

Transcript of an oral history interview with Helen Levinson (died 2016), conducted by Lee Viverette, Fine Arts Reference Librarian, and Suzanne Freeman, Head Fine Arts Librarian, at Helen's home in Richmond, Virginia on December 12, 2008.

Levinson was an actress with the Virginia Museum Theatre, starring in several leading roles from 1964-1971. She was also a member of the Council of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts from 1964-1979, and served on their board in 1966-1968.

LV: This is Lee Viverette with Suzanne Freeman in the home of Helen Levinson, on December 12, 2008. And we're just here to talk to her about her experience with the Museum and her work in the Theatre. Helen, would you like to just talk a little about your background?

HL: Yes, I graduated William & Mary. After, I was, I married very young, and I graduated William and Mary, moved to Richmond. And one of the first, my first connection, I guess, with the Museum was joining the Museum Women's Council which eventually I got put on the Board by Mary Freeman, when she was President. Our connection was the Theatre. Mary knew me because of her husband, Mallory. And when I was in the Museum Council, I graduated to being on the Board. And I was the publicity person for it. And I worked with George Cruger and I, for a while, I did that, I think for two years – once as an assistant and once as full Publicity. And I learned all about how to write a press release and stuff that served me very well when I went into business, when I worked in the future.

LV: What year would you have gone onto the Council, do you think?

HL: I think it was around '64, '63.

LV: Do you remember who was President then?

HL: Mary Freeman.

LV: Mary Freeman was President then.

HL: And Mary Freeman picked me to be on her Board, only because she knew me from the Theatre. Her husband, Mallory Freeman, was one of our, one of our most dedicated and wonderful actors, and he was in the first play that I did. The first play that I did at the Museum was *Auntie Mame*. And I went down for the callbacks because I was too nervous to go down for the auditions. And I pretended I was out of town. And the next morning after the callbacks, I had a telephone call about ten o'clock, and I picked it up, it barely rung. And Bob Telford, who was then the Director - and I'd never worked at the Theatre before – Bob Telford said to me, "My God, you must have been sitting on the phone." And I said I was. I was very naïve in those days. He said, "You walked in and you walked out with the best part, Vera Charles." And that was heavy competition.



So, and I was pretty young to be playing Vera, but we had a wonderful time, and that was my first connection. As a matter of fact, you mentioned Martha Davenport. She, people like Martha...no, that was the next year, in *The Women*, we included blacks and a little...that was later on. But the first show I did was *Auntie Mame*. And I walked into the costume room, and they had done all these elaborate costume designs. And the costume designer at the time was Tony Eikenbary, and he looks at me, all five feet of me in a pair of flat shoes and a shift or something. [Laughter] He said, "You're playing Vera Charles?" because he had these costumes with big hats and muffs. She's very flamboyant. But he scaled everything down. I looked tall on the proscenium stage.

LV, SF: [Laughter]

HL: So it all worked out very well. And I can't remember all the exact, consecutive, what the next show I did was. I'm trying to remember. I think the next show was *Tartuffe*...

LV: Okay.

HL: ...at the Museum. That's when they invited Eric Christmas and Tony van Bridge, very, very well known Shakespearian actors up at Stratford, Ontario. And that was very, very exciting, because, to work with professionals was a really good deal. And we had...that was *Tartuffe* which – there was even an editorial in the newspaper that said, "Get on down and see that show at the Virginia Museum!"

LV: What was your role in that show?

HL: I played Dorine, the maid, who was the protagonist for the whole show. She's the one that everybody bounced off. And one night, I don't know if you want me to talk about this?

LV: Yes.

SF: Sure.

HL: One night, we were out on the stage, and Tony van Bridge was playing the father, and he was wonderful, and I'm out there with him. Again, we're setting a scene. The maid did all that kind of work in the show, because it's really an important part. And I look at him, and I say my line, and nothing comes back. And he's talking, but he's not talking in the play. I mean, nobody could tell. But I looked at him, and I knew he had no idea.

SF: He went up on his lines.

HL: Yes, went so far up ...he had no idea where he was, and he was just talking. I mean, nobody knew it. And I'm standing out there, and I'm not exactly a pro. But somehow, I had the presence of mind, and I took his line and threw it to him as a question, you know, and we went on with the scene. And it was an exposition scene, so it was pretty important. And when we got off the stage, he went around. He was a very fine man, and of course, a very well respected

actor, and I was a little nobody. And he went off the stage, backstage...he was saying, "This little girl saved my life, she saved my life out there. I'd still be talking. I had no idea." And I was so, you know, I was so touched by that, because so often people are not generous, and they say, "Well, you didn't give me the right cue," you know. So I cherish that memory. It was really dear. We became good friends.

SF: What a dreadful feeling, isn't it, to be up there in front of all those people and know the person is just like a rabbit in the headlights?

HL: And, and he being so professional, you know, nobody could tell he'd just went talking. But we couldn't get him...move on with the scene.

LV: Right.

HL: It does happen, so it was a dear, wonderful experience. And it was a great show. But during that show, I had an automobile accident between the matinee and the evening performance. I was coming back down to the Theatre with my aunt, who was visiting me. And it was a rainy night. I had my makeup on because I had never taken it off. And I hit another car, and my husband had to call somebody to babysit our children. He came down to get us. My aunt went to the hospital with some cuts, and he's rushing, he says to the policeman, "Get my wife down to the Theatre. She has a show – Saturday night, full house." We got down to the Theatre. I didn't even know what was going on. I was like...and somebody put me in my merry widow, you know...tucked me in, they put my wig on, and I was standing backstage – I was the first person on the show. And I was standing backstage, and the girl that was playing a little assistant maid, I said, "I think, I don't think I'm feeling well." She just pushed me on the stage automatically. We did the show. But then I think it was shortly after that, the guy who was playing the young juvenile lead, he also had an accident. And he lived in the far, far West End. I only lived in the far West End. He had to take a taxicab to the Theatre, to get to, get to the Theatre that night because we had no other way to do it. But it was a very happy experience.

