

*Transcript of an oral history interview with Robert "Bob" Sheldon Telford (1923-2016), conducted by Sally Curran, Publications Editor, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia on June 9, 2009. Also present at the interview were Courtney Yevich, Archivist and Assistant Fine Arts Librarian, and Bob's son, Scott.*

*Telford was an award-winning actor, director, and writer. He was the Director of the Virginia Museum Theatre from 1958-1966, directing more than 40 shows during his tenure. He was the first Director to present popular musicals during the theatrical season, and he is credited for integrating the theatre during his final production in 1966, while the Commonwealth of Virginia was still a legally segregated state.*

*Note: The recording begins in the middle of Bob talking about his predecessor at the Virginia Museum Theatre, Theatre Director Arthur Ballet, and his relationship with museum Director Leslie Cheek.*

BT: But on opening night of every show he [Leslie Cheek] would sit there with [his wife] Mary Tyler [Cheek] and write little notes. And as Mary Tyler told [my wife] Jodi, after ten minutes of notes writing, he would fall asleep. [Laughter.] He never really saw the play. But, on the opening night of the theater...you know, that was more auspicious than just any old opening night. I mean, here we are! The theater in a museum! Wow! And the note came down to the [Theatre] Director the next morning, and on the note, which related to this monumental opening of a theater in a museum, it said, "When I walked into the theater, there was a matchstick in the aisle. Please be sure that that does not happen again." [Laughter.]

SC: Yeah, I think I did hear that story.

BT: Have you heard that?

SC: Yes, I have.

BT: You had to have heard that from me!

SC: Yeah. No, no, no. I think I... I heard the matchstick story, yeah.

BT: You have heard that?! I thought I was the only one in the *world* who knew that story!

SC: Maybe it was something similar, maybe a similar type incident where it was...

BT: Well, I'm convinced he [Arthur] left because he couldn't stand Leslie Cheek.

SC: Yeah, yeah.

BT: And then the next guy that he hired was a comments teacher. He was inept at the most. And I came in, I believe, and replaced him.



SC: Okay. And any...was there any discussion about how the work would... the theater...

BT: Not a bit of how to do, nothing. But all I knew was that everything I do went through him in the same manner as the note, you know. It was all kind of after the fact. But, I had certain commandments that I had set up based on my understanding of him. One was it was a classical theater, so the plays had to be classical. And don't forget I was not only the Producer... my title was Producer-Director, not Managing Director, but Producer-Director. I produced the theater as well as directing it. I produced a chamber music society program. I produced a film society program. And I produced a dance society program. And these were all booked-in shows. So... And I didn't have... I had a Business Manager who, you know, helped me in almost every respect, but these were not delegated responsibilities. They were mine.

SC: You were running a full time performing arts center...

BT: Yeah, and I got along well with everything. And that didn't mean that he didn't do dumb things with me, but I mean... I remember one time when Ariel [Baliff] was still my Designer—Ariel was here from the beginning—and he and I were called into Cheek's office. And I can't recall the conversation, but he was telling us that we should do something or didn't like something, you know, one of those things. And all of that usually just wafted over my head. I never took it personally, which is why I lasted because I didn't take it personally as the other people did. But when we left his office and we were walking across the lobby floor, Ariel said and you can't quote this [in your *myVMFA* article] because... He said, "I'll fix that son of a bitch!" And his answer was the Renaissance Theater. He started the Renaissance Theater to overwhelm. See, he wanted my job. He thought he was going to be the next Director, because after all he was a designer, Cheek was a designer, and his work was *really* good. But he thought that Cheek would then take that and assume that he would be ideal to run it. Because a designer ran the museum, why shouldn't a designer run the theater, right?

SC: Right.

