

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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TAPE 2, SIDE 1

CO: You touched on this a little bit when we talked last week. You talked about the change in your life when your mom died, and how you went from being a "n'er do well," and not a very serious writer, to something that really changed you as an artist, when you came home to Hoboken. How did your writing evolve then, in that arc of your career, from when you started writing and you had all your great success on Broadway, then you went to L.A., and came back to Hoboken. What were the changes like?

LL: Hmmn. What were the changes like once I came back and started writing?

CO: Yes. How did your writing evolve?

LL: I thought we covered that.

CO: Well, you talked about how your writing evolved, when you came back to Hoboken. You started writing about your life. But there also was, now you're writing about yourself a lot more. And did going to Hollywood change the way you -- ?

LL: Well, that was later. But finding a subject matter that meant something to me made all the difference in the world to me, as a playwright. I like to think of myself as a colloquialist, kind of a Palooka of playwrights. Yet, I'm always in conflict with the poet I started out to be. It's been an unusual trip. I don't know if that answers that question.

CO: Well, I think as a playwright you seem to have a lot more control than a screenwriter would. Did you find that when you went to L.A. you were being pushed and pulled in ways that you were unaccustomed to?

LL: Yes. When I went to L.A. I wanted to much to be a success; to make everybody happy. But, ultimately, I wasn't.

CO: You weren't a success, or you weren't happy?

LL: I wasn't a success.

CO: I was just looking over some of the plays you've done, and I was looking at your bio, and I found something in it that -- did you adapt *Wheelbarrow Closers* yourself?

LL: Yes.

CO: And how was that?

LL: It was a nightmare. It was not a fun experience.

CO: Who directed it?

LL: Some Greek guy.

CO: It was tough because you had to conform to all these producers, and their idea of what you are?

LL: Yes. And they missed it completely. They completely lost what it was about. The director once said to me, "The dialogue is very stifling." Well, I heard that, and I knew I was in trouble. Where do I go? My dialogue is stifling? My whole life is a tribute to my dialogue, and this guy says it's stifling. So I knew I was in strange waters.

CO: Well, it seems to me there's a musicality to your dialogue that's here, in this town. I walk down the street and -- When I read *Lamppost Reunion* that's what I could hear -- which is a lot of what it's about it seems to me. What do you make of this recent fascination with *The Sopranos*, and with this "fiction of Italian-Americans?"

LL: Well, I'm very much against all that. I've never written negatively about my people. I've never written them as killers or drunks. Well, drunks, of course, I have, but killers or bad people, evil people -- I wrote

about them as people, and what came out came out, but I never deliberately isolated them in a negative way.

CO: As a group, or as a culture.

LL: Yes.

CO: Now your dad was a longshoreman. What was his life like?

LL: Tough.

CO: He was an Italian immigrant?

LL: You'll read about him, if you read all the plays. I know that's a lot. But eventually you'll get to it.

CO: I've got a few on order.

LL: Many you'll have to get from my niece, Donna, because they're not published. But you should make a list -- I'll give you a list -- of some of the plays about him, that she can make you copies of.

CO: Great. But he came from Italy. Did he end up working on the docks right away?

LL: You have to read *Momma's Little Angels*, to get that story.

CO: Were you close to him?

LL: Yeah, I was. We worked together.

CO: When you worked on the docks?

LL: Yeah.

CO: Was that pretty common? For a son to follow his dad on the docks?

LL: Yeah.

CO: When did he pass away?

LL: I believe it was '85.

CO: So he outlived your mother.

LL: Yeah.

CO: Was he still in Hoboken?

LL: I don't want to ruin it for you.

CO: Okay.

LL: You've got to read *Momma's Little Angels*.

CO: Okay. You talked a little bit about Hoboken and what a great place it was to live, to grow up in; that you wouldn't trade it for anything. What have you seen -- So much has changed. I've only been here for five years and I've seen a lot of change. You went away for a while, then you came back, then you went away again. Do you have any thoughts about how the city has changed?

LL: It has changed, a lot. I've loved it, personally. I guess because I'm an artist. So I've been in favor of the changes. But, yes, it's been exciting.

I need help today.

CO: Okay. So even now, the character of the city has changed. I think the ethnic character has changed. My idea of what Hoboken was like twenty years ago is that it was a lot more Italian, and now it's diluted; there's a lot more upwardly mobile, young professionals here. Is that a pretty accurate statement?

LL: I think so.

CO: Have you written anything about that? About the changing currents in Hoboken?

LL: I don't know.

CO: I think at one time there might have been friction in the city, as the real estate boom started happening.

LL: I'm not sure.

CO: How about the theatre? Do you still pay attention to what's going on in the world of the theatre?

LL: I'm sorry to say I don't.

CO: It's a lot to keep up with. When you were working in New York, where was the theatre going at that time? I guess there was a lot of experimental stuff. Were you just kind of on the outside of that, and pretty much on Broadway? Or were other forces influencing you in an way?

LL: I don't know how to answer that.

CO: What would you advise a writer, a young writer -- what advice would you give a young writer, starting out? I'm working with a lot of younger playwrights at Rutgers. How would you advise someone who's going out there?

LL: I don't know if I'm in the state of mind, today, to give that lecture. Sorry. Sorry.

CO: That's okay. Shall we just try another day?

LL: Unless you want to just pop shot
around.

CO: I've got a few things written down. Let
me just try them and see -- as long as they don't --

LL: See, my fear about trying another day
is that I'm deteriorating. So I don't know where I'll be
the next time.

CO: Well, I'll run through this, and we'll
see what happens.

LL: All right.