LV: It sounds like the show must go on.

HL: Definitely. Actually, it was only canceled one night that I remember, where a leading lady had the flu. Most of us went on. We might end up throwing up in the middle between scenes with a bug, but we went on. [Laughter]

LV: Wow!

SF: So you came into the Theatre right before Leslie Cheek actually retired, didn't you?

LV: Yeah, he was, he was there and very supportive.

SF: Yeah, that was his baby, wasn't it?



HL: Yes, in fact, an interesting story from him that was told to me by Jack [John] Doepp who was the very clever scenic designer who left the Museum to go work with Jo Mielziner in New York. But he said one night, one show, Leslie Cheek would come in to see the dress rehearsal. And he went over to Jack, and he said, you've got to do a lot of changing on that set. You know, things were wrong, and he gave him the list. This was the night before the opening. And Jack told me they were so aggravated that they had...and he said Mr. Cheek was so on target that they stayed up all night making the changes. And he was 100% right.

LV: That's interesting. He did have an eye.

HL: Oh, he never left things alone, and you never saw a brown leaf on a plant in the entire Museum. He really did keep an eye on everything from the Ladies' Rooms...

LV:smallest things.

HL: Right.

LV: We got the same point of view from Martha Davenport who was in charge of some of the exhibitions...

SF: ...and the Viennese Ball...

HL: Oh, I remember the Viennese Ball...

SF: ...and all of this...I mean, he was right in the middle of it.

HL: The Viennese Ball...and then, we had a very fascinating thing one year. We had Parsons School of Design.

LV: Right.

HL: Did anybody tell you about that?

SF: No.

LV: It's written down, but we haven't had anybody talk about it.

HL: Well, it was a wonderful event. They got...all the designers came. I mean people like, I'm trying to think of who now because no names are coming to me, but the famous couturiers.

LV: We can look them up.

HL: Yeah, you can look that up. And then the women on the Council hosted some of them and...

SF: Claire McCardell, was she one?

HL: No, she didn't, I know that...

SF: It was that era, though.

HL: It was that era.

SF: Yeah.

HL: And, oh, the name is like Norman Norell, he came.

SF: Oh my heavens, I love that perfume!

HL: And yeah, there's a lot. There were quite a few people. It was a wonderful event. And they had, you know, models and so on...and I remember particularly, because, as I said, my costumer friend André Bruce Ward, I had to get him invited. I said, how can you have a costumer here and not have him attend this Parsons School of Design?

LV: ...event.

HL: And he went with us, and we had the best time. We took one of the designers, who, the name will come to me in another time, or I'll look, you can look it up. We took her out to the White Tower for hamburgers, you know...

LV: [Laughter] The White Tower, great!

HL: That was, that was the place to go after hours, there was nothing else. So we had a lot of fun. That was a neat event. I mean, they did wonderful things like that.

LV: They were very creative, varied in the events, it sounds like...

HL: And so, the Council, you know, and they, those women worked like they were being paid. There was no difference, the Board, I'm talking about. I mean I've never seen women work like from nine to five. This was not a dilettante charity or anything like that. It was entirely different.

LV: We were talking about the difference in volunteerism then and now. And that, that's really the difference, is that they were invested and dedicated.

HL: It was like noblesse oblige. These women didn't have to work, but they worked.

LV: Right.

HL: People like Laila Pearsall, I mean...

LV: We interviewed her.

HL: Oh, did you? Okay.



LV: Yes, we did. She's at Westminster Canterbury as well.

HL: Oh, is she? Okay. Yeah, they were...and I, you know, was young and coming up. Boy, I learned a lot of good things about volunteer work, too...

SF: Sure you did!

HL: ...that would serve me in good stead, just in the real world.

SF: Well, it interested me how you got on the Council. You made a very interesting remark before we started taping, about Mrs. Thalhimer coming to you and...

HL: Oh, yes.

SF: ...being a minority.

HL: Yes, Nancy, well, Nancy Thalhimer was one of the early people on the Board because her...and her father-in-law, Morton Sr. was the one who started the whole Theatre. And she had to go to the, you know, ends of the earth to get the sponsors to get me in, to try...you know, to join with her. And it was a pretty restrictive group they were...

LV: A waiting list and it was hard to get in.

HL: And, I mean, it's totally different now, but it was really a big deal.

SF: Oh yeah.

HL: And you did work.

SF: It was very WASP, it was very...

HL: Very WASP. Yes, they had very few...there were maybe two or three Jewish people on the Board.

LV: But not far after that, there was the President of the Council...was Jewish...I can't remember her name.

HL: Really?

LV: I will have to look it up. [Jackie Viener, President 1969-1971]

HL: Well, I was, I was, I think, a member until about '75 when I started to work full time, so...but I used...I remember kidding our esteemed Mayor [Doug Wilder] who was then just a Senator and we were friends, and there weren't any black people anywhere...

HL, LV, SF: [Laughter]



HL: ...anywhere near that group. The Museum has changed for the better, I think.

SF: Oh, yes.

LV: Yeah, it's much more...

HL: I mean, I don't know how much you want to put in the Archives of...

LV: We were talking about the desegregation of the Museum.

