The Oral History Project of the Fashion Industries

Interview with Patricia Zipprodt

Interviewer: Robert L. Green
Narrator: Patricia Zipprodt
Location: Tollgate Farm, Bucks County
Dates: November 10 and 11, 1979
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PREFACE

This memoir is the result of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History Project of the Fashion Industries by Robert L. Green with Patricia Zipprodt at Tollgate Farm, Bucks County, on November 10 and 11, 1979.

Patricia Zipprodt has read the transcript, and has made only minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind, therefore, that he or she is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word.

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I: The date is November 10, 1979. We are at Tollgate Farm, which is an 18th Century Bucks County house and owned by me, Robert L. Green, who is an authority on style and a consultant to the President of the Fashion Institute of Technology. As you know this is part of an on-going series of oral audio history of the famous, the greats, the significant forces in the fields of design, fashion, and interior design. It's personally a great joy to have with me today, Miss Patricia Zippordt, who in my opinion is the foremost costume designer in the American theatre in this portion of the 20th Century. As this tape begins to unfold and take on its individual meaning, I think there will be no question of Miss Zippordt's extraordinary contribution, as well as her inventive, creative insights into her profession. So I look forward to having the experience myself. Pat, incidentally would you prefer to be called Pat or Patricia or...?

N: Both, Robert L.

I: Either one?

N: Yes.
I: Okay. Well, at this moment I feel very "Pat" about it.

N: That's because it's morning.

I: Exactly. I really think the way to start is to just zero in on perhaps your parents. Who they are, and then where you came into the picture, and then what siblings there were - the family background. So we get some sense of the marvelous force that created you!

N: Yes, indeed! Well, I think I'll start with my mother because we touched on her a bit last evening. She is still alive. My father is deceased. She is, I would say, a very theatrical person. A woman of great individuality and when she's at her best a great independent. When she was about 16 or 17 she ran off and joined the Navy. Not to see the world, but to serve her country, Robert L. She was one of the first WAVEs; this was World War I and she was a yeoman female - that's what they were called. My mother, as a yeoman female, went to the best couturiers in Philadelphia for her Navy uniform and re-designed her hat. So she was quite something. She worked in the medical section of the Navy Yard. She is very devoted to the Navy, to the point where when she dies she asks to be buried with the flag over her casket. Which - we will decide later about that.

I: Now, were you born at this time?

N: No. My mother was just 16 or 17. I guess my father had come up from St. Louis which was his home, and probably was serving in the Great Lakes Navy Yard. He was in the...he was a sailor somewhere in Chicago. He came from a very, very, very, very, very religious home. His grandfather, and three of his grandfather's brothers, came from Switzerland.
Oh, I would say in the 1830's or 1840's, because they were Brethren which is a lot like Quaker and they were pacifists. They came over and somehow got up the Mississippi to St. Louis and the southern Illinois area and settled. Their names were, as good Christians, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John Zipprodt, pronounced at that time "Zippro" because they were French speaking but were German. Anyway, out of this strict morality came my father, who the minute he got away from there did not put his foot back into any kind of church unless there was either a funeral, a wedding or a baptism. My mother, convent raised with her own little altar in her closet, was a devout Roman Catholic until she was about 16 or 17, when she decided that the virgin birth didn't make any sense and she left the church. So, ultimately when I was born... I was born in Evanston, Illinois...

I: Now, just to backtrack...they met while your mother was in the Navy?

N: No.

I: When did they meet?

N: They met when my mother... much after the war... when my mother was representing Maurice Rentner. She had started there as a model and ultimately became their first saleswoman, and she took their line on the road and got it into Marshall Field & Company. My mother is very proud of that. In the process ran across a gentleman named Herbert E. Zipprodt who she thought was a very difficult man! She went back to New York where she was living at the time, being a flapper. On several more of the business trips to Chicago and those points, she saw more and more of him and finally one day for some reason or other they got married, and Mother says that he was late. They had a very
civil ceremony because they were both from extremely overburdened, theologically overburdened backgrounds. So ultimately I came into the world.

I was their first born and I was born at the St. Francis Hospital in Evanston, Illinois. Now, fable has it, I don’t know whether this is true or not, but fable has it that my father, being a violent anti-Catholic, anti-church, took me out of the St. Francis Hospital when I was about four days old for fear that the nuns would baptize me!

I: What year was this, Pat?

N: 1925. February 24 was my birthdate. I'm Pisces, three house Pisces. So, away I went evidently, back safe and sound to Evanston undonated to any particular religion. While we're on this line I’ll stay with it because I remained "undonated" for years. I went to every kind of Sunday school. I went to the Lutheran...I went to all the little churches around Evanston and finally we moved to Kennelworth, where my selection of Sunday activity was limited down to two. One was the Unitarian Church and the other was high—high and low, because it was Episcopal and it depended on which Sunday you went--it was called the Church of the Holy Comforter. We called it "The Holy Blanket," it boasted Eugene Field buried in its backyard. The people...I arrived there in Fifth grade, I was nine, and I did Fifth grade twice incidentally. I didn't know which of the two to go to, but the people seemed to look like they were more fun over at the Episcopal Church, and as a result the entire family is now Episcopalian. I was baptized and confirmed the same weekend by a Bishop, Bishop Stewart. It was remarkable! He put holy oil on my forehead and I went home and looked, and nothing had
changed. So I too was entering into my age of disillusionment with religious practice.

I: Were you still the only child?

N: No, by this time I had one sister, my sister Barbra, who was about four-and-a-half years younger than I. Soon thereafter, when I was twelve... Well, I was about twelve when I was baptized and confirmed and my youngest sister Constance had been born. We wanted a brother, my sister Barbra and I, so when my father called from the hospital, he was very happy and said, "Yes, you girls have a beautiful baby sister" we hung up. (Laughs) Ughhh!

I: Has that rejection followed through for the rest of your lives?

N: Well, the child had no name for six months, so she was entered in the social gazette of the North Shore of Chicago as "Noname" Zipprodt.

I: Has that become a nickname?

N: No, thank God. Finally, we didn't know what to do because we had really planned on boys...my mother and I and my sister Barbra - we had Peter and we had Charles and we had a splendid list of names, Michael. All the names that are popular now we had for this fantasy, fantasy male. My father, being a somewhat wise man, decided that he had a good harem going and he was going to keep it going. He wanted a girl. He said "God only sends girls to very careful places!" I used to wonder about that, because ours was hardly a "careful" place.

I: You mentioned before that you did the Fifth grade twice. Is there some significance to that?

N: Yes, because it's annoyed me all my life, that that was forced on me.
I was in the Evanston schools, and I was evidently very bright and I did a grade each semester. So that by...in other words I did First, Second and Third grades in a year-and-a-half. Now, I was skipping right along and having a great time, and reading and writing and doing my arithmetic. Then we moved to Kennelworth. I had finished Fifth grade except for four weeks, it was May. So we went into the Fifth grade at Joseph Seers and the principal had this great meeting with my parents. He was worried about the relationship between my social age and my physiological age, chronological age. I was, by this time, two years...I didn't know it...my friends are my friends. As a result, here was a good time to stop me and put me back to Fifth grade again. So I did Abraham Lincoln twice; in the state of Illinois you do Abraham Lincoln in the Fifth grade. I did long division twice, and I was put in the back of the room with special projects. This was when I learned to procrastinate. I had to do a map of the United States with a yarn thing going across it indicating the Lincoln Highway, and it took me all year to do it. I had potatoes I was growing, I had little nasty, evil, horrible, boring projects, and my teacher, Miss Allender, had great sympathy with me but she had to keep me alert and alive through this non-negotiable year. In the meanwhile all the kids decided that I had been kept back because I had flunked. I was this new kid. (In taunting sing-song voice) "You have to do Fifth grade twice, we're going to Sixth grade." Well, mortification just overwhelmed me because I knew that that wasn't the reason.

I: And an unfair mortification.

N: Very unfair. I've thought about it a great deal, because it was a waste
of time, and it really hurt. If anything should have been done, they should have let me gone on to Eighth grade, drop me out a year and send me to art school.

I: Had you already demonstrated at that time that you had skills in the field of art?

N: I think so Robert, because I remember when I was very small, I was going to some kind of little kindergarten in Evanston and one day either it was raining or snowing or I woke up late, or whatever; anyway I missed some but I remember running like mad to get to this place because the art class started at 10 o'clock. I was long curls and big hair-bow, I was five or under. I spent hours drawing African violets. It was my subject matter - African violets.

I: You remember the association?

N: Well, I think I saw one once and I like the shape and I made it very abstract, with just crayons and chalk and everything.

I: Was there any relationship to your mother's theatricality that produced an interest in that kind of beauty?