BT: And when he did not get that job, he never forgave Cheek. And the costume designer whose name escapes me—you may be able to remind of that—was a classmate of mine at Yale. And he told Cheek that I was not capable of running a theater. He knew me from Yale, and he knew that I was not *capable* of running the theater. And when I came down here to be interviewed, I went to his house. And he told me that, "Oh, I just thought that nobody could do it the way things were, blah, blah, blah..." Well, of course I figured out later, the reason why he said that was he wanted Ariel. So when I came in, he quit. He never worked for me. He quit right then on the spot. Ariel stayed a year and started the Renaissance, and that was his threat. It came to fruition in the Renaissance, which lasted three years and was a, you know, damning blow I suppose to all of those guys—Tom Carlin, all the guys he took with him—all thought that they were going to change Richmond, Virginia. They really did. They thought they were going to change the situation completely...



SC: Right.

BT: And put us into the realm of something...

SC: Where were they located?

BT: They were across the river, I don't know. But—Courtney could tell you where they were. But they were notorious for their arrogance. And the irony is Tom Carlin was supposed to be the cook—it was a dinner theater—and Tom Carlin was supposed to be the cook for that, and he was discovered opening number ten cans for all the dinners. That was his... that was his...

SC: Were they all native Richmonders by any chance?

BT: I think they came from Utah or Colorado or something. They went back to Utah and started another dinner theater there. But I think they were college mates, mostly. There were a set group of four, five, six people, and they're pretty well known by theater people in the neighborhood. But it was very funny, I could never get close to Ariel and that was the reason why. He wanted my job and felt he should be running it. And then he started this theater to prove that he could run a theater. And failed.

SC: What do you think you were doing that made this so successful?

BT: Well, I think there was a little bit of what I wanted to do mixed in with what Cheek wanted to do. I knew that the history of Richmond was vital. And when I picked my opening play, I picked a play that had several aspects to it. First of all, it was a very good popular drama in theater – *Inherit the Wind*. It's the Scopes drama, if you know it. But it also tickled the beliefs of the Confederate... of the Confederacy, because it was the Scopes trial. And it didn't address the Civil War but it addressed certain principles of the Confederacy, and in my thinking that would get their attention. But at the same time the play was morally proper, and it spoke for America even if it didn't just speak for the Confederacy. So my selection as an opening play was part of my overall approach to the theater. In other words, do things that will catch the attention of the audience beyond just being a good play. I don't mean just titillate them; I'm talking about things that people will talk about. And the Scopes trial I'm sure was talked about for a long time, even up through the time that I was here... maybe not. But it was an important time in the history of America. So that was the first thing I was going to have with my plays.

Uh, I had been in a theater that used the summer to produce musicals outside of the group of plays that you saw with the subscription. The musical was separate. But it had an effect. It was in the summer. It had... it was open-ended so you could run it as long as you'd want to. It also obviously was a kick-off for the subscription campaign of the fall, right? So I said I'm going to use it in the beginning and not in the end, so that I can use it as the kick-off my subscription campaign... And... I said, but I know I can't do it because Leslie Cheek wants a classic theater. So I don't remember all of my plays but they were all pretty much plays of stature, anyway. And

that's the way I opened. But I inserted a play that Mary Martin had done on Broadway in which she sang. It was not a musical, but it was a play with music. And I couldn't tell you what the name of it was. And I did it perfectly to get a piano in the pit and somebody singing on stage. And it went over well; it had a good effect. And I said okay, that's my introduction to musicals, so that was another factor that was built into my... and of course, classical plays. Shakespeare, Molière, French comedy. And that was essentially it. So my second year – and I may be wrong about whether it was second or third but I think it was my second year – I went to him with my list which included, in fact, opened with, uh...

*CT: Kiss Me, Kate.*

BT: What?

*CT: Kiss Me, Kate.*

BT: *Kiss Me, Kate!* And I didn't hear this myself, but I heard he was telling other people, "Well, it's... at least it's based on Shakespeare." [Laughter.] But it was... my reason for the selection was that very thing! I didn't have to say it, and he didn't have to tell me. But, uh...