HL: Yes, there was a lot of segregation at the Museum at the time. And Bob Telford was Director, but he was also the one that brought in the dance programs. They didn't have separate people, in other words, he was like the Artistic Director. He directed the shows and also scheduled the movies and dance companies that came through for the public. And he told me the story of one of the – he contracted with a dance company which was very prominent to come in and do a program. And the contract was signed, and there were black dancers. And they didn't want it – the powers that be – really did not want any black people on the stage. And the contract having been already signed, that was basically the first time that the regular programs were desegregated, because they couldn't do anything about the fact. Once the contract was signed, you had to abide by it. And then he desegregated the Theatre. I'm just trying to think... *Once in a Lifetime*, no, not *Once in a Lifetime*, I'm trying to think... *You Can't Take It With You* was the first show. And if anybody knows that old Kaufman play, the, even though they are stereotypes, it's the maid...

SF: Right.

HL: ...and her crazy boyfriend, but the whole family is kind of wild and wooly and crazy. And he, you know, he just cast the maid and the maid's boyfriend with black people because that is what...and that was basically the first time that the stage was desegregated at the Virginia Museum Theatre.

SF: That's fascinating...

LV: Was there any...

SF: This was the 60's?

HL: Yeah, I would think that it was definitely in the late 60's.

SF: Late 60's.

HL: Because Carl Lester, who subsequently played many, many roles around Richmond, was, I believe, the boyfriend. And he's very, very talented. He's a musician and so forth. But it was a big deal.

LV: Was it well received? Or was...



HL: I don't think there were any problems.

LV: Okay.

HL: The only problems I remember was when... [Tape has no sound]

LV: All right, we were talking about...

HL: ...when they did the play, when [Director] Keith Fowler's first show, I think it might have been, but I might, I haven't really gone over it, so I don't remember...but *Marat/Sade* was pretty scandalous. And one of the, it's an African American or black, call it black, whatever is politically correct, was climbing up the body of a white girl in this insane asylum, and there was much to-do about that, backlash.

LV: In the papers or just in the community?

HL: I don't think it was in the paper. You just got, you know, I was close to the Museum. You just sort of got things. And *Childe Byron*, the other play, where there was the...oh, and in *Marat/Sade*, too, you've got the first touch of nudity. Somebody stood up and from the back was nude.

LV: Man or woman?

HL: Man. And that was pretty scandalous, too, I mean...Keith Fowler was trying to set everybody's teeth on edge. But with *Childe Byron*, the big rumor was that if they didn't change some of the things in that, a big contributor, who was going to leave money to the Museum, was threatening to take away donations. So that...it was pretty shocking. But he was there to shock, that was his whole big thing.

SF: Yeah.

HL: You know.

SF: Exactly.

HL: So, that was during his period. But getting back to Bob Telford in my days of acting, because we also got the people down from Shakespeare, Stratford-on-Avon. They did *Hamlet*. We had a fabulous *Hamlet* thing. I wasn't in that, but we had Leo Ciceri, a famous, famous person from Stratford. And then they came down to do *Comedy of Errors*, and I didn't even want to try out because I thought of myself as a comedienne. And I, Shakespeare...but *Comedy of Errors* is the lowest, bawdiest...you know, show of his, and I was lucky, and he cast me in that show, too. So that was ...

LV: A low and bawdy part?

HL: Yep, let's see, yes, it was very low and bawdy. I played one of the sisters.



LV: Okay.

HL: Meredith Scott was the cool sister, she was all dressed in blues and greens, and I was the hot sister in orange and reds. And it was...we did it in the style of a *commedia dell'arte*. And it was, it was very exciting. But Eric Christmas directed it. And he's the one who directed *Tartuffe* and *Hamlet* and so forth that we brought down. And he was down to see a show prior to his coming down to direct *Comedy of Errors*. And the costumes were so awful for this show. They had somebody who worked on the staff at the Museum, was really not up to snuff. And we walked out with him, and he was a very volatile, temperamental kind of guy. "That woman will not do my costumes." I mean, people were in...the show was *Fanny* and the costumes were...everybody kind of had their own bathrobe on in the bedroom scene. So he got...we had these stylized, wonderful *commedia* costumes designed by the costume designer...by the scenic designer. And they made a postcard which they had at the Virginia Museum.

LV: Okay.

HL: They used to have it with Meredith Scott and myself and the two...two men that played parts.

LV: I'm sure it must be in the Archives, I'll look for it.

HL: Yeah, it's a really beautiful postcard. I used to love to buy them and send them to people. Put a little arrow in case they didn't recognize me with a red wig. [Laughter]

So the...and then when Keith Fowler came in, people were really bellyaching because some of the shows just didn't, were not what they wanted to see at the Museum. They wanted to see some of the old guard back. He came in with his own forces. And so finally, I got a call to come down. I didn't...wouldn't have gone down, but I got a call to come down to audition for a part. And I found out that I was the token of the old guard that was asked. Everybody else was either his people...it was one of my most miserable experiences. [Laughter] The show was *Once in a Lifetime*, and it was a fun show. But there was just a few of us that hung out together because we were a little bit outcasts.

LV: Right.

HL: And I think the only reason I was asked because people wanted to see some of their familiar...

LV: Familiar faces...

HL: ...familiar faces that they enjoyed, you know. And Jack Doepp came down. He was designing the show, and he walked by the Rehearsal Room. I remember him saying to me after, "Boy, you look miserable." But I was just...it lacked the vigor or something. And it was like

not a great experience, but the show was fun. And I think that's the last thing I did at the Virginia Museum. I can't remember that.

LV: You did things elsewhere?

HL: Yeah, I worked at Barksdale, and I worked at Swift Creek. But actually, I did the bulk of my work at the Museum.

LV: How many plays do you think you were in now? Do you have any idea?