N: I think the kind of atmosphere we were raised in made it very comfortable for me to remain in the theater, having started in it, because we were in a highly dramatic, not necessarily stable, atmosphere, but loaded and crackled with tensions and demonstrations and...

I: What was her relationship to clothes?

N: Well, she loved them number one, she was very beautiful and she wore them with great elegance, as you can imagine.

I: Because when you described her as having her Navy uniform couturier-fitted,
it has been my experience that people who think in those terms have a real identification with the value of clothing as part of an extension of themselves. In other words they prefer to present a picture and send the message of carefully balanced, proportioned, beautifully made wardrobe. I find that an interesting connection, a bridge to your own identification with a great career in clothing people.

N: Well, could be. I also had quite a surprise, it was something I had forgotten about, but our house was sold in Kenné•worth and my parents moved to Florida. My mother did her attic number and found all sorts of things from my childhood, including my paper dolls. Now, I had these little figures, she sent them all to me, these little creatures that I drew as near as I remember about six inches, eight inches high, and they were crayoned and penciled and penned, and there was a blonde and a brunnette lady and they stood like this - one hand on the hip.

I: The classic model's stance.

N: Yes, with their little toes going out. They had this fabulous wardrobe, paper doll wardrobe with pads, and some of them had umbrellas with... that matched their dresses.

I: Now the wardrobe was one that you designed?

N: Yes. I drew the dolls, I drew the dolls and then I had this ongoing interesting...

I: How old were you?

N: It would be before I was nine. Nine is sort of a memory point because that's when we moved and I know what happened before and what happened
after. It was six and seven and eight.

I: Patricia, do you have any memory as to where you drew your ideas for the clothes at that time? Was it from your mother's wardrobe, was it from magazines, was it from movies?

N: I think it was probably from Mother's wardrobe and from her friends' wardrobe. What I saw around me, and possibly magazines. I don't know that I went to the movies when I was that young. But, these were all color coordinated, the parasols matched the dresses or accented them, and these ladies also had an environment they lived in. They had rooms like the kind you get out of catalogs. They had all these...they had ballrooms. Any room they needed I clipped for them. They had this whole life going. They would go to parties and they would go to the kitchen and they'd put on their kitchen clothes. They had all these little clothes for all these rooms. It was a great trip and it lasted for several years.

I: And your mother saved these things?

N: Yes.

I: You had no awareness that they were being saved?

N: No.

I: I raise that question because I think there is on the part of some people a conscious desire to accumulate everything that they do creatively and they don't want to give it up. I think it's even more significant if a parent sees in these things something important enough to put away and eventually to return to you. But go on with the whole development, your trial doing this school thing, you're obviously a gifted child and you have this talent. What about the next plateau, which of course
is high school?

N: In high school—well before we went there we were in a very privileged part of the world, we were in the North Shore of Chicago. Nobody, with two or three exceptions, even went away to prep school because there wasn't a prep school that was as good as New Trier at the time that we were there. We had PhDs teaching us algebra.

I: For the purposes of record, how do you spell New Trier?

N: It's two words. Trier is from the town in Germany: T-R-I-E-R, and this is New Trier.

I: N-E-W.?

N: N-E-W. There were some Germans there I think.

I: You see, my identification with fashion is such that I thought it was Nutria.

N: Nutria, of course! Well, this is a fur-lined world.

I: What was your economic level at that point?

N: I would say that we were...in the suburb that I was raised in, Kennelworth, we were surrounded by names like Kraft of cheeses, Bremner of crackers, and Wayne King of orchestras, and Maurice Stans, later to be of the Nixon administration, and people of a very wealthy, mercantile...lawyers, chairmen-of-the-board.

I: Was your own family wealthy?

N: No, my father came from a very, very poor family. His father was much more concerned with preaching the word of the Lord, and that was his mission in life, so that was what they all did. My own father had to stop school at the Eighth grade. His sisters went on. The girls went
on to high school oddly enough, but the boys had to stop and support this missionary they were born to...Uncle...Grandpa Zipprodt. He handed out tracts on the street, wrote his own religious poems, and saved 10,000 souls, he said. Maybe he did. Anyway, this was via his sons. He had three very bright sons. The oldest, my Uncle Robert, came to New York and he was a big advertising man. I think he invented the Camel man who blew smoke over Times Square. My eighteenth birthday was spent at little club and danced with me and gave me an orchid, because my Uncle Robert always went there. Lunch was at because he always went there.

I: Let's go back to New Trier.

N: We were talking about my father. My father, being number two, came up to Chicago and somehow or other had $1,000. When he was not in high school he made money carrying lithographic plates for a printing firm in St. Louis. He later set up his own lithographic advertising agency known as Zipprodt Inc., and it was one of the biggest of its kind in the country. So he was a self-made man. He had all the accounts, like Ford and Heinz, you know, in the Chicago area, just the top accounts. He loved it. That was his thing. So, our financial level was about like that.

I: Not bad.

N: Whatever that was.

I: Well, it's the great American dream.

N: Yes, yes. It was the proper house, with the goody sturdy slate and brick, and the proper schools, and servants when and if they were needed, and so on and so forth.
I: Do you remember your own wardrobe at that time!

N: Ohh! Ohhh! Good question! I think...my mother raised me in hand made dresses. There was a woman named Kathleen Statiker who traveled up and down the houses of the North Shore with a large suitcase filled with models, little samples...

I: Could you spell Statiker?

N: I can't because I never saw her name written.

I: Okay.

N: But Statiker it was. I had lots of check gingham with Peter Pan collars and my name embroidered and roses. Just absolutely lovely clothes. What I found was that every morning I had this terrible decision about the color of my hair bow. I had huge hair bows on clips - which kept sliding down. One day I woke up and I was tired of this and so I put myself into a uniform. It was a pleat skirt, navy blue or dark red, and a knit blouse and a tie which matched the skirt, and the hair bows which matched the skirt, which now was just a choice of two, and either socks or in the winter time my jack boots. That was what I wore every day for one year.

I: What was your thinking?

N: I don't know! I've often wondered! I think...I was going to a school where everyone was dressing, dressing, dressing, dressing, dressing, and I had all these dressing dresses but somehow they bored me. I sort of wanted to get where I didn't have to worry about all that because it was enough to get my curls curled. I mean it was enough! I think I still dress very much the same way. I will to this day get onto an
outfit and I will wear it until it just wants to cry for help.

I: Do you think it has anything to do with your reference before to procrastination. In other words, that moment of truth in the morning of looking at the clothes and deciding, "Do I combine this with this, do I do that with that, do I take this hair bow with that or do I change it?" And the procrastination taking considerable time, then simplifying it by giving yourself a defined direction. It's a choice of two, the blue skirt or the dark red skirt. Could that be valid?

N: It could work. I just knew that I wanted to make mornings easier. I don't know. For some reason or other...

I: Could we look at it in a slightly different direction - because I know you very well as a great friend and I know your own great personal style, so part of the thing that I see, at least that's reaching into my head, is that possibly with all the little girls being dressed to the nines, pretty, pretty, pretty, fluff, fluff, puff, puff, bow, bow, along comes Patricia Zipprodt with an innate sense of style and moving against the stream, and saying, "You're all going to be this kind of thing, I'm going to be wonderfully crisp and classical, and somehow or other I may even manage to make you look overdressed."

N: That's a pleasant thought! Sure, could be.

I: Because in knowing you as well as I do, I've watched because of my own interest in fashion, I can't help but respond to the clothes that you wear, and I've always sensed an extraordinary demonstration of great understanding of style. You are always a little ahead of the change.

N: Maybe I sort of anticipated Chanel! No, but I did have this little work-a-day outfit and I trudged off to my school and did my map and
grew my potatoes and sulked in the back in my self-imposed uniform.

I: Well-dressed!

N: Maybe I was in prisoner gear! Hey...because I really loathed and was mortified by that second Fifth grade - and bored.

I: I think the fact that both of us can bat this back and forth with concepts and ideas is a good demonstration of the power of clothing and the possible reasons why we are motivated to wear any given thing or any given outfit at any given time - it broadens the understanding that there are lots of reasons why people select clothes.

Anyway, the high school thing. Were you popular in high school?

N: I don't think I was. I think I was a very introverted, I mean I see myself that way - maybe no one would agree with me who knew me then, but I was a very shy person, and very ill at ease with my....

I: Peer group?

N: Peer group...and with the particular social environment of that school. One of the reasons that Fifth grade remains so clear in my mind, the trauma of it, was because the trauma seemed to start then and I got a feeling of being quite displaced from where I was flowing, where I was going. I was taken out of my own stream and put arbitrarily into a place I didn't wish to be, which was called "Fifth grade again." But it was a place, a physical place where I did not wish to be.

I: And that continued into the high school years?