SC: Sounds like some of those marketing classes you took... began to take hold. [Laughter.]

BT: That was part of my business administration teaching in college, you know? So, my parents were right in steering me into business administration, because that's really what I was a part of. But the point was, it was the product that was really me, and so I gravitated to the product and then used my natural ability as a businessman. And I know that money makes the – what is that? How does that go? Money makes the wheels grow? What's the...

SC: The world go 'round? Money makes the world go 'round?

BT: Something. Money makes the something. [Laughter.] And I knew that in the arts, which are not publicly funded... I mean they're privately funded... we didn't have anything like, uh, arts until the Depression.

SC: Oh, yeah. Right.

BT: So I can't remember the rest of the season, but they were built around that philosophy. And there's no questioning, Trudy Cox was the one who started it. She's the one that came out and said [singing] "Another opening, another show!" That was Trudy. Little, slim Trudy. [Laughter.] And, uh... is that when we met Guy? Was that when Guy came in?

CT: I think so.

BT: This fellow came and auditioned for me, and oh, my God, what a knockout! Handsome young man, sang like a bloody angel, and he had a girl with him. And at one point, I said, "Who is that?" to the girl. And she looked at me and she said, "That's Guy Kilgore," as if to say,



“That’s Jesus Christ. You don’t recognize him?” Well of course, Guy was in everything from then on. *Carousel*, you name it. And he was a dear, dear friend, and it was... God, what a talent. So, we had the makings of *good* people for our musicals. And those musicals I can say unabashedly were the financial underpinning of the theater. And when you start off like that, the people could come out after having bought a ticket and go right over and buy a season subscription. By that much strength, by golly, I’m going to stick around. And I think we did have a lot of fun with our classics. They were regular classics, I mean...

SC: Any one particular that stands out?

BT: Well, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. My wife was in it. She played the princess [Titania]. Fred Haseltine in *Paint Your Wagon*. Bill Cooper, who understudied John What’s-His-Name on Broadway... played ... what did Bill play? Oh, God, anyway, everybody who was worth anything. [Marjorie] Marge Arenstein playing the lead in... Bob Albertia played the king in *The King and I*... *Anna and the King of Siam*. And Marge, you see, became Anna for the rest of her life at that point. She named the boat. Everybody who really had an interest, a valid interest, and who wanted to be in a good production, was in my theater.

SC: In this area, yeah.

BT: We had, I think, speaking as an aggregate, we had the best talent of any theater in the town. That’s too... what? Egregious of me to say, but at the same time I really think that’s true. I really do, because it was a marvelous group of people. Del Driver... I mean, the talent was remarkable.

SC: About how many productions in total?

BT: We did about five or six a year, I can’t remember which it was. But don’t forget in between I’m doing film society, dance society, chamber music society and booking these things out of New York.

SC: Right. Right.

BT: I don’t know how the hell I did it, frankly. Hansford [Rowe] did it, you know, as my Business Manager, handled a lot of stuff. But the Designer... I had to fix the stage. Light, heat... he was my Lighting Designer as well... he had to fix the lights. It was a lot of work that went into this.

SC: It’s like running a performing arts center really. You were doing the whole thing. Now I know. Something else that Courtney sent me...you were responsible for having the first integrated production here.

BT: That is a story in itself, worthy of a book. I had integrated, in a sorts, my last theater.

SC: In South Carolina?



BT: They had a history in Columbia of soldiers from Fort Jackson nearby coming in to see the play at the invitational dress rehearsal, so that they could be the audience that helped the cast get on its feet without being the audience that criticized it and killed our ticket sales, you see. And the only thing they said was, "Be sure that there are no blacks," because they didn't want any blacks in the theater. No black soldiers. So when I called and talked to the sergeant in charge of the bus and bringing them in, I told him, I said, "And be sure I have blacks in the group. I want blacks." And when they came in, there were a half a dozen or more blacks in the troop. And the board didn't stand around and watch the bus unload, so I don't know whether they saw all this or not, but we had the first blacks ever in that theater. And every show for three years, there were blacks in the dress... in the invitational dress rehearsal. So they obviously got to know about this, but you know nobody on that board ever said anything to me about it. Nobody said, "You can't do that anymore; you gotta stop that or you're fired." Nobody criticized me even. So I learned one thing: *Do it*, and wait for the criticism. Don't ask permission and get turned down.