HL: Let's see...I don't know, maybe 5 or 6. I can't...I did *The Women* which was a tour de force. And that was another year. We didn't mention that. That was my second, my third year at the Museum. And that's when André Bruce Ward came to costume. And he had been there the year before, but I didn't do anything. But we became friendly. So when he designed the designs for *The Women*, he had all the costumes for Sylvia with my hairdo, it looked like me. He said, "I never knew whether you could act or not." But we had become friends by that time, and I did get that part. And...I was the resident bitch for a couple of shows.

LV, SF: [Laughter]

HL: And that was wonderful. And he got Burlington...they got Burlington Industries from North Carolina...

LV: Okay.

HL: ...to donate the fabric. And the clothes were made like couturier clothes, hand stitched...

SF: Oh my!

HL: ...no machine. And I mean they were gorgeous. And you probably have documentation of the gowns and Miss...

LV: Right.

HL: ...Suzanne Pollard with her red feather cape and me with my leopard chiffon and...fox. It was just an incredible show, and then they tried to sell people the costumes.

LV: I was going to say I wondered what happened to the very costumes that were used.

HL: They tried to sell them, but...and Martha Davenport played a very small part. I mean, there were so many women in the...

LV: She didn't mention that.

HL: She did not?

LV: No.



HL: Well, she did. She was one of the ladies in the rest...you know, in the fancy nightclub restroom or something. Lots of people who didn't really do a lot of stage work did the models and things like that in the show. And the costumes were absolutely glorious, and I think you have all the slides and stuff from that.

LV: We do. We've been trying to recreate because we have a Theatre archive project. That's one of the focuses of the Archivist, documenting the Theatre. We have an Archivist working on that with another part-time Archivist, and they have been able to hunt down some of the drawings for stage sets. They found some things on eBay and someone, you know, from Texas. They have been...

HL: ...because, I mean, Jack...

LV: ...trying to accumulate material like that to put in the Archives.

HL: That would be real...

LV: So it would be neat to have the costumes. I think about the top hat...

HL: Well, André, André has stuff, and I think he told Steve...

LV: Murden.

HL: Yeah.

LV: Okay, great.

HL: ...that he was going to donate some of the...in fact, they just published a book for him on his costumes at...in Memphis. He's been there about 30 years. And they did a book for him which they just sent me so...

LV: Okay.

SF: Have you come to the Theatre gatherings...been able to at the Museum?

HL: Yeah.

LV: She did.

SF: I thought you were there...

LV: The memory...

SF: Excellent, because we walked out, and I said this is wonderful, when Bob Telford...they called him in California...

HL: Yes.



SF: And people were just so excited to see each other. They hadn't seen each other in 40 years.

HL: I know, sometimes you had to wonder, who is that?

LV: Without the pictures, you know, we wouldn't have been able to identify...

SF: Exactly...

LV: ...everyone, to identify the people.

HL: Well, that was a very, very novel idea for the, for *The Women*, to make the clothes. I mean, you just almost felt differently. Everything was made just like an expensive dress would be made. And I don't know if they ever ended up selling it. I, I would have loved to have bought my beautiful leopard chiffon, but I just couldn't, I just couldn't afford it. I mean, because they were trying to...they were worth a lot of money. But I don't know what happened to...I could ask André what happened to those clothes because they were gorgeous.

LV: I guess Martha would know. The only thing she said about the Theatre was that they were required to pour coffee and tea at the intermission, so they kept having to get up and leave the audience, you know, leave their husbands to go work...to pour, you know, act as hostesses for the intermissions. And that... and their husbands complained, and so they, then they didn't do that any longer. [Laughter]

SF: Mr. Cheek listened, she said. You know, she's very, very high on him, very fond of her memories of him, that he listened, was very sensitive, and said, "well, you don't have to do that anymore."

HL: Oh, okay, yeah, well those, those opening nights that we had season tickets, I mean they were glamour nights, you just start...some of the men wore black ties for the openings, and I must say, wherever you go to the theater now, everybody is in their blue jeans or whatever. Of course, I should talk, but it really, it...

LV: ...makes it less of an event.

HL: It does, really.

LV: A really special time, I think.

HL: It does make it less of an event, and there were...there were a lot of hard times after Bob Telford left. We...other directors came in, and, you know, the Theatre went through a lot of bumps. I was not really that active there then, because I did other things.

And in the early 80's, they had a tribute to Mr. Cheek, and they did scenes from shows. And we all came to the...they picked out the shows...somebody else did that. And that was the tribute night. I was going to say that's maybe '82. I don't know the exact year, but I was working.



LV: That sounds about right.

HL: I was working at Cudahy's then. And so Suzanne Pollard and myself and a few others recreated one of the scenes from *The Women*. And we wore our costumes, and we, you know...and other, other things from other shows...*The Admirable Crichton* and *The King and I*, different shows. It was quite a celebratory night.

LV: So it was a big party, then?

HL: Yeah, upstairs, you know...they had all kinds of food afterwards. And it was a big celebration. I guess, what would, what would it have been? It was for Mr. Cheek. Was it maybe an honorary thing for him or something?

SF: It could have been his 80th birthday or something like that. I can't...I've seen the clippings and know that happened, but I can't...

HL: I don't remember what it was, maybe they did something after that...

LV: Well, they were working on a biography at one point, it wouldn't have been connected with that.

SF: I don't know.

HL: No, this was...it was...I guess it was also a fundraiser, because people paid, you know, money to come to it. But I just remember that we would, you know...they, they dragged out the old costumes, and we did our scene. But there were also a few nights in the Theatre where they honored somebody. One time, they had parties at the Jefferson. I don't know whether that...I'm just kind of thinking about that now. One, where they had a little cabaret program, and it was to be to honor somebody connected to the Theatre.