N: I think I carried that with me. I brood that a lot, and not necessarily to my own benefit. But, high school I found very difficult, because first of all I had an extremely outrageously destructive family scene going. So there was no harbor of any sort at home, I had to go other
places for any sense of security or peace or quiet. I took onto
myself a second family - the one out in Hinsdale. I would get there
one way or another even if I had to drive in the middle of the night
at 90 miles per hour, or take the train into Chicago and take it out
again. I would go see my second family.

I: Were there any hobby identifications in high school? I mean, were you
involved in the drama club? Was there any indication that the theatre
was a natural outlet for you?

N: I tried to do some acting. I did some acting in the eighth grade. We
did a play called "Merchant of Venice," the annual school play. Our
principal, Mr. Nyguard, that one who kept me back, had seen "Our Town"
and became very impressed with the idea that we should all wear strange
smocks and walk up...use ladders...so that's the way we did "Merchant
of Venice" I got to play Nerissa. I was Nerissa, I would much rather
have been Portia but I was not Portia, so there you go. In high school
I worked in a verse speaking choir which I loved. You know, it was
the vocal verse. I think I did some acting. I must have. In my
class at the time was Ann Meechum, who was one of my good friends and
who really was acting then.

I: What about the costume that you wore in that particular play? Do you
remember anything about it?

N: In the Shakespeare?

I: Yes.

N: Oh God! It was turquoise and it had a front and back yoke and set-in
sleeves and pleats. We all wore the same thing. We took these patterns
home and we sewed up these horrible things.

I: Did you edit yours in any way?

N: No. We weren't allowed. I didn't even get to pick my color.

I: Did you want to?

N: Yes. I didn't want to wear that at all. But that's what we were doing because Mr. Nyguard had seen "Our Town." It was much easier to do Shakespeare in schmatzes than it was...

I: (laughs) Indeed!

N: (laughs) Indeed! Ohhh!

I: Okay, we get out of high school...

N: Well, I was going to art school in high school - a lot. I had been going to art school since I was ten or eleven.

I: Art school was a separate school?

N: Saturday classes, and the school in Evanston was like an extension of the Art Institute. The Art Institute teachers were up there working. I went Saturdays, and I even went one summer because I became very interested in seeing if I could spend a whole summer painting. I was maybe 16 or so. So I didn't go to camp. My parents kept wanting me to go to Wyoming or some marvelous exotic place. But, no, I just wanted to go to art school and see if I liked to do this all day long. I did. So then ...

I: You went to art school and you talk about painting. What were you painting?

N: We were painting from the figure and we were also going out and painting landscapes and buildings, farms, whatever. There were two or three courses.
I: Were you a realistic painter?

N: Yes. Well, it was realistic training. If you're studying from a model, drawing from life, then you're studying bones and muscles. If it comes out as a realistic thing is something else. Yes, I was.

I: Did you discover it was something you really wanted to do?

N: Yes, I really loved it. So I talked with my teacher at art school. I said, "You know, I really love to do this. What should I do?" He said, "Well, I would like to suggest that you think about this. That never in your life will you have, if you're able to go four years to school and you go four years to school and study, if you are a painter or an artist or whatever you'll always manage to do that. But, you won't always manage to read Plato or take a course in physics or get a standard liberal arts training any other time but now," he said, "so I would say give yourself that base because the other you will make yourself do, you will have to do, if it's a valid thing in you." So, I worked on that, I followed that. Now, my plan was to go two years to a college that was liberal arts based, then come back and put that into the Art Institute system and work it into painting and get to whatever kind of degree they gave at the time. So, I went to Bradford Junior College in , Massachusetts. I was very interested in getting to New England because I just felt that that was the place I wanted to be. I went there for one year and my grades, which had been disastrous at home, in high school, although I had started out in one of those special groups they have at New Trier working with Columbia University and all that, those XYQ Groups. I just was dropped from every class as I went along because I wasn't
able to study. I got to Bradford and, I think, came up as second in my class. I had one fabulous teacher named Wolfgang Paulie who was my zoology teacher Freshman year. I was drawing up a storm with my microscopes. Amoebas, anything under the microscope, came up as a beautiful drawing. He said, "You have a full career right in your hands as a surgical artist." I said, "You're kidding, what's that?" He said, "I'll tell you what it is dummy!" And he told me what a surgical artist was, so I went home for Christmas and I told my father and mother that I was going to be a surgical artist. Well, my father started scouting around and he found Gladys "Somebody." He invited her to join us at the club. Well, Gladys, I don't remember her name, but she was the great big head surgical artist at the University of Chicago Medical School. Gladys first of all smoked constantly and kept flicking her cigarette ashes over her shoulder on the rug of the club, the Chicago Athletic Club, and I was mortified. They kept sweeping it up and she kept not caring. I thought, "Wow!" Anyway, she said, "Alright, if you're really interested I have one test for you. Tomorrow, meet me down at the University of Chicago Such-and-Such a place and we'll go through the labs and so on and so forth. If you really like what you're experiencing I would certainly consider taking you on as an apprentice when you finish your two years at school." Well, the place I meet her at the next morning is the morgue! We start rolling around with these cadavers, and in a bucket is one half of a head, severed front to back in a bucket of formaldehyde. She addressed it as Elmer and picked it up by its hair and then gave it to me to do the same!
I: Your reaction was?

N: My reaction was, okay I'll pick it up, and I did. I put it back in this formaldehyde and gave her this rather odd look, but I remember that I survived that. I didn't faint. It didn't seem odd. These cadavers seemed so remote from life that it really wasn't that bizarre, as bizarre of an experience as it sounds, at least as I took it in. Anyway, she decided that if I could do that, I could indeed be a surgical artist. (Laughter)

I: You'd passed the test.

N: Yes, by fire. Well, as a result of all this I... another thing Paulie said was, "You're too bright for this place, get out." I said, "Where should I go?" He said, "Go to a place that has good pre-med." So that Spring vacation I went on this little tour, and I went to Smith, and I went to Vassar, and I went Brynmar, and I turned in my grades, and everyone said, "Oh, we'd love to have you as a transfer student, your grades are wonderful and we like what you're interested, etc." Now, inadvertently I went to Wellesley because I had a date for tea that night. A friend of mine said, "Why don't you come out for the afternoon?" So I thought, "Well, we'll go out there." It was the only campus of the four where people said "Hello" to one another whether they knew one another or not. I thought this was something different. The other four were absolutely like New Trier. They had their cliques. If you ate with one table you couldn't eat with the other, you had all these insane limitations wrapped around all these women. At Wellesley I was just walking around and people would say, "Good Morning," or "Good Afternoon," whatever it was, or "Hello." There was eye contact, there
was acknowledgement. The Dean said, "No. We never accept Freshman year transfers. Your high school record is very weak, we suggest you go another year and try again next year." Well, between those two things there was only one place I was going to go, the place that looked like it had sort of a normal social climate, and yet told me I couldn't go. So I applied to one college and...

I: Wellesley.

N: Wellesley, and fainted practically dead away when I was accepted. So I went there and the Zoology department there was so BORING! I mean there were all these ladies from Woods Hole, all these great big ladies in white laboratory coats, and we spent our time with butterfly nets, chasing things over hill and dale and watching spiders mate - oh please! Well, that wouldn't do, and the Pre-med-I couldn't take chemistry - forget it! I somehow or other ended up in an obligatory class, a credit requirement called sociology. I ended up in the sociology department working with the and doing research over at Harvard and filling out forms for Margaret Mead about interviews on the common about the Irish people and how they survived the potato famine.

I: What was happening to your artwork at this point?

N: Nothing. Because Wellesley didn't have any art courses there. You could write a novel but you couldn't paint. It was vulgar. There was one painting class and I was too late to enroll in it because it was already full by the time I pulled in there.

I: Were you doing anything on your own?

N: Yes. I would set up still lives in my room and paint. But I really sort of got away from it, and when I got through college my parents had
always made a point of giving me a wonderful present for graduation. My wonderful present from Eighth grade was my Corona typewriter. My present from high school was like a six pack of cream leather luggage. I mean, with the hat boxes and the shoe boxes...a fortune in....the most gorgeous luggage...I didn't know where I was going! The war had started and I wasn't going to war. I was going to be sitting on these things on the New England to get to Boston on a 52 hour trip.

Anyway, from college I thought I would anticipate and try to shape the nature of the present they gave me, because I didn't even want to stay for graduation. I thought that was an excessive activity and I wanted to go to the Cape. So I wrote to my father and I said, "I don't know what you've got planned but what I would really like is some money put away so I could go on to school" I have never gotten an answer to that letter.

I: Or the money?