CO: We talked a long time last time, and
you said a lot of great stuff. One of my fears was that I
was going to ask you questions that covered stuff you
talked about.

Here you are, your first play on Broadway,
and you get nominated for a Tony. What was that experience
like? Was it a surprise?

LL: [Long pause] No.

CO: You weren't surprised?

LL: No.

CO: It made sense?

LL: It was the biggest hit on Broadway, so I wasn't surprised. As a matter of fact, I was very disappointed that I didn't win.

CO: I forget what won instead.

LL: Tom Stoppard's play.

CO: Oh. *Travesties*.

LL: *Travesties*. I'm losing my memory, too, which is part of this. This is so horrible.

CO: Yes, I'm sure it is. How did your family and friends react? You're the same person. Was the dynamic in your relationship with your friends, your friends back home, and your family -- did that change?

LL: [Whispers] No.

CO: Same Louis to them.

LL: Yes. Nothing changed.

CO: You know, you hear of people who gain success, and suddenly the people around them don't know how to -- they're in awe of them.

When you were growing up, what was your folks' expectations of you? What did they think you were going to be? Did they encourage you to write? Did they encourage you in that?

LL: [Long pause] They had no idea. They were proud. I mean, my mother had passed away, but my father was very proud. He showed up at all my opening nights.

CO: So he was able to see all that.

LL: Yes.

CO: I was wondering -- you talked about Michael Bennett; how great he was to work with; your working relationship with Michael Bennett. Actually, you had talked a little bit about your working with Laurence Olivier, but we were upstairs, before we were interviewing. What was that like?

LL: [Interruption. Shows a photo of himself and his brother as children.]

CO: So what are these? Uniforms?

LL: They're like sailor suits, made for little boys. They were brown, actually.

CO: Do you know where this was taken? This one of your folks?

LL: Keansburg.

CO: New Jersey? Keansburg, New Jersey?

LL: Yes.

CO: What did you do when you worked on the docks?

LL: I was a longshoreman. You're the laborer. You take the cargo off the palettes as they come down. You load them onto the empty palettes, as they need to be lifted up.

CO: Were there trains down there, that they would load them on?

LL: No. No, they came in on trucks, and you would put them onto -- There was a team that would put them on the floor. Then you would put them on different palettes, then you would have a round circle of palettes to different locations, and you would put them on A,B,C or D. Then there would be guys with forklifts to come and take them away, which would then -- The forklifts would take them right to the dock, and load them off and put them on the ship.

CO: So this is all the stuff going out. It must have been dangerous.

LL: I never thought of it that way.

CO: I guess I was thinking of the accident in *On the Waterfront*, having something over your head. Did you have to join a union?

LL: [Nods yes.]

CO: [Looking at *Knockout* photo.] This is from *Knockout*. When did that happen, in relation to *Lamppost*?

LL: Well, *Lamppost* was my first, in '75. This was in '79.

CO: You look so proud in this picture.

LL: Well, I hope I was proud.

CO: Who's this guy?

LL: Jimmy Donahue.

CO: Is he a buddy?

LL: He's an actor. He was a quarterback at Notre Dame.

CO: What was there to do around here when you were a kid. You didn't have TV, and all the distractions that everybody has now.

LL: [Long pause] I don't know. Life seemed so full.

CO: Was the city a draw to kids then? Like now, kids are always going into the city.

LL: We never went into the city. We played basketball. We just filled up the time with each other, when we weren't working. We'd usually check in, in the morning, praying there were no ships.

CO: Oh. So you wouldn't necessarily work every day?

LL: Right.

CO: Did your dad not work every day?

LL: Well, if there were no ships, nobody worked.

CO: I guess that's pretty much what I did. I grew up in a small town in Iowa. There was nothing, nothing there. We'd find something to do out of nothing, basically. Play baseball, basketball. Walk around. Aimlessly.

LL: I never thought of it as aimless, until now, actually.

CO: I guess there it was a matter of where your imagination would take you. Nowadays, kids just turn on the machine, and they don't need an imagination.

What about H.E.A.R.T.? How long has that effort been going?

LL: About three or four years. It's a nice title, isn't it?

CO: Yes, really nice. You'll leave it for your beloved city as a legacy.

LL: Yes, and I'd like to make you and Joey the partnership that guides it for the future.

CO: So how do you see it? One of the things you say is that you would advocate minority images. Is that part of what the mission of H.E.A.R.T. is?

LL: Yes. I mean, I see it as a theatre company that develops new plays, or even does old plays, but casts different minorities, and takes the opportunity to show, as has been done so successfully, so often, that good writing is not confined by those restrictions.

CO: Right. I've been reading *A Raisin in the Sun* recently, for a couple of things. I'm doing this reading for Black History Month at City Hall, and I'm going to read excerpts from that. I'm thinking what a great play it is, an African-American play. But it's really a great American play.

LL: That's the thing.

CO: It has such universality to it. I'm reading this thing, and I'm completely moved, as a reader.

So the plays you've done at ATA you've produced under the production of H.E.A.R.T. Has H.E.A.R.T. done work in Hoboken?

LL: Yeah, it did in December.

CO: That thing that Danny did. Are there other playwrights in Hoboken that you know of?

LL: I do. There's a guy named Joe Gallo. There's a lot of talent in Hoboken, that has to find each other.

CO: Yes. It seems to me there's no center point, in terms of the theatre. Which is one of the reasons why it excites me to be starting a theatre, and see who comes out of the woodwork.

LL: Well, I'm barely starting it. It's a shame this had to happen.

CO: Yes. I should meet Joey sometime.

LL: I should call him right now.

[Interruption. Lou calls Joey.]