SF: You remember going to it.

LV: I can, I can certainly research that, and Steve will probably know.

HL: Because that's the time Bob Telford came, and I think that may be the time...or he was down for a panel. And where he usually stayed, he couldn't stay, so he stayed here. And he just kept us up to three o'clock, a couple of us sitting here and telling us stories about the Museum.

LV: I'd love to interview him.

HL: Yeah, you could interview him. Can you fly out to California?

LV: Sure, that'd be fine.

SF: [Laughter] I wish.



HL: I guarantee you he'd tell you everything.

SF: Oh, I know!

LV: We may have done a phone interview or tried to do one. Wasn't [Archivist] Courtney [Yevich] talking about that at one time with you?

SF: We might have, yeah.

LV: Have any stories about him you'd like to relate? [Laughter]

HL: No, except that... he was just...he was kind of a pillar of the Theatre. And he had a good rapport with all the others. The only reason I got cast, I think, in that...*Auntie Mame* thing with such a glorious part was he had been out to Barksdale to see me in a show that I was in with Hansford Rowe, where I played the same kind of person that Vera Charles was. He didn't know me from Adam, you know, before that. And I think that kind of helped me get the part. And Hansford Rowe...there was also...I don't know if we should go into this. There was also a big to-do at the Museum Theatre about getting actors paid, which I always think maybe was starting the whole downside of the Theatre...

LV: Right.

HL ...was a lot of...

LV: ...consternation about...

HL: Well, there were...there's always one person that can start the ball rolling, and he's getting a petition going. And, well, see, the other theaters were paying nothing, but something...in other words, I think when I went to Barksdale, I got \$2.00 a performance, which maybe in those days did my gas.

LV: Well, why shouldn't you have been paid?

HL: No, all the other theaters did pay, even if they could pay zilch, they paid something. Except we didn't. The Museum was such a wonderful venue, that beautiful stage and all that, all the lovely things that you could work on, that people felt like the Museum was nonprofit, and we did it. And I never thought much about it. But then something started stirring up, the petitions went out, and it just, it just...

LV: Kind of soured...

HL: I think it was a sour note. I can understand somebody who wanted to be a professional actor, wanting it like that. But because when they imported people...got Equity people to come in to take leads, they had to pay them.

LV: Right.



HL: So...

SF: Yeah.

HL: But it was just not a real good time, and I just...I don't remember what year that was, but nothing ever happened. They never did pay people, I don't think.

LV: When the Theatre became separate from the Museum, that was TheatreVirginia? That was a whole...

HL: When Keith Fowler, they started doing the Union, the Equity players, and we're a right to work state, at that time, particularly, and a state could not have a Union. And I mean...and it was done, and there was a lot of consternation about it. I can't remember all the details, but the only way they could continue was to basically rent the Theatre back from the Museum. They couldn't, they were functioning originally as the Virginia Museum Theatre. And then they had to make that change because legally they couldn't unionize the Theatre. I think I'm sort of right.

LV: Right.

HL: I may not have every fact straight. So that's how they separated, and then that was all the part of the whole downhill.

SF: Yeah, did you remain associated with, or even as a theater-goer until the end?

HL: No, I didn't keep my season tickets. I sort of, I guess you might say I rebelled against some of the stuff, and I didn't have the same feeling. I did go to the Theatre, but I didn't have my regular season tickets, I dropped those. And...I wish I had done my homework to do the years for you all.

LV: Well, that's something we can look up.

HL: Okay, but there were...

LV: It's really your point of view that we want...

HL: And then they...there was another rebirth of the Theatre which I was not active in. They had a Board and so forth, and I didn't...I didn't participate at the time, but that didn't work either.

SF: The subject matter became...when I was first working here, that was when the Theatre finally closed. Because they just could not bring in, I don't know, it's unfortunately...it is a testimony, I think, to where we are still. You know, a lot of African American themes, and African American director...

HL: Well, by that time we had done *Purlie* at the Museum...

SF: Which was great.

HL: ...for the Museum while I was still there.

SF: Great fun.

HL: They had sort of moved on, you know. But now, the Council just...you can go...I can go in and say I want to be a volunteer, and I join the Council?

LV: Pretty much.

HL: That's what my neighbor told me.

LV: Right, it's...the group has just been dwindling, I think, with age, and younger women don't come on because no one has time for the kind of volunteerism that used to be so prevalent. And the volunteers that we do get aren't willing to really work that many hours, and it's kind of hard to get that type of dedication. The real dedication now, I think, with the volunteer force is with the Docents. They seem to, you know, invest a lot of time and energy. But the regular rank and file Council volunteers, you know, do their time and not much else, and that's kind of how it's been.

HL: So, is there still a Council Board?

LV: There is, there is, and they have a lot of social events and travel, and that seems to be pretty well attended, and lunches and that sort of thing. But as far as the volunteerism goes...

HL: In my day, they were working...

LV: Right.

HL: ...they were really working hard. I mean, people like Martha and Mary Freeman...and Laila Pearsall was down there every single day.

SF: Oh, she's a dynamo, yeah.

LV: She was still coming until a few years ago. She was working in the Library.

SF: She was actually in the Library. She had a fall. Yeah, she's something.

HL: Yeah, she was, she was sort of a mentor when I was on the Board.

LV: Do you remember her getting the Shop together at the time?

HL: The Shop was already functioning.

LV: Okay, okay.



HL: But I...I had retail skills that I didn't know about. I didn't know about them until I started to work at Cudahy. Because, you know, it just came naturally, but I...when I worked there, you know, I would have some suggestions. And it was, it was actually Laila – I met somewhere many years later – and said we still use some of your ideas, which I thought was cute because I did work in the Shop. But when I was on the Board I did the publicity, and I loved that.