N: Or the money, and my mother said, "You fool! He had wanted you to have a fur coat! So I was instructed to take it back, so I took it back," she said. "So now you have nothing." My graduation present ended up being a trip to Canada with my father, fishing. Which was what he wanted to do. Nothing was ever said about the money. So then I went through this nightmarish period realizing that I had used up these four wonderful years directing myself completely off my first track. Having a wonderful time though, I adored what I studied. I adored my professors. I really was working with crack people.

I: Did you feel at that time that Paulie's advice was sound advice? That you had developed a whole new insight by virtue of being exposed to
larger areas than just the limited circle of your art expression?

N: You mean by art teachers? Paulie was.... Yes. I've always felt that was true if you could afford the time, or if someone the minute you got through with this wonderful four years you would really be able to get on with what you were supposed to be doing.

I: Would you recommend in the normal pattern of events that somebody who was interested in any of the areas that you've been successful in should first set a sound base of liberal arts education before they plunge into the pursuit of the specific direction of, let's say, costume design?

N: It makes for harder going, but yes. If you can afford it, and if you afford it psychically—the time. You come out with more in the long run, but it makes the long run sometimes a long way off.

I: Why is it you come out better?

N: I think you come out—if you have a good education it means really that you've done some good reading. That you have, in a gentle way, had a rather thorough introduction to several different fields of thought. Whether it be in the physical sciences or literature or language or history or whatever, that you know how broad the world is and how broad life is.

I: I've always thought it increases your perception.

N: Yes. Exactly. You know how much there is out there just to proceed.

I: And that you bring into your examination of any specific situation a knowledge that you've accumulated from other people's insights and their awarenesses, which I've always felt is vital if one is going to design something that is going to reflect the basic pattern and force of a given character, for instance, in a play. It's wrong to take the
Shakespearean character and just give it a uniform that's repeated.

N: Right.

I: I'm really glad to hear you say that. I think there's an increased area of specialization in our society which starts so soon that people get very limited, and thus they never develop their true talent.

N: They can't really sail because they're locked in frequently prematurely. I worry so about the ballet dancers. The kids who go through the American Ballet and then right into City Ballet. You try to talk with them and you can't, because they're in one little tiny world which they are thoroughly and totally in, and that's all they have. It's very, very frightening. It's the same with lawyers I suppose.

I: Well, back to how your development continued. Well, you've done the Wellesley thing, you've moved on.

N: One bit of art work that I did at Wellesley... There was a mural course and I decided to take it because it was a three hour course and I'd never painted a mural. I took it, and that was my only "A" I did a wonderful mural, Robert L. It had to do with a Wellesley event called "Float Night" which I'd never seen because during the war everything was very different. We didn't have all those events. We had blackouts instead. Anyway, I invented "Float Night" and I looked at that thing today. I still have the small sketch that I worked up from, and it's still a very valid spatial design - on flatness it's good. Well, I could move those balloons a little bit, but I argue with it every time I see it.

I: There were people involved in the mural?

N: You mean people in the mural? Yes. There were events going on. There were
pirates and canoes and...

I: Do you remember how you clothed them?

N: Oh, vaguely. The pirates wore great big pirate hats, they were quite small figures within the context, so...it wasn't anything special and it was quite abstract. It was not realistic at all. It's very similar in style to the cards I'm doing now for the Guild, the Opera Guild. So that was my one "A" for art.

I: What happened after you got out of Wellesley?

N: Well, the world sort of came to an end. It was...first of all I came home and I didn't fit. I mean I never had really fit.

I: Back to Chicago...

N: Now, I really didn't fit, because all the men were coming back. All the boys I had grown up with, all the ones who were still alive...because everyone was...In a sense the educational and social class I came from, we had wonderful Second and First Lieutenants, and...because it was the creme de la creme....the education, the health, they could all read. They were decimated. It was quite a wack.

I: This is post-World War II?

N: This is during World War II, and at the end of World War II. I graduated in '46, so the war was over and people were pretty....I mean I remember being so bored with everything that was going on. I had a little spot down in our basement where I set up shop. I set up my drawing board and my typewriter, my Corona, and I remember writing long, long thoughts. I was writing essays all that summer because I was trying to figure out where I was going. I remember the title of one of them was...this is 1946..."They've got to stop educating women, or they've got to stop
educating men." Then we were just beginning to realize what I was saying.

I: That's very advanced in terms of...

N: I knew the problem. I can't talk with these men. They aren't going to give me any space, they're not interested in what's going on in my head because I'm not supposed to have anything going on in my head. The women were playing cards. I stopped playing bridge then and there, because I could see the root. On Wednesday nights there was this damned card group of all these women I had grown up with. The sound of their laughter...I couldn't stand it, and these endless cards, and their husbands were playing poker that night, and this was life on the North Shore.

I: How long did you stay in that...

N: Well, I'll tell you what happened. (Laughs) One day, a group of my college friends decided to visit the West...this is Chicago. They stayed, to my father's horror, at our house. My father did not like company - this included anybody. Anyway, we had company and it was getting very tense, so I said...I was getting bored with these ladies and it was kind of one of those deals where we went to the theatre a lot. We went into Chicago and my mother gave luncheons, and so on. One day we were going to have lunch at that club again, where Gladys threw a dance on the floor, and I woke up early and one of the girls, Camila, who had been my roommate--I said, "Camila, let's go in early and meet these people at the club for lunch. Let's get out of here!" So we got out of there and we got into Chicago and we didn't know what we were going to do. I said, "Let's look for a job?" She said, "Okay."
Now, we both had jobs. She was going to be in Altman's training squad, or Lord and Taylor training squad. She was going to be a buyer or work for Vogue, and I was in the Art Research Department at the Encyclopaedia Britannica. We went to the Yellow Pages of the phone book and we looked under employment agencies. One said, "University Employment." I said, "Camila, that's it, we're fresh out of school, we've got our degrees, and we will go to the University Employment Agency. We'll just play this and we'll have a wonderful time this morning and then we'll go to lunch." We had our little white gloves, we were all set for lunch at the club and the matinee. But, off we went. We went to this place and we sat down and... these evil little Wellesley brats. We said, "We're Wellesley graduates and we can't do anything useful; but what we want is a wonderful job, interesting, original, unique, that we can both have and we can travel together because we haven't been able to travel because it's been the war, and we want to go to wonderful different places, and where we don't have to write home for money, where we make a good salary." This woman looked at us and said, "All right, smile." And we both went "aaee." She said, "I think I've got just the thing," said she through her gritted teeth. She went through her little card file and low and behold she comes out with a card and it said, "There is an opening for a pair of puppeteers at The Good Teeth Council for Children, Incorporated, in the Wrigley Building" and she, bang, made us an appointment and said, "Go!"

I: I lost the first... Good what?

N: Good Teeth Council for Children.

I: Teeth?
N: Teeth.
I: Something sponsored by the Dental Association?
N: By Wrigley Gum!
I: Ohh!
N: (singing) "Chew, chew, chew!" So we had to go! We went with our little white gloves on and with our card, and we went to the Wrigley Building. We went to the very top, in the tower. The one that sways in the Chicago winds. I hear music coming up from the door. (singing a little fanfare) The door says, "Good Teeth Council for Children, Inc." and it's got apples and carrots painted on the door. We opened it, and here is this madhouse of puppeteers. All preparing their Jack and Judy shows for the road. There were windows all the way around because it was the tower, and between each window where there'd be a stanchion, there were vegetables painted, and they all had on little smocks, and they were with the plasticine and the painting and washing little clothes, practicing, and before we knew, we were in the lady's office who was hiring, and we had scripts in our hands.
I: And the great world of show business was opened to you!
N: You've got it! Do you believe it! My first reading consisted of, "Bow wow, wow wow," and Miss McAndrews said, "Oh, you can do better than that!" (With great enthusiasm) "Bow wow, wow wow!" We had to do animals. I learned to "moo" We layed eggs, "AAAA!", we played Jack and Judy. We sang quartets, and did we travel! Did we travel! We played Moscow, Pennsylvania in 20 degrees below zero.
I: Paris, Vermont?
N: Paris, Vermont! Where the glacier moved!

I: How long did you do this?

N: We did it for a whole school year. We were the Jack and Judy team. My job...Camila got to play little Jack because her voice was in the right register, and I, because of that verse speaking choir, could do anything from Grandpa to Judy. was nothing to my range! I would play Grandpa (deep voice), and then I would play Judy (very high voice), just like Charles Laughton and Orphan Annie. My task was... because Camila got to be little Jack, the hero... Little Jack would come out in front of the little Duck Blind and say to the boys and girls, "Hi boys and girls!" and they'd say, "Hi!!!", because Jack and Judy came every year to schools with a different story. It was quite wonderful. My task was to jump out in front of the curtain and say, "Good morning boys and girls, we're back again with the show, and you can read what it's all about by looking up here on our lovely pink curtains." Little Jack by this time would be out there, and I would say, "Now, what do they say?", and I would point and they would say, "Good... Teeth..." I would say, "Oh, boys and girls, you can do better than that! Let's try it again!" Then this thundering crowd would say, "GOOD... TEETH!!" and little Jack would clap and he would read this letter that he had written to them since last year.