Well, anyway, about the third from the last year [at VMFA], somewhere in the mid-sixties, I wanted to do the Helen Keller story, and as I read the script I said, "Oh, my God, there's two blacks in it." So I went to Leslie Cheek. Now this is a story that may not go well in print. But it's the truth and you can use it or not. And I know that the last [Theatre] Director here got in trouble for the letter that he wrote. You know the letter I'm talking about?

SC: I bet... that was the last director who was going to shut down...

BT: "And you can buy out all the tickets so the white people can't come..." Something like that, "...you can be the main audience." Well you'll hear reflections of that in the story I'm going to tell. But I went to Cheek saying, well he's a Tennessean boy, this is gonna be a rough one now. I don't know what I'm gonna get. So I went in and told him, and he said, "There's no problem with that. I think we ought to do it." He said, "After all, they're servants anyway." And I thought, "Well, here we are." Ooh, I left out a little part.

The year I did *Carousel*, I was asked to get a little scene ready for a meeting of the editorial society... editors... The Society of Editors in America were meeting in Richmond, and the [news]papers here were hosting them. And one of the things they were going to do was come to the theater and see a little skit of mine that I showed them a scene from *Carousel*. And Cheek was a friend of Alfred De Liagre. Now that may not mean anything to you, but he was one of the most famous producers on Broadway. Very famous name, Alfred De Liagre. And he and two or three other representatives of Richmond, and I think Richmond in the arts—I don't know what, but *big* names in Richmond—were to be seated after the little sketch and answer questions for the editors from all over the country. Big deal!

But just before that, a day before that or so, Cheek called me and said that, "Alfred De Liagre cannot be here. Would you step in and sit for him on the stage?" And I said, "Oooh. Okay." And here we are, the skit is done, and we come out and sit in our little seats and a little podium

here, and the man in charge called for questions. And a man raised his hand in the back of the theater and said, "I'd like to ask Mr. Telford a question. How come there are no blacks on stage in this theater?" He might as well have asked me how come Jesus Christ didn't get baptized, you know? Oh, I get up and make my way to the podium, and I said, "I'm going to tell you something that nobody in this city knows." And I was saying at the same time, "Not even Leslie Cheek!" [Laughter.] But I said, "Nobody here knows what I'm going to tell you, and what I say will be said for the first time in the city of Richmond."

I said, "I was one of two white people in the American Negro Theater." And I worked in Harlem with people like... *famous* black actors... Sidney Poitier came through with his first contract, I remember. I'll never forget that sight. And I said, "Not only that, but my wife and I toured with a black theatrical group as the only whites in the Venezuela Jones Repertory Theater touring all around Harlem, playing in people's bathrooms, restrooms and living rooms." So I said that to let them know that I was familiar with integration. I was not really active in the battle that was going on in America, but I was sensitive to it and really a part of it. And I said, "But this theater is owned by the state of Virginia and it is their property. The state of Virginia legally is a segregated state." I don't know whether you knew that or not, but legally this state was segregated. We had two bathrooms on both sides for a reason. My wife used to go to the black one because there were no black women, and she could get a stall quickly. [Laughter.] But I said to them, "When the law allows me to do this, I will do it legally." And I sat down. Cheek was very satisfied, pleased even, with the way I handled it. And there was no reaction editorially. So I don't think the local editors really wanted to put that in print, or even discuss the matter in print. But that left an impression on me as much as it did on them. And it had to have left an impression on Cheek.