LV: And when you're talking about publicity, it's publicity for events?

HL: Yeah, I did all the publicity. The first year I did publicity for the Council, I was assistant, and Ann Haskell, I don't know if that name has come up...she was the publicity. I didn't know anything about it, but I was her assistant, and I helped. If they were having an event...like one time, they had an event of a concert that was coming into the Museum, and they needed something to accompany a slide on television for PSA, you know? And I think Fred Haseltine was the PR person then, and he went and he called me. And my little...my daughter Jill, my baby...she was about 8 years old...she's standing there next to a big viola or something. And that's the thing, you know, at the last minute they needed somebody.

And so we...they had a lot of...all the events had to be publicized. And they did, you know, a really good job, and I didn't have to work with any committee, which I liked. I only worked with the public information head of the Museum. And sometimes, we'd go to television to promote it...a children's program, "Sailor Bob" or somebody, I remember.

SF: Oh, Lord, "Sailor Bob."

HL: I had to go on for one of the children's programs...the "Paperbag Players" came. So it was a lot of interesting things, and I loved doing that. So it was two years, but then I guess I went to work for a real living... [Laughter]

LV: Taking your retail skills with you...

HL: ...at the Hand Workshop. Right, right, actually that is, I guess, where I learned everything.

LV: That's amazing.

HL: Well...

LV: I'm sure you had a knack for it that you applied in that situation.

HL: Well, you know, it just, this has nothing to do with the Museum. But when I went to work, my first job was at the Hand Workshop. In those days, they had a fair, you know, the big craft fair. Well, the craft fair is now a big venue and so forth. Well, it was in the backyard of the Church Hill Hand Workshop on 24th Street. And they were...they sold food, but they were paying to get the food. And I was there the first year, I did the fair, it was my job. I got everything for nothing. You don't pay for food. We got McDonald's to give us the Orange



Bowl, and we got somebody to give us the hot dogs and the rolls, and then we sold them, you know. It was just a natural instinct.

LV: [Laughter] Natural, yep.

HL: But I learned apparently all the skills at PR. I did learn how to write, how to write a PSA and all that stuff because I was working at another nonprofit. So it was...it stood me well for my first real job.

LV: Exactly, you went on to be involved in the arts communities all around town.

HL: Yeah.

LV: Do you want to talk about all the different art associations you were involved with, or have been involved with?

HL: Well, I thought this was limited to the Museum.

LV: Well, we're not...it's about you, too.

HL: Well, I did learn all that stuff, and I must thank George Cruger for teaching me how to do those things. And so when I went to my first full-time job...was working at Hand Workshop. I mean, I was taking a pottery course. And somebody says, "Does anyone want to work a couple of days a week?" And I went...I was making \$2.50 an hour. I had to go home and ask my husband, did he think it was all right. He said, "I guess it's all right" in those days. And I...that's how I started, and then they opened a branch on Cary Street. And the Board chose me to manage it. And that was just about when I was getting split up. And I, you know, was looking for a full-time job.

SF: Right.

HL: So I ran their store on Cary Street, and that was wonderful. And then they decided to close it, not because of any...and when they closed it, one of the Board members wanted to back me and let me keep the store open. She was very happy to, but I was timid about that. That was, that was not my thing. I liked to work, although I didn't want to own it and be bothered with it. Probably because my ex-husband was a builder, and when you're building, you have a very, very fabulous year, and then the next year, you have to worry about how to make payroll for your men. And I didn't want that kind of thing, so I didn't. But I didn't do it. But I did go to work for another gallery that was opening up in Church Hill where the Hand Workshop was. I worked there for a couple of years, and then started Cudahy's with Rita Stern. And so...and then ended up working there for 23 years, and then we closed because he wanted to sell the building. He was totally moving away. And La Diff asked me to open up White Canvas. Lee, you helped me with that.

LV: Yeah, I was there.



HL: And we opened White Canvas, and then I was there about 2 ½ years, and then I retired, and now they're closed. But it was a good career.

LV: Well, you were involved with some arts organizations, too.

HL: Yeah, and I still help the Hand Workshop with their fundraisers and help Jennifer occasionally and Glave Kocen with anything that I can do and...

LV: Didn't Governor Wilder have you on some art...

HL: Yes, he had me...put me...oh, bless his heart, when he was Governor, he put me on the task force, the Arts Task Force that month...that year, and there was no money. That was when he was balancing the budget a little bit, and he cut all the arts money, which, with all due respect to the arts, I love them, I'd rather see him cut the arts budget that year than take them out of poor children...and take the food out of the mouths of poor children.

LV: Right.

SF: Yeah.

HL: I was very...I got a lot of flak from people that said, "You're our friend. Governor Wilder sure did hit the arts community," and I said, "where did you want him to take it...hit it?" You know...I just...because there is a lot of dilettante stuff in grants for artists. It's not all...I mean, we all know even in the Depression days, the artists were given stipends, but they had to go into the schools and do murals and in the public buildings.

SF: Right.

HL: It wasn't just a handout.

LV: Right.

HL: But anyway, I was on this Task Force, and we traveled all around the state and listened to all the arts organizations crying for money. It was...I would say it didn't do me any favors. [Laughter] But it was interesting, because I did get to go to all the different...Roanoke, Fredericksburg, Norfolk.

LV: Right, well, the Museum is involved, you know...

HL: Yes.

LV: ...has a lot of affiliates in those areas, too.

HL: Right.

LV: Outreach...



HL: Yes.

LV: ...because we're a state agency. We...that's one of our missions, is to go out into...

HL: Oh yes...

LV: ...the hinterlands of Virginia.

HL: What do they call, what do they...?