I: Did you get hooked on this? Did you get hooked on theatre?

N: What do you think? Yes. Well, it seemed like it was so simple to do. It seemed like just an extension of home.

I: But did you get satisfaction from the sense that you were creating something for an audience?
Yes. Oh, we milked our laughs and...

And applause...

Yes. We ran the show from...it started as a 25 minute to 30 minute show and we worked it up to 45 minutes just on laughs alone.

What was the relationship of you to the clothes that the puppets wore? Any relationship at all?

No, not really, because they were little clothes that you put your hands in. They were hand puppets. We mended them, we washed them, and we did spend three months at the Hay Adams House in Washington because all our expenses were paid, and we chose to stay there. Every morning I would open my French windows and look at the White House and Lafayette Park, and every afternoon I would ride a horse in Rock Creek Park. It was lovely! Halloween was off, Election Day was off, we had all the school holidays.

What was the next move? Where did you go from there?

I came home and didn't know what to do. Now, what did I do? Oh, I went immediately to the Art Institute and enrolled in something...a painting course that summer.

Have you found that a pattern in your life, that when you find yourself with time and no defined occupation, that you return to art school?

Yes. I do that. I keep thinking I'm a painter you see, but I never really put it first. Other things get put first and it's always third or fourth.

What was the next occupation?

The next occupation was...I have to sort of remember because it got very, very blurry and confused.
I: Well, you can jump over ill-defined things to the next area that really was a job.

N: I would say...I started working for J. Walter Thompson in the research department. I did charts and graphs, and I went to the Art Institute at night. I had to stay home, and the reason I had to stay home, in my head, was that I was in a sense becoming a protector to my youngest sister because it was a very rough scene, and I was unable to get out of the house because I was...

I: You make references to the roughness of the scene, to the complications of the family thing. Just very briefly, what was the nature of it? Was it a conflict between your mother and father?

N: Enormous. Enormous, and my mother was just a very unstable person, really like a schizophrenic. She'd be one person in the day and another person at night. The night was when she could get us, and she did. There was a lot of physical abuse, and that was the thing I had seen with my youngest sister, was literally getting knocked about, so I didn't know...I wanted to get out of the house because I loathed it, but I didn't know how to do it. So I took...well, that was a delaying action, and also I didn't know how to get back into my art work, you see. I realized that I had really done myself in, at least temporarily.

I: Next step?

N: Next step was...let's say eventually I got to New York. I don't remember how...but eventually I just did it and I went. For about two years...you see first of all I was not equipped for any employment. But I thought, well there's one thing I can do. I went to Wellesley and I could write a paper, and I can write. So I went into P.R., and I soon
started doing all the P.R. for Long Island University, and sending out pictures, and blood donor campaigns, and on and on. I also did... one of the accounts was Restaurant and Canned Foods, and I would write all the press on it, and get the photographs taken, and I had the great pleasure of seeing my own words in the Herald Tribune under the food editor's by-line with the first sentence and the last sentence changed. Terrific!

I: Did you feel a creative frustration because of that?

N: Terribly, well not because my work was used, because I didn't feel that I was doing creative work, but I was... by this time I was going to the New School and painting... and how do I do this? Then, one morning I woke up, literally, and had a sudden understanding. I had been going to the theater a lot, and I had been going to the ballet a lot, and City Ballet, Balanchine's company. This was 1950...1949, 1950, by the time I came to New York, and they were just starting to dry their wings. The work of Karinska was before my eyes two and three nights a week, and I suddenly decided that was it.

I: Define who Karinska is.

N: Karinska is a Russian dance and theatrical couturier, who came over from Russia, not necessarily with Balanchine but in that same flow of talent, who used to have an atelier in Paris where she made costumes for and then came to New York, where she started cutting on the floor of her apartment. She eventually had one of the finest costume shops in the world - bar none. There she executed costumes for other designers, and she also designed for the ballet and did her own. She's legendary and she's still alive, but she's absolutely
legendary. The shop still goes on now, but just for the City Ballet. Anyway, her use of color was just mind boggling. The layers of silk, net that made up a skirt, the different colors in them and things like just spun me around. So anyway, I got this idea that I would design for the ballet. Well, having cleared something up - like what was it that I was going to do, because I knew if I didn't use my hands and my eyes I would get much too much like my mother. I knew if you don't use your creativity you have destructiveness, latent and lying in wait. So, then how was I going to get training? Here we were again. And where was that money that I had asked for? That's when I needed it. My friend Anne Meachum had a nervous breakdown, a complete serious breakdown, while she was on the road in Wisconsin, so she ended up in a hospital in Wisconsin and I emptied her things and sent them back to her parents so they wouldn't have to make a trip East. In the process I fell heir to a $14 a month cold-water flat on Carmine Street, which I moved into after I figured out how much it would take for me to live on for a month... I was in that place in no time. I had quit my job, my P.R. job, and I was painting and working in art galleries part time. It was in this period that I suddenly knew... that I began to clarify what it was... about ballet and the costuming. Then, school. Well, Yale wasn't interested in me, and they had no scholarships. Carnegie Tech, which is another design school that was good at the time, and the Fashion Academy over on Fifth Avenue, wanted $8,000 just to talk to them. One of the people that I was painting with, I think his name was Ernie, was in one of my painting classes at the New School... we all ran around together, crazy artist time you know, and we lived at the Cedar
Bar with Franz Kline and Motherwell, and all those people. We just sat at their feet. He said, "You know, there's a funny school over on 23rd Street, in a high school. I've heard about it, it's called the Fashion Institute, and I think they give scholarships." So guess who was there the next morning?

I: This is our very own Fashion Institute of Technology?

N: Yes! I thought, "That's it! That's it!" Free. Scholarships. Well, they didn't know what had arrived. First of all, I had a B.A. from Wellesley in Sociology. That meant number one, that I was rich because everyone who went to Wellesley was rich. The fact that one third of the people there were on scholarships or were Minister's daughters was something else that no one knew but us. So they couldn't see what.... they gave Associate Bachelor of Arts degrees in the New York University system, so what was I doing... what was it? Furthermore, they only took people of high school age. So the whole thing was impossible and thank you very much. I went home and I thought, "That won't do!!" I went back and I think until I annoyed them so much that they thought it would be less trouble to have me there than to not have me there. So they did this experiment, as I remember, they took in one woman who was about 40, and myself, and I was about 23, 24. We were the experimental students. The older students. We both worked out, and now they've got a very broad policy. We were at the Central Needle Trades High School on the seventh and eighth floors. I kept going down the "up" staircase and I kept getting demerits. If I were sick, and I had a lot of strep throat at that time, I had to bring a note from home. Home?!

I: So you became your own mother!
I became my own best friend, my own little mother. I would write to the Dean and say, "Patricia Zipprodt couldn't go to school today because she had strep throat. Signed, Patricia Zipprodt."

Now, the area that you were in... Was that called Costume Design?

No. Apparel... Because I also made clear to them that I wanted to design for the ballet. That made the issue even more confusing because they didn't teach... But I knew if I could get my craft, use the hands and the eyes, then I could get a job and I would be set. I never will forget the art teacher. She said... I can't remember her name, she had red hair and she had Joan Crawford shoes and she would rise up on her toes when she spoke at F.I.T. "You do not know," said she addressing the class, "what you're really getting into. Because a designer eats design, sleeps design, lives design. It is the central thing in a designer's life. If it means picking up pins to get started, you will do that." I thought, "Not mee!! I'm from Wellesley... I won't pick up any pins... No way will I pick up pins!" Well, when I got out of F.I.T....

You were there how long?

I went three terms. I didn't really graduate because the fourth term was a work term, and I had to go to work, period. I was on borrowed funds. This was when I walked by Lord and Taylor and saw the Charles James coats in the window.

Go back just a moment for me... did you find the F.I.T. experience worthwhile?

Absolutely. Absolutely. The craft training there was absolutely fantastic. I learned to drape. I mean really to drape, not to just...
work from patterns, Simplicity patterns or whatever that I had been doing when I was growing up. I really learned how to make a pattern. I learned how to sew properly. I mean I had always sewn but I didn't know how to run an industrial machine, I didn't know really how to put in a zipper. I didn't know all the things you need to know. I did come with art training though, so I was very fortunate. Also I had taken all the liberal arts program, I didn't have to take that, so I could really put my full interest and time into designing garments and figuring out how to make them. I really tried to work in different shapes in ways that hadn't been pre-cast. If the project was the bolero I didn't really see the point in doing a bolero because the bolero already existed. So I was trying to do strange and weird things, working on the bias...I didn't know what I was doing but they helped me. They helped me a great, great deal. I had a fabulous draping teacher.