And when I was asked to take over a theater in Texas, my teacher, Donald Oenslager, very famous Broadway designer, had built this theater [in Texas]. And it was a theater in a museum, and he had said, "Bring Telford out here. He's doing that in Richmond." Boom. And when we got through with the introduction and all of that out there, they said, "Would you come back as our Director?" And I said, "You've already got one." "She hasn't even made up a budget." And then I had to decide whether to leave Richmond or not. And I'm not saying that I left because of Cheek, but, let's face it, it would have been nice to be in a place where you were appreciated and you also worked *with* somebody and not in spite of somebody. And Cheek did that to everybody he had here. He drove them away.

And so, and I can remember talking to one of my Equity actors that I brought in. I brought in Equity actors to work here. My *Hamlet* was Equity, and Eric Christmas, who directed for me, was Equity. And he said, "You know we're just a bunch of gypsies anyway." I didn't know whether to carry my family all over the world. He said, "We're just a bunch of gypsies." So, Jodi and I, you know, I don't think we brought Scott in on it, but—he was just a little baby boy then—we all went. And, uh... where were we? You started by asking me a question, and I started to fill in.



SC: Um... you... well, we had started with the integration but then you had talked about how you moved from here to Texas.

BT: Okay, then we were just into that move. Well, that was essentially it, and I went out there. And in the process I started a repertory theater with two colleges. And that was interesting, but I really didn't excite the people. And I'm going to try to say this as properly as I can. The people in Richmond are a cut above the average audience. They are far more... it's not just sophistication, but they're far more... historically oriented—how about that? And you know that. Richmond people are zealous about their history. Not jealous, zealous. And they build, and they preserve. And that has created a culture in Richmond which means that they go for the fine arts. They really do. There's a certain quality about Richmond which is unique in the country.

SC: Yeah, I think for a town this size it is, I think, yeah, I think that's true.

BT: Even New York with Broadway, you know, it's not all theater. Hell, they've got other things. But this theater... this city is oriented and tied to its culture. And that's not the way Fort Worth is. Or Dallas. So, a man named Jim Brown—does that ring a bell with you?

SC: Well, a different Jim Brown, but no...

CT: James Brown, the Director after Cheek.

SC: Oh, okay. Yeah, okay.

BT: Jim Brown called me on the phone and asked me to come in at a hundred dollars a day and look at a theater that was really in ramshackle shape. He would like my advice. Who was the Director?

CT: Jim Brown.

BT: No, I'm talking about the theater.

CT: Oh. That I don't remember. We couldn't figure that out.

BT: Tell me the first Director's name. It was an odd name like Bartley or... It was a very well known name. List them...

CT: After Jimmie Dyas?

BT: Yeah.

CT: That's what I can't remember...

BT: Well, Jimmie Dyas, I know I told you, was my classmate in high school. And when I came back from World War II, he was directing off-Broadway, and I was...



SC: Oh, okay. Right, right, right.

BT: And then, so Jimmie and I remained friends. I brought him up here as I think I did in Richmond... in Columbia, as a guest Director. But when I told Jimmie what I was doing... See, he went out into women's clubs and put on shows for different organizations, didn't really run a theater, but he was brilliant and able to take all these people and put them together and all these talents and put on a show. And he did about 600 of those things, and he was brilliant at his job and his work. But his life was like he was on a train all the day, always going out somewhere, and his wife was sitting home alone. So, when he was here, oh, when he joined me and found out what I was doing and, of course, the plays, Shakespeare and so forth, Molière and so forth—ew! “God, I'd never hear that. Ooh, ooh!” So I bought him in to do *Teahouse [of the August Moon]*, right? And he shticked it up, and he did a good job, that's what he was hired to do.

