it is plays. As you said, you started writing dialogue. But then did you move into writing screenplays, which is more visually oriented?

LL: Yeah. I wrote twenty-four commissioned screenplays.

CO: Well, it's a different thing, living on the East Coast. I lived in L.A., as well. Did you enjoy it?

LL: I loved it. I loved it. It just didn't fit in with my artistic soul. But the side of me that likes to chase pussy -- I loved it. I just had a great time. I was making tons of money; I always had a brand-new Mercedes convertible; I lived the high life. All the top restaurants knew me, I'd just walk right in. I was the man. You couldn't have been in a better position than I was. All the studio bosses loved me; invited me to dinner all the time. I was the man. But it was growing on me, this need to get serious.

CO: You mean to go back, and do something of substance.

LL: Yes.

CO: Did you find any way to do that in L.A.?

LL: I tried, but it was hard. Because it's such a bullshit life.

CO: So how long were you there?

LL: Twelve and a half years.

CO: That's a long time.

LL: Yeah. Well and half of it I was married, to the girl in the pink sweater.

CO: Actor?

LL: Yeah. But after a year or two I got rid of her. It's hard to be married in L.A. It's just so conducive to -- whatever you want.

CO: So what brought you back to the East Coast?

LL: The need to be serious.

CO: You still had this place?

LL: Yeah. Oh, I would never give this up. I used to bullshit myself that I was bi-coastal. But I was spending less and less time here. I bought into the bullshit.

CO: It's seductive.

LL: Yeah. I had a great time. It was a great ride; really a great ride.

CO: Being a writer of, oh, I don't know, realistic drama, and writing a lot of working-class plays (at least a lot of your plays, from the way you've described them, and from what I've read), how did you stumble into writing some books for musicals?

LL: Reluctantly.

CO: Really?

LL: Really. Tommy Tune came to me because we were with the same agency -- ICM -- when he was doing

Platinum. He had seen *Lamppost Reunion* and said he wanted that kind of gritty realism. I kept saying no, and he wouldn't have it. My agent bugged me to death, so finally I said I'd do it.

CO: For what project?

LL: *Platinum*.

CO: For *Platinum*.

LL: Which, at the time, was called *Sunset*. It went through quite a few changes.

CO: Was that a success?

LL: It ran about a year. A musical has to do better than that.

CO: Right. But it then gave you a reputation as somebody who could write a book.

LL: Yeah. Now I was part of the establishment. Michael Bennett drove me crazy to fix

Dreamgirls. That was a really bad show. It was called *Big Dreams*. But I fixed it.

CO: And that did well.

LL: Very well. Then I did one with Tom O'Horgan called *Broadway Babies*. It was like a puppet show. All the characters were either children or puppets. It was the music of one of those old Hollywood writers; the guys who wrote *Singin' in the Rain*.

CO: It was a revue, of that sort?

LL: No, no. It was a regular play, a musical play. You know who Tom O'Horgan is, right?

CO: *Hair*?

LL: Yeah. And *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

CO: I think Gale McDermott, his partner in *Hair*, was a Hoboken guy.

LL: I think so.

CO: The museum could confirm that. [Note: McDermott is from Staten Island; James Rado and Gerry Ragni lived in Hoboken.]

Of your collaborators, who were the ones you most enjoyed working with? I assume the time you had with Danny Aiello is probably up there.

LL: Well, there are different kinds of collaborations. The kind of collaboration you have with an actor is very different than one you have with a director or a producer.

CO: Sure.

LL: Danny was always a pleasure to work with. He worked harder than anybody I knew. He would show up off book. How could a writer not love that? Michael Bennett was probably my favorite collaborator, from a purely artistic point of view.

CO: Did you ever do an original book with Michael Bennett, or was it all rewrites?

LL: Yes. Well, I did a screenplay for him.
That's the one I did, Francis Coppola produced it.

CO: And Michael directed it?

LL: Well, it never got off the ground, but
that was the deal. Zoetrope was producing, and this was
going to be Michael Bennett's first film.

CO: Is it hard to invest in something like
that, and never see it come to fruition -- which is so
common in film?

LL: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Especially if you
love it. Some jobs you take for the money, so if they don't
happen -- next? But when you get caught up in the passion
of a project -- and there are so many things that can go
wrong. The biggest is, you're hired by studio executive A;
you turn the script in four months later; he's been fired;
studio executive B will not touch his work; and the
project's dead. That's the price.

CO: And that's a common occurrence, too.

LL: Too common. It's a joke.

CO: When did you come back to Hoboken, from
L.A.?

LL: In '95.

CO: So you returned to playwriting more
seriously?

LL: Yes. There was such a longing.

CO: Talk about that. Talk about what your
process has been; where have you gotten your plays
produced; where do you try your plays out, since you've
been back?