I: You really were using the process of draping in the same way that one uses the process of painting. You were painting with drape.

N: Yes, it was three dimensional. It was kind of a sculpturing thing really.

I: Interesting.

N: It's really very much that to me. As a result of my three terms there I really was able to...I worked one summer while I was going there. I worked for Swirl. I was a sample hand and I made a Swirl sample a day. Sometimes I had to stay until 9 o'clock.

I: What was Swirl?

N: Swirl at that time...it's much more sophisticated now, but it was a
company owned by a fabulous man named Jack Nackman. It was the wrap-and-tie house dress. It had a patented back which...the back always had the same thing but the front changed and the cottons were wonderful, pretty prints, and sometimes they'd have set-in sleeves and sometimes they'd have rick-rack or whatever...and they always had pockets. They came street-length and I think they soon went into a hostess length...hostess gown length for around the house. I don't remember how I got that job. They had a little tiny sample room on Fifth Avenue in the Thirties, and I had two sewing machines and a big cutting table and a little phone. It was a little teeny office.

I: Do you remember...because it's very important for young students to learn from other people's experience of how you go from the school experience into the job market. Did someone from the college send you to that?

N: I think, if I had gone the Fourth term...that was all under college auspices, but I literally--because half of it was still the school, I had a full degree. I had to get out.

I: But did you apply? Did you look in the paper and see that Swirl wanted someone?

N: Oh, actually what I did? I must have heard about that job through someone because I needed summer work between my second and third term. So I guess someone put me onto it and I went and I got it. Jack Nackman thought, "Who's this strange woman? She wants to be a sample maker, what is this?"

I: A Wellsley girl!

N: A Welsley girl, and with all these lovely drawings in my portfolio which
had nothing to do with Swirl. It amused him so. He said, "Well, how much do you want?" I thought, "Well, $50!" and he said, "Well, why not!" He became one of my great, great backers in a way. He said, "Okay, be here tomorrow."

I: That's a nice experience. How long did you stay there?

N: I worked there all summer but then I had to go back to school, which he knew. I worked another period there though, maybe Christmas. Oh, I know. I worked there when I stopped the third term. I said, "Jack, help!" He said, "What is it you really want to do?" Now, by this time I had spotted Charles James's coats in the corner of Lord and Taylor. I had gone home, changed, got in my best clothes, which I had one of, one black dress, and went up and tried them on. They were living sculpture. They were simply on a dress form with little blobs, no faces, just these three coats, just sitting there breathing, and it had to do with all the stuff I was trying to do at F.I.T. - all that cut and the architectural turn to everything.

I: The sense of construction that was translated.

N: Yes.

I: One always feels about James's clothes that they stand by themselves, literally stand by themselves. In other words, they don't have to have a body in them.

N: That's right. They just exist and they breathe, they really do. Well, anyway I started my campaign to get a job with Charles, which consisted of frantic letter writing and receiving frantic letters back from him saying, "Absolutely not!! I have no money. I have too many people working for me now..." but long, long letters. I would keep on writing.
Meanwhile I was working at Swirl, and Jack... one day he said, "What is it that you... can I help you with... obviously you're going to get where you're going to get. What is what you want to do? What is your next step?" I said, "Jack, I've got to work for Charles James. I just have to work for Charles James." He said, "Well you should. You should work for Charles James." I said, "Well, I've been writing him and..." He said, "How much will it cost you to live for six months?" I figured it up. He said, "I'll back you. You can work for him for nothing." 

I: Oh, that's wonderful!

N: Yes. I said, "Wow!" and off I went again. That's when I camped on James's door step.

I: Because we're living at the moment in an inflationary period, do you remember how much that was, the backing?

N: Yes, I can, because I know exactly what it cost me to go to school for three terms. I lived for one year on $900. That's what I know. I lived for one whole year on $900 because my rent was $14 and I carried my sandwiches and I didn't have any clothes. I made fabulous soup out of anything I could get off the Bleecker Street market and I had a wonderful time.

I: Ok, you went to... you finally got an appointment with James?

N: Yes, well I did it this way. I knew I really had a message, so by this time I had found friends, Fritz and Jean Boulton, and they said, "Oh Charles this is someone you should really....." As you know Charles at the time had people who paid him to work for him as a result of the G.I. Bill. Well, I couldn't do that. Anyway, I took my lunch and my supper and all seven papers of the time, The Journal American, remember
all the newspapers? The Brooklyn Eagle.

I: The Mirror.

N: Yes. It was fabulous, and I just sat outside his suite at the Sherry-Netherlands on the carpeted hall, and every now and then I'd knock on the door, and he'd, "Oh, she's still there!" I think it was just like I did at F.I.T. I think I wore them down. And finally, after one or two warnings, he said, "Ohh, come in."

I: You'd been there all day?

N: I'd been there. He said, "Oh, start tomorrow. Be here at 8. What can you do? Can you make charts?" I said, "I can make charts and I can pick up pins!"

I: Remember your instructor's comment.

N: Yes, remembering and suddenly knowing that I would pick up pins the next morning and be so thrilled that I did not go home that night. I walked New York City all night long. I was so excited I could not see. I bought myself a toothbrush, had breakfast, and went in the same clothes I had been in before...at 8 AM and picked up pins for Mr. James. He paid me! I called up Jack and I said, "I got it, and he's paying me!"

I: What was he paying you?

N: $60 a week.

I: Very good.

N: I could do it. I could live on that very nicely. That was money. Then I started my year with Charles.

I: Did he talk with you, communicate with you, teach you?

N: Oh, yes. He scared me. We threw up all the time. We always threw up there. He made us so nervous we had to wait in line to get to...
I: You mean literally you threw up?

N: Yes. I mean sometimes the tension would get so high in the atelier... and one time he locked me up for a whole week-end and we designed belts together. I lost ten pounds. I swear to God I've never been so frightened in my life! He was absolutely terrifying, because his demands were very high and you would do things like... if you started with a piece of paper you'd presume that the right angle of the paper was a true right angle.....ohh, thirty lashes for you! You had to make your own right angle from precise instruments. It was quite a discipline!

I: It's interesting that that's like the mind of an engineer and when you look at his clothes you realize that they are engineered.

N: Yes, exactly.

I: You stayed with him how long?

N: About a year.

I: You progressed beyond picking up pins?

N: Oh, yes. I was...I certainly did. (Laughs) I progressed to the point where when we were doing a line at Samuel Winston's, the famous line, I was cutting and adapting clothes over to the Seventh Avenue version and Charles was still changing, changing, changing. So everytime he would change a seam by an eighth of an inch I would have to re-record it on the pattern, so we were always about to go in to work with them. I finally got to the point where I would punch the new pattern in on the time clock, because we were making so many changes and he was changing so fast and so often that unless I had a time record I wouldn't know which was the final Gusset pattern. So I was quite active. There were sometimes when we would be sewing clothes, there'd be eight of us
sewing on one dress, like the clover dresses. It was going under the
machine waiting for someone to wear it to a ball, eight of us would
be following the hem around, or pushing it under two machines at once
to get it done. It was madness!

I: There has of course been a great deal of conjecture about the fact that
James was mad, in the true sense of the word; did you feel that?

N: I felt that he was...that his madness was socially acceptable and that's
why he was allowed out. I think he really was bizarre, but yet in a
funny way, Robert L., what he said was so true. What he communicated
was absolutely the basic fiber of truth even though it seemed mad, it
was true. So you never knew if he was mad, or more sane than any of
us.

I: You say it was the "essence of truth"; was that his observations of
society, or...

N: Observations of society, of life, of what he could do with clothes,
anything that he had to say was a highly, highly intelligent,
brilliant...

I: What do you remember most about something he might have said in
relationship to clothes? Is there some axiom, as it were, that's
tattooed on your brain?

N: Not per say, but there certainly was...I saw a miracle. I saw magic
happen. He was changing the silhouette one day, and when Charles
changes the silhouette that means that he goes back to his dress form
and with calipers takes off a quarter of an inch across here and puts
it a quarter of an inch there. He was a firm believer in the fact
that you cannot take away without putting it someplace else. That
matter can be neither created nor destroyed, but it can be moved around wherever you want it. He one time literally changed the silhouette, this was prior to the Winston line, to such a point that by the time we got through changing the dummy we had carved right through the stomach part of the front and had put all that on the rear end, or vice versa...I forget, but anyway here is this rather hollow dress form and we bandaged it up and filled her all out. I think we took off the fanny and put the fanny on the tummy - to calipered measurements with Charles measuring and weighing stuff that we had taken off, and we put it back on in a new place and re-scultped it and wrapped it up like you'd wrap up a sprained ankle, so that the form was all back together and he draped the whole line on it. I was just waiting for those to get manufactured and get into Lord and Taylor. I was going to jump in and see what happened, and I jumped in, in my best underwear, to Lord and Taylor's and tried those street dresses on. Low and behold, my fanny went away and it all went to my stomach, and I've never understood how he did that. I saw him do every step of the process and he was right, and it was not believable.