SF: Everything! Affiliates now, partners...

HL: It used to be the Museum Affiliates, I remember that. I remember going to a couple of functions when they'd come in for a play or something. Occasionally, someone would invite me to be a part of all these groups from...but it was also, you know, it was a certain kind of person. Now, it's so much...it seems to be serving so many more people. It was a little elitist in the early days, wouldn't you say? [Laughter]

LV: I wouldn't know.

HL: It was, it was a little bit elitist, you know. I don't mean in a bad way, it was just the way life was.

SF: It was different.

LV: Right.

HL: Everything was different, but I think it has opened up, and it's wonderful now.

LV: Do you remember the Artmobile?

HL: Very well, yes, they used to travel all over and...and now they have the Friends of Art, the African American Friends of Art. And I, you know...

LV: And they have a group, I think it's called Canvas...

HL: Yes, I went to one of their meetings as a matter of fact. I went to a meeting down at the old Cudahy building. Bev Reynolds was talking and showing some of the art that this particular firm had collected. And it was the White Canvas...not White Canvas, it was the Canvas Group. I went with Jennifer Glave, she took me.

LV: Okay.

HL: And it was really very nice because I was very surprised. Bev Reynolds was doing the talk, and she really gave a very nice tribute to me. I mean just, "standing over there is Helen Levinson, she's been very, you know, helpful in the arts community." I was...

SF: How nice!

HL: ...very touched, I thought that was a really sweet thing that she did. So yeah, I, I don't know much about that group.

LV: It's an older...it's...you graduate from Friends of Art, and you're...

SF: ...more mature...

LV: ...not single, you're older and established and...

HL: ...and that's when you move into that...

LV: ...into Canvas.

HL: Friends of...

LV: Over forty.

HL: Over forty? Okay, I could pass. [Laughter] Well, they now...Friends of Art had a couple of functions at Cudahy's. We would, you know, occasionally have people do things like that. And Friends of Art and even the African American...what are they called?

LV: Friends of African American Art.

HL: And so, you know, we occasionally worked together on some things.

LV: Right, and there's the Collectors' Circle...

HL: And I belonged to the Collectors' Circle for a while.

LV: And how was that?

HL: Well, I did it, you know, because I thought it was a good networking thing, being in business, and I was a collector, you know, and it was fine. But it got to be just a little...I don't know if I want to be quoted... [Laughter] ...a little self-serving, it just...

LV: Was it a small group when you were...?

HL: It was pretty small...

LV: Okay.

HL: ...not enormous.

SF: Because in the old days, you know, the huge collectors like Nelson D. Rockefeller and Vincent Price...and during the Cheek years because you know how many people he...



HL: Oh was that...this was much later. It was when I...it was in the 80's.

SF: And now, it's become sort of a forum for people to sort of show off things, I think, in a way...

HL: That...

SF: ...that...

HL: Yeah, in fact...

SF: They are trying to change it because it is a really interesting concept, I think, to have...to share their things. How you go about it. How you started this.

HL: Well, we, when I was in it, one of the first...there were a lot of people, and they weren't all old people, there were younger people in it. And it was interesting at first. And then they had a show. Everybody would have to bring their work if they had something of note...bring it and have to be juried. And a lot of people brought things. And a lot of things weren't juried in. I was lucky, I brought my Stephen Fox painting, the one up there.

SF: I love that.

HL: And they did.

SF: I've been admiring that.

HL: That was juried in, and I was excited to have a piece in. But...

SF: I've always loved it.

HL: You got to feel a little bit when people were showcasing their own...

LV: Self-promoting.

HL: Yeah, and I don't...it wasn't anything big. I just finally gave it up.

LV: So it wasn't for you at the...

HL: I stayed in it for quite a few years. I think I probably wasn't the only one that left.

SF: Oh no, it's a pretty small group now.

LV: We've come probably to the end of our talk, but just in closing, I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the Museum over time? How it was when you were first involved with the Museum, and how it is now, in light of the expansion? If you have any wishes for the future...



HL: You know, I don't...I mean, I think it's opened up to the public a lot, and I think that's very healthy because there's no reason that, you know, young children from the wrong side of the tracks shouldn't be exposed to the wonderful things that could enlighten their lives forever. And so, I think that's very, very good. And I assume when it's expanded there will be even more opportunities for, you know...as long as it's kept to the thing...it's not, you don't have to have a lot of money to enjoy it. And I particularly think that young people...I mean, I can still remember my first experiences in New York in the museum.

LV: What sparked your interest in art? Did you have one epiphany moment?

HL: No, basically I was all...I was not good with my hands, and I was not a visual artist, but I always had the art mind and I, I mean, I have a book of paintings from the Louvre that...I don't know...I must have been 14 or 13 when I bought that for something, but, so, I always loved it. And I did go to a lot of museums, because I lived in the city. But I wanted to be an actress, and so to me, all the arts are sisters and brothers.

LV: So you lived in Manhattan, is that what you're saying?

HL: Yep, and you know, if you're into the theater and, certainly, you have to be into the visual arts...I think, maybe the only art that isn't as connected is the art...

[Tape ended, turn to other side]

LV: ...with Helen Levinson about how she got interested in art when she lived in New York.

HL: Well, naturally, you have all these wonderful museums. My cousin lived across the street from the Museum of Natural History. What better for a child to go in there every day, or whenever they're visiting? And, you know, my parents were more into theater. They weren't into art. But I feel that the arts are all connected, and so when I went into the gallery business, I basically had the kind of courses at school that you take, the general art courses. I was not an art major, and...but I did a lot of reading and a lot of quick studying because I really needed to know about all the mediums and anybody that knew anything, I...just like I used to do with Eric Christmas when he demonstrated how to act a thing. I could stand there and put it away in my head.