So Cheek, of course, was faced with me leaving mid-season, and I said to him, “Why don't you just keep Jimmie on, let him finish the season, but don't keep him. In that interim, while he's working here, find a replacement for me who would be doing the plays you want.” And I emphasized that *strongly*. And Cheek had a lazy streak. If he had something, he didn't really want to bother with it. He had been, I think, hurt too many times with people leaving. He didn't like the idea of having to replace people, and he made no effort to get a replacement for him.

And so this guy came in and everybody knows his name, and I can't remember his name, and the Director who was directing when he left and Jim Brown was then directing, was saddled with this inept guy, who was a big loud mouth, and I couldn't tell you his name. So when I came here, Brown was asking me what I would do to make this theater fixed up, to fix it up. And just before I went to leave he said, “Will you come back and direct the theater?” Well, I had been ... I was in a position in Fort Worth where I was ready to leave anyway, and I said, “I can't leave now because I've got a season. I'm just setting up and I can't walk out on it before I do my job. I've got to finish my job. But at the end of the season, I'll come here and take over.” And he said, “Great.” I said, “In the meantime, hire this guy from the university who wants it, and have him bring in a play from each of the major repertory theaters in America. It will be great; you will be the showcase of American repertory theater. *Great!*” I think he nodded politely. But anyway, that was the way I left it.

And I think Lorraine [Slade] was the... my Business Manager in box office at the time. I was told, I think by Lorraine on a phone call... it could have been something... that Jim Brown went back to the board headed at that time by my friend Billy Higgins, wonderful guy, and told them that I turned the job down. And the reason we surmised was that he wanted the theater for the museum, and he didn't want anything in there that would in any sense compete. So the theater was to be used to for lectures and so forth and probably keeping up the chamber music and the dance and everything I had. But not theater... and maybe a theatrical production seldomly which you may get that, too. Next year or the year after, you'll go right back to what Jim Brown wanted. Anyway, that was probably what motivated him. But I didn't want to call Billy and tell



him that Brown was a liar because then I'd be going back to work for a liar. Actually, five or six years later I was called again asking if I would come back here and I said yes. And that one never materialized. So *twice* I was asked to come back.

SC: But, just for your over... because I have to wrap up because I know you gotta finish, and I could listen all day because I love stories about the theater...

BT: I can probably talk.

SC: Well, that's great because you're getting captured here. For what I can write about, I really want to capture your impressions of this, you know, museum audience... you know, your time here. It's interesting what you say about the audiences here compared to where you went. Did you find that to be true? Because I know you went on from Fort Worth, you were in Oklahoma for a good deal. But that Richmond...

BT: And I was almost ten years in Oklahoma. And we geared our theater to different kinds of plays. Yeah, the play selection was quite unique for Richmond. The play selection at Richmond was unique. Not unique for Richmond, *unique*.

SC: Unique for theater.

BT: Establishing, providing... No, you couldn't do Shakespeare and Molière in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I think I probably did a little bit of something, you know, but I can't remember. But theater here is special. And I think you should make that very clear that my feeling about... that theater here is special. And anybody who doesn't take it seriously is not gonna succeed.

SC: And you left... when you left, you left that troupe of people who, you know...

BT: Except that when they turned Equity, it went out the window. Because I could use large casts, and when you go Equity you have large bills. That was a thing that I would never have done. For economic reasons only. But I could bring in any Equity actor I want. I had Equity actors coming in as our featured performers.

SC: But, you weren't... well...

CT: Well, tell her... You told her about integration, but you actually skipped the story about *You Can't Take It With You*.

ST: You started with *Miracle Worker*...

SC: Yeah, start with *The Miracle Worker*, that you weren't allowed to have the two people on stage as servants. But then did you go from there to a more...

ST: You didn't tell her about going down and meeting with [Morton] Thalhimer. I think that's the point where it got contested...



BT: Oh, when I asked about *The Miracle Worker*, I wanted two blacks in and Cheek said yes. We had lunch with Thalhimer, who was Chairman of the Theater [Arts] Committee. And Cheek said, go ahead and tell him what you want to do. And I did, and Thalhimer said no, "Because if we have blacks buying tickets, whites won't be able to get in."