I: So he was a true genius then?

N: Yes. He knew what he was doing because it worked on my own body. I saw my body change.

I: The name that's most associated with him of course, as far as the general public is concerned, is Millicent Rogers. Did you meet her?

N: No, she was "before my time." I did assist him with one fitting at his suite at the Sherry where he did a lot of his work, his thinking work, and the atelier was where we executed it. He had a fitting with
Lisa Kirk in one of those paddle wheel dresses.

I: Define who Lisa Kirk was.

N: Oh, Lisa Kirk was a wonderful performer and singing star, nightclub and Broadway, and later in my own career in a show called "Mack and Mabel." I said to Miss Kirk, "You know Miss Kirk, you know when we first met?"

I: Oh, how fascinating!

N: Isn't that marvelous?

I: Just for the record, my association with Lisa Kirk of course was "Kiss Me Kate" on Broadway and she was wonderful in that part.

N: Isn't that funny?

I: I love the way... I've often used in lectures at F.I.T. the fact that there are threads of our lives and they all come together forming and creating their own tapestry and it is fascinating. Everyone I've ever talked with or interviewed or been involved with has these things happen. You meet a person at a given point in your life and they reappear in your life some other time. It is a whole cultural history in a funny sort of way. Working with Charles James of course becomes demanding as you describe it in terms of tension. Was that tension, you think, just yours or was it all of the employees?

N: It was all of us. All of us. The whole work crew.

I: Was it because the genius was such that you wished his approval, that you did not want to lose the situation?

N: No, he actually terrified us. He really scared us.

I: What were you afraid of? That he would hit you?

N: I don't know. He would lock Miss Peel in the closet a lot.

I: Who was Miss Peel?
N: She was this little old lady who ran the shop, and she was locked in the closet a lot. The key would go out the window onto Madison Avenue. We would all wonder what we would do about Miss Peel. The minute Charles left we would run down and get the key. I mean she was locked up. He could have left her there for years, and you never knew. You never knew.

I: But you had no desire to leave?

N: Not until he really got saturated with it. I left because I got fired by Samuel Winston, which was...

I: You did something bad?

N: No, no. I, having worked til 4am the night before, didn’t get in until five of nine. I was the last one in and they wanted to drop two people off the payroll so they took the last two time cards for that day and mine was one of them.

I: That ended your relationship with Charles James?

N: Well, Charles wanted me back, but by that time I thought, "Enough of this craziness."

I: And then what?

N: I had gotten such great things from him.

I: You feel that he's influenced your entire career now?

N: Well, I feel this...yes, I'm sure, but I know where absolutely truly... my work with Charles preceded by my overall training at F.I.T. came... made my career possible in the sense that my off-Broadway work, which was very experimental and very...we were working with the Genet plays and really unique theater. I would not have been able to do it had I not been able to run my own workrooms and to cut my own things.
I: Because of budgets?

N: Because of budgets. I mean you did a show for nothing, and my sewing machine from F.I.T. was at Circle-in-the-Square as often as not. But, I couldn't have done the cutting and therefore I couldn't have made my expression.

I: For this record, because it is a true history of your work and progress... okay, we have you at Charles James, you're fired by Samuel Winston.

N: "Let go" is really a better term.

I: Well, let go, sure. Anyway you move on and make the decision that you've had enough of that, that you've absorbed enough, you move on to the next plateau - which was what? Were you doing shows at the same time you were working for Charles James?

N: No, it was a full-time thing.

I: So where do we go from there?

N: I think... I know, I made a fumble, and I used direct help for the first and I will tell you the last time in my life to get a job. I wanted very much to work with Pauline Trigere and I didn't know how to do it. But I had friends who were very close to Pauline Trigere. The woman... the sister of... it was Ellie Rand Pope, who was a very, very... oh she was a Chicago woman who ran benefit fashion shows and what have you for St. Luke's and so on; she was one of Pauline's friends. Her brother was a friend of mine who said, "Let me speak to Ellie and maybe she'll speak to Pauline." Well, anyway this all came about that I went to see Pauline Trigere. She couldn't, number one, believe that I had been paid by Charles and finally I think I brought her a pay envelope. She said, "He never pays people." I said, "Well, he pays every other week at least."
Which was true. He was so busy suing people that he took our funds to take Hattie Carnegie to lunch and we'd have to wait. Anyway, she put me to work as a sample hand in the sample room. What I wanted to do was to sketch for her, or to assist her, but that job was occupied by someone who was really dug in. So there I am, Bertha at the sewing machine.

I: You're back again.

N: I'm back again, right. This time I am being given little treasures like unmatchable chiffon plaids to cut into bias dresses - told to me in French.

I: Even though Pauline speaks perfectly good English?

N: Yes. There I am with plaids that I cannot make match on the bias or any other way and everyone-someone blows their nose the chiffon is floating around and I am not happy with this situation. But I go through about two weeks of it, and the women do not want me in that workroom. Those women do not...I wear earrings, and I go out and smoke cigarettes and I wear lipstick. These were ladies with those little cotton things over their dresses who were sewing-- good sample hands. I am not a sample hand and they knew it.

I: Was there a lag between their educational level and yours?

N: Well, number one they were much older, and they were working women of the old sense, of old people who had...

I: Factory workers.

N: ...learned to sew. They did beautiful hand work and all that. They made the originals. One day, Pauline had to go to the opera one night and they were running up a coat for her, and it was getting near 5:30
or so and she asked me if I would put a hem in for her, the shop had gone home. I said, "Surely," and I took...mind you I'm a very well trained F.I.T. person, I know very strongly the difference between stone chalk and wax chalk and what you use them on. But again I have someone who's scaring me and I picked the hem on this off-white silk moire coat, opera coat, street length but full evening, and I mark it with wax. Now for those of you who do not know, for silks you use chalk and for woolens you use wax because the iron, the heat of the iron, will make the wax just absorb. On silk it makes a grease mark. Now, I got home and I thought, "Oh...my...God!", I suddenly realized what I had done, and Robert L., I never went back. She still has my scissors. Go back! Are you kidding! I wrote her a note saying, "Dear Miss Trigere, I have so enjoyed and learned so much from my time with you but I do feel that since my interest is in the theater and going into theater design that I must now study theater. Sincerely yours..."
I have now told history what I did to Miss Trigere's coat. I'm sure that tailor must have wondered. I'm sure she knew. I can hear it. It's time to wear it and go, and it's got grease marks on the hem—going up the moire. Ohhh! Yelloed grease! I can see it! Go back!!

I: It's always possible...you know I'm a great believer that there are unconscious forces that direct our destinies, and it's quite possible that what you wrote in your note to her was essentially what was motivating this. You didn't really want to continue being a sample hand and you may have felt put upon to be asked at that late hour to do that, and the unconscious takes over and creates a situation which is unacceptable.
N: I never have made that mistake before or since with chalks. I knew chalks cold - so something was going.

I: Well, you were also creating a situation that demands that you leave or be fired. One or the other, and you don't give her the opportunity...

N: No, I'm not going to put myself through that.

I: ...to say "I quit" before she fires you. Then what?

N: Then I actually did find out about the union, the United Scenic Artists, and realized that I had to take an examination to get a card, and realized that I had to have a union card in the first place. That never dawned on me. Secondly, it was like a guild and I had to take a twelve or eight hour exam. I thought, "Oh, what will I do, what will I do!" Well...

I: Is there some way one can study for that?

N: Well, you can go to Yale for two years and study for it and have their Masters of Fine Arts in Costume. One can go to Carnegie Tech, but they wouldn't let me in. F.I.T. let me in. So I thought, "What will I do?" I didn't think it would be all that hard. I said, "What do I need to know?"; they said, "The entire history of costume." I said, "Okay, and what else?" So, I had a very dear friend and mentor, who was key in my life at that point, and he said...I told him what was going on. I told him that I had to leave Trigere's, that my life was at stake, and then here's this crazy union exam. He said, "How did you find out about it?" I said, "Well, Ann Meechum knew about...and so on. But I've got to study for it John!" He said, as people seem to say to me, "How long do you need to study?" I said, "The exam's in June and this is about two and a half months and I'll need all that
time!" He said, "How much will it cost you to live for two and a half months?" I said, "Oh, about $300," and he said, "Come to the theater tomorrow and get it." There were three one hundred dollar bills, no more, no less. When it came time, when I was able to get $300, I said, "Here, I want to pay you back." It was quite a while later I must say. He said, "Oh, no no no! You do not pay me back. You do it for someone else."