LL: Well, I've been developing my plays
exclusively at the American Theatre of Actors (ATA), on 54th
Street. Are you familiar with that?

CO: I've heard of them, but I've never been
there.

LL: Judy James is the artistic director.

CO: Fifty-fourth and -- ?

LL: -- between Eighth and Ninth. It's a great facility. They have, like, four theatres, and they give me the main stage, 140 seats. It's a great place to develop a new show.

CO: So they'll do a showcase production of your shows?

LL: Yes. Which is a great thing. Anytime I want to do a play, I just go do it. It's produced.

CO: And you direct them?

LL: Yeah.

CO: And what's that like? Did you direct before you came back? Did you direct your own work?

LL: My attitude about a playwright directing his own show is, I think it's important to direct

the workshop, because there's so much to do; there's so much wrong with the first draft. If you're directing, it's like being inside a tank. If you're inside the tank you know where all the holes are, because the light is shining through. You have that advantage. You can see all the glaring mistakes of the play, if you're in the middle of it like that. Now I don't think the playwright should ultimately direct the main production of a play, but to do that first workshop, where you get all the writing problems out of the way, I think it's very beneficial. Then you have to turn it over.

CO: Do you welcome give and take from your actors?

LL: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I try to use an ensemble group, for that purpose. I know who they are, and I know, when they speak to me, they have something to say.

CO: So you trust them.

LL: Right.

CO: And at ATA, you're using the same people.

LL: I use a lot of the same people all the time.

CO: How often are you producing there?

LL: I usually do a show a year. Now I'm just not well enough.

CO: Now I've read two of your plays, one early career, and one late career. The first one had strong plot elements about these guys, and big events that occurred -- big disturbances that really -- all the characters really drew me into the story. *Ghosts of My Soul* is a play about ideas, it seemed to me, very philosophical.

LL: Yeah. It's esoteric.

CO: Has your writing shifted a lot, in that way? Or was that just something you needed to get out?

LL: No, I think -- Let's get back to my roots. I said to you when I started out these concepts weren't working? I'm back to them, and they are working. I'm writing on a different level. Wherever it is you were, no matter how wonderful it was, you can't stay there. That was then and this is now, and you have to keep growing, changing, and experimenting, or it's not fun. To accomplish something is great. But then that's over, and you have to keep striving; keep looking for more ways of saying the things that are deep inside you. That's where I'm at.

So a lot of what I'm writing today -- I think *The Ghosts of My Soul* -- It's just a fun piece. It's a high-energy, fun piece that, if done properly, will stir a lot of imagination. It's not the kind of piece you're going to walk out of the theatre saying, "Brilliant," and this and that. It's stimulating if you do it right. I've written a couple of recent pieces that --

I'll give you an example. I think I've taken my ego to its ultimate place. I think the reason I gave you *Ghosts of My Soul* is it's an autobiographical play. It's about me, Larry Masters. That is my alter ego. I think these plays are necessary (and I have several more autobiographical plays), leading up to the grand autobiographical play, which is called *La Russo by Larry*

Masters, and what it is, is a two-character play -- me, Lou La Russo, being awakened from my bed, by my alter ego, Larry Masters, who has had enough of the way I've portrayed him, as this totally full-of-shit guy, and has to have a reckoning with me, because he can't bear being Larry Masters for another minute. So that is what it will ultimately be.

CO: Have you written that play?

LL: Yes.

CO: Sounds like Pirandello, almost -- "One Character in Search of an Author."

LL: When you write as prolifically as I do, you're leading to something. This play could just be a brick in the wall.

CO: Have you been writing a lot of Larry Masters plays?

LL: Since I knew I was dying.

CO: Oh, really. So *Ghosts of My Soul* is just a couple years old?

LL: Yeah. In effect.

CO: At the end of that play, her leaving you --

LL: That's her, over there (points to portrait).

CO: -- and what it evokes --

LL: That's "Tamara."

CO: Here?

LL: She was Miss California.

CO: So there's a real recognition in that play of just the different sides of who you are -- the good and the bad -- that all make the whole.

LL: Yes, well, that's what it is.

CO: All fighting each other for focus, to be up in front. Has that been in workshop?

LL: Since I've written that I haven't been well enough to do the show. Everybody wants me to do it.

CO: Are you still able to write every day?

LL: It's over.

CO: Do you write anything other than plays? You were going to start a theatre in Hoboken.

LL: Yes.

CO: Everyone kept saying no?

LL: Yeah. I have a partner; a terrific guy; high-energy; makes good money; a good actor, and a perfect guy to be part of it. I want to introduce you to him, too, because I mentioned you to him. You guys might fit. I'd

love to get you all together to do one of my plays. I'm not well enough to participate.

CO: Right. Right. I'd like to keep looking at the scripts you have.

LL: Sure.