CT: That's what Thalhimer said.

BT: This is Thalhimer saying... Now don't forget; every day I drove by Windsor Farms, which Thalhimer built, but was not allowed to live there because he was Jewish. Did you know that?

SC: I didn't know that. Good gosh.

BT: He was not allowed to live in his own enclave because he was Jewish! I said, "This guy is not going to complain. He's going to say... I'm going to do this just to get back at them." Well, what he did instead was top them by saying we won't let blacks in. And his statement in front of Cheek was, "If we sell tickets to blacks, they'll buy tickets and take up all the seats." And Cheek looked at me and I looked at him and we were both thunderstruck. So that's why I [later] did [the auditions for] *You Can't Take It with You* in secret.

There was a girl at church who used to do a little dance work up in the... during the services. And I went to her—she was black—and I said, "Can you get me some black actors?" And she said okay, and we would sneak in the theater lobby, go upstairs, and there was a Studio A and a Studio B, and then we would take them into Studio B, and I auditioned black people there for two or three nights. And she got mad one night and she said... I took her out into the lobby and I said, "Why are you so pissed?" "Here, you are going to integrate this theater, and," she said, "you're doing it all in secret!" I said, "Honey, if we don't do it in secret, it won't get done." And so she went along with it. And here we ended up with these two people, marvelous people who you should put in your story, Jo Washington and Carl...

CT: Lester.

BT: Lester, right?

CT: Yes.

BT: Carl Lester. Wonderful people! She was a teacher, a high school teacher, and he was a... he knew show business! He's in Florida right now. Jo died. I wish she were alive, she's a wonderful sweetheart. And they're the ones who integrated the theater for me.

SC: In that production. And what was the reception? What kind of reaction did you get?

BT: Well, the first thing that shocked me was the cast did not react. Nobody came up to me and said, "Well, what do we do with these black people?" Because I did the show in Summer Stock, played the same part of Grandpa, and we all used white people. Nobody used black people in Summer Stock. But here I was with two black people in the cast. So we had no discussion about



this at all in the rehearsals. But I can't help but feel that rehearsing up in Studio A, people coming in and out and around, word *had* to have gotten back somehow to Cheek, *had to have*. But nobody ever came up to me and said a word. On opening night I did something I never ... I didn't do in general. I usually choreograph my curtain calls for people to come in and take a bow and boom, boom, boom, it's funny and all that. I lined up the cast behind the curtain, and the third person in on each end was the black person, Jo and Carl. And the curtains closed, and I'm in the middle because I'm the lead. Curtain opens, okay? And curtain calls start. Two whites on the end came in, took a bow, and backed out. Next two whites came in, took a bow, and backed out. Carl and Jo walked across the stage, took a bow, and the house fell apart. I mean, there was an ovation you have never seen or heard before or *since*!

SC: Wow.

BT: I've been in this business sixty years, and it was the most thrilling moment of my life in the theater. And that audience was saying, "Good! Good!" They were... they were right there integrating the state of Virginia.

SC: What year was that?

BT: '66. And the Governor was in the house, I'm *convinced*. He was always there opening night. Probably Walter Robertson too. And certainly Morton Thalhimer. [Laughter.] And, of course... and Cheek never said a word. Nobody *ever* said a word.

SC: Nothing in the papers or anything?

BT: But I've been told here there were black people in plays after that. And, of course, you ended up with a black [Theatre] Director.

SC: Well, yea, it's amazing how things happen, but...

BT: Well that was a signal moment in my life. And I think in the theater. And I really think it had to do with integration in the city. 'Cause after all it was still a state-owned theater and segregation was the state law. But I think that state law began to be ignored. And you can... the theater can take the credit for it.

SC: Ok, well that'll be my final line. [Laughter.] Well this was really interesting. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

BT: Oh, you're very kind.