I would do the same thing with art. When Dick Cossitt was the first critic in Richmond that I dealt with...remember him? And I picked his brain when he was critiquing one of our shows. "Well, why did you say this?" because I wanted to learn. I'm not really into people who come in and think they know it all or wrote the book on it, like the Spear Carrier in the play. He does one role, and he's ready to play Hamlet. [Laughter] But I did get a lot of, you know, learning, and then I went to camp. And I...that's where I got my theater bug. We used to take Broadway musicals and change the name and write them, because it wasn't legal, and do plays,

so...between the two, I never thought I'd end up in a gallery. I thought I'd end up doing all theater work, but I think the arts are just so close that if you relate to one, it goes all the way.

LV: And you were...before you did gallery work, you were talking about how you were involved in the Loan/Own gallery at the Museum.

HL: Yes, in addition to the Shop and in addition to publicity, I did work the Loan/Own. And that was great. I loved the idea that people could rent work, and it goes to the price of buying it eventually. I actually, I didn't buy it from Loan/Own, but when I was in...trying...one of the shows at the Museum, one of the early shows that I did, they used to have a big portrait in the...before you went into the Theatre. And Frank Rowley, who was a prominent artist at the time, would do the portrait. And it was just done on spec so that the people could see it and get his name. And I got called, I guess it was the first show, so it must have been *Auntie Mame*, but I can't remember now. And it was a portrait of me, and it was...oh, I loved it. It was, you know, just a little essence...a charcoal. I paid him \$25 a week until I paid for the whole thing.

LV: And where is that?

HL: It's upstairs. You want to see when I'm young? [Laughter]

LV: I'd love to see it when we're done.

HL: So, and I do remember one night, at opening night, and we were in the Lobby. I was then dressed for seeing a play. And Mrs. Cheek, whom I knew just barely then, she was in a circle talking with, I guess...Leslie [Cheek] was there...and a few other people. And I guess I must have said something to her about how do you do all you do in one day? You know, here she was, in the Theatre, dressed beautifully, and she probably had done 49 charity events before that. And I will never forget, because it was really mentoring me. She may have not known it, but I did tell her about it in her much later years when I would see her. She said, "Well," she said, "When I get up in the morning, and I get dressed for the day, you know, if I know I'm going to something at night, if I have an event, then I basically get ready underneath." You know, like you put your makeup on a little more carefully than you would if you're running to the grocery store. You put the right garments on that you're going to wear so that you're basically done. You need to freshen up your face, and you need to maybe change your clothes...that, I mean, I've been doing that for years. And like sitting around now today, you know, I have to go to a thing, an event tonight. But I'm basically, my hair is done, my face is done, I'm...you know, so I can just throw on some new clothes and touch up a little bit, as opposed to just getting up and running out in the morning and doing...and then you have to come back and...

LV: ...change...

HL: ...do the whole thing, and I always found that those little...I remember them. I mean, this was a long time ago. And every time I'd see her, we'd connect on that point. The other story about Mary Tyler [Cheek]...Mary Tyler, I thought you said Mary Tyler Moore...[Laughter]

I was told this story by my friend André who was the costumer. Every fall when the new staff would come in, she would, she and Leslie would have them out to dinner. And a lot of these people had not been to a house like this or a dinner with six spoons and four forks or whatever it is. And he said it was so cute. They were all there at the beginning of the season, the new people that were working at the Museum. And Mrs. Cheek would be at the head of the table, and she'd pick up whatever was the first utensil for the appetizer or whatever...and he did a wonderful imitation. She would pick it up, and she'd say, "So, I was saying to Leslie...", and then everybody would pick up the fork. And she just would guide you right through and make everybody feel at home.

LV: Gracefully make you feel at home. That's lovely.

HL: That's a really sweet story. I didn't have that, but all the new work people did. And I'm sure they were from many works, or walks of life.

SF: Oh yes.

HL: And so she did it so gracefully, he said. That's an interesting story.

SF: That's a wonderful story.

HL: And he always used the words, "so I said to Leslie," and then he picked it up. [Laughter]

SF: Remarkable, she was a remarkable woman...that whole generation of women...

HL: She was quite...

SF: There was a group, the ones who started everything...

HL: Even I knew a little bit Mrs. [Elisabeth Scott] Bocoock. She started the Hand Workshop. And when I was working at the one on Cary Street, I mean, I didn't really know her well, but she'd come in, in her tennis shoes...who knows, she may have ridden a bicycle. And she plopped down on the floor at the Hand Workshop and just started talking to me about things. I mean, she was an old gal by then, but she just had this vim and vigor, you know, which we...you know a lot of people could use a little vim and vigor, right? [Laughter]

SF: Yes.

LV: A lot of people could use vim and vigor.

HL: Anything else?



LV: I'm trying to think...unless you wanted to say something about Pinkney [Near]?

HL: Pinkney was Curator when I was there, and I just found him to be a dear man. I mean, I know he was very learned and very accomplished, but my adjective for him would be dear. He was just a lovely person. We all went to his funeral, and it was a testament to him, really, that, I mean, every art teacher from VCU, every artist was there. And you know, the Museum wasn't always so welcoming to young, new artists. But he must have been, because they were all there for him.

SF: Right.

LV: That does speak volumes. I didn't experience that, but I felt the same way at [Curator] Fred Brandt's funeral recently, you know. It was well attended by people who knew him. He was a big supporter of the Museum. On that note, we will end, unless there's something you'd like to say.

HL: No, I look forward to the new Museum, and maybe I'll get back and do some work for it.

SF: We'd love it.

LV: Thank you, Helen.

SF: Thank you, Helen.