I: Isn't that interesting. You know, not to digress, but my early career and my personality and my cultural development was certainly directed by Alexander Woollcott, and when I reached the stage where I said to him, "Alex I am ready now to return to you some of the monies, the books you've given me," and things of that nature. I said, "How do we do this?", and he said exactly the same thing. "You return nothing to me but what you do is you find somebody and you do it for them as I have done it for you." Of course I must say that since then I have said the exact same thing to other people.

N: Yes, you see just how far these gifts went. It's like the pebble in the pond, the ripples. That $300 is still going, because I've said to people I've done it for in whatever way, "Now when you do it...", it just pyramids. It's fabulous! So anyway I decided, "Okay here I am and I will go to the library." So I went to the New York Public Library and I started with the Egyptians and I worked my way through. I taught myself the history of costume by studying an epoch or an era, depending on what time it was, and drawing what I needed to know. I learned by drawing. I cranked my way through. I got to the 1920's by the night of the exam. I thought, "Well, if they ask for the Thirties, forget it,
I'll flunk!" I had the whole history of costume in my little Wellesley demented brain, and that's what I got from Wellesley, I could pack it in. There were other things to do. We did a project. I designed my first show for the exam. It was called The Country Wife.

I: You had never designed a show before?
N: No.
I: Interesting.
N: Oh, I had designed one. I had almost forgotten about that. I really literally had never done one from a script because I wasn't into that. It was a little late. I went to take the exam and there were all those people from Yale with their M.A.s and I came in with the top score! Absolutely top score! The reason I know this is because John had gone to...

I: Give John's last name.
N: John Mealy. One way or another we had lunch with Eileen and...

oh, here's another one...I have to back up...I needed references for the exam, for the union committee. They wanted three letters. I'll never forget, I went to Gus Tyler, who at that time was Vice President in charge of politics for the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union. Ol' Gus wrote me a letter saying I was always on time, that I was responsible and a good union person. John Mealy sent me on to see a man who became absolutely critically instrumental in my theater education, it was Boris Aronson. John called, in my presence, called up Boris. He said, "Boris, there is someone I would like you to look at their portfolio...ta da da da da da...you are under no obligation to do anything, if you do not like what you see I will understand". So I
go up to see Boris Aronson, and he looks at my portfolio and he writes me a letter. Ohhhh! Compared to Gus', it was five lines, but I had a letter from Boris, and then there was someone else.

I: Again for the record would you define who Boris...

N: Boris Aronson is the master of scenic design in the Western world, I think, certainly in the American field. He's a painter and a sculptor and phenomenal designer.

I: The five lines that he wrote for you were based on the portfolio?

N: Yes. He gave his reaction to what he saw and suggested that I would be a very, very fine union member. But letters from Boris Aronson were not given out every day, which John well knew. Boris also wanted to know if I wanted a copy of it and I didn't have the sense to say yes. I said, "Oh Mr. Aronson this will do!", tripping over the furniture.

I: What an exciting moment for you!

N: Yes it was, lots of things were exciting. I remember it very well. He was in the process of moving. He and Lisa were moving from 1 West 89th Street, no it was Columbus Circle, they were tearing Columbus Circle down, and everything was out of the place except a desk or two and Boris. He couldn't find a pen to sign his name. He wrote it for me in pencil. I took it home and typed it up for him, I brought it back going over all the litter of the collapsed area, and there he was, he couldn't find a pen. So finally, somewhere in the desk we found an old bottle of red ink and a quill pen, a drawing pen, and Boris in the process, since it was an old bottle, spilled red india ink all over himself. I was standing there thinking, "I've done this to Boris Aronson!"

I: Talk about a red-letter day!

N: "He'll be red forever." You know how long it takes for india ink...it
is a permanent stain.

I: He'll remember you dear!

N: (Laughs) I sent him red carnations to say thanks. But he was just literally a mess, but there was enough ink left for him to sign his name, but I was mortified! These sort of things were always...I was messing up Pauline's coat and then Boris. This trail of destruction. But, anyway I passed the exam and the union didn't believe it. They looked over my resume and I hadn't gone to anyplace. They said, "Where did you learn all this?" I said, "I went to the library." They said, "We all go to the library, where did you learn the entire..." I said, "The New York Public Library. It's all in books," and it is.

I: It also is...I mean it's running through everything you're saying Patricia: it seems to me, it's the determination of something that one really wants. I have always believed that if you want something badly enough you'll find a way of achieving it within the limits of whatever your God-given talents are.

N: Well, you know there's a famous saying, "Be careful of what you pray for, your prayers are answered." I think that was Thoreau or Emerson, but it's true because you focus all that visible and invisible energy on a point and it's infallible - no one can stop you, only yourself. Don't you think?

I: Oh I think so. It certainly has guided my life. The real confusion for most people, and it increases in the complexity of the present specialization of the 20th Century: that people don't know what they want and therefore it's hard to focus in and there's no opportunity for them to find out what they want. They're plunged out into the world
with a sense of responsibility to achieve almost immediately and that can be very damaging, but that's a whole other thing. A right, you passed your examination and this now allows you to do what?

N: I now get to borrow money to pay for my union card and now am officially unemployed in the ranks of theatrical labor. (Laughs) It's that simple. When people say to me, "When I get my card it will all be different," and I say, "No, no, no, you'll just be out $500 and you'll be more unemployed than ever."

I: You are now an official statistic.

N: Right. Because the union is not able to get us jobs, there aren't enough jobs. But anyway...how did I start? Oh, yes. I know very well. I at that time was very involved with, and deeply permanently involved as far as I was concerned, with a man who...died. I had just been initiated into the union when I got this news, so by the time I sort of had gotten myself together from that I really was just floating...I didn't know what I was doing but somebody knew of a job at ABC Television.

I: The year is what?

N: I don't know Robert. Oh, it was the year I got into the union, I think it was 1955 or around there. So I got this portfolio together because I knew you had to have a portfolio. It said you had to have a portfolio. I had this portfolio of shows I had never done, projects and some stuff from F.I.T. which was non-theatrical.

I: When you say shows that you never had done...

N: Well because I had never done any shows, I had just sat down and done projects.

I: Oh, I see, you created.
N: Yes, but they had never been onstage.

I: I see. Did you take a range of things? You mentioned that *Country Wife* was your project for the union and you had...

N: I had done a lot of F.I.T. work, and I had done a lot of illustrating then too. I had some watercolors from when I used to go around New York. I was a city painter for quite a while. I took those because... I just scraped together whatever I could get my hands on - and my project. I took the sketches that I studied from because I did some very nice plates on the history of costume. I did some very nice sepia drawings. So that was all I had and a few letters. Anyway they didn't ever look at the portfolio, they said, "Can you start Monday? We need somebody to help Al Leeman." I started on "The Voice of Firestone."

I: Doing costumes?

N: (SINGING) "If I could tell you, of my devotion."

I: This is doing costumes?

N: Assisting the costume designer, and Monday was show day, so he needed someone to double for him.

I: This was a weekly show?

N: A weekly show, and I worked one day a week for $27.50. That was union minimum take home. I lived on that. I lived on that! Ohhh! It was a fun show, a wonderful show because all the opera people...Rise Stevens, Roberta Peters, Robert Merrill, and Cezare Siepi, with whom I fell in love at long distance... It was fabulous, right up my alley. I just collected the shoes and I had my lists and there was a period of three hours that I covered up at the studio when the designer was still at Costumes
getting the last stuff out and I would be at the studio. But, because of the union rules that until wardrobe people got on no one could touch the wardrobe and I was not a wardrobe union person - there was three hours that I had nothing to do. So it was right next to an old riding stable and I used to go riding on Monday afternoons. That was about half of my salary for the week. I'll never forget, the producer and director of "The Voice of Firestone" were one day looking out the door, and I walked right by the door on this horse. They said, "Oh my God, don't fall off! We're on the air at 8!" It was live. (LAUGHS)

I: How long did you do that?

N: Oh, that was probably about a half a year. Then I think I ran into... oh I did Les Paul and Mary Ford five minute commercials. I was doing anything. It was called "bread time," I learned that...

I: When you say you were doing it...you mean you were designing clothes for them?

N: I was shopping clothes.

I: Shopping clothes.

N: Yes. It was all modern and I would go get Les's coats and Mary's dresses and I was raiding Seventh Avenue and doing it for credit, and Ohrbach's always worked well with you. I would have...one time we did hats, and I had all of Sally Victor's hats and both my hands were full with hat boxes and I couldn't flag a cab. Everyone was taking cabs and I had to get there before the camera rolled and Oh, it was big excitement. But, that was fun and I learned how to do TV commercials, and also every now and then Al Leeman would take a vacation at ABC or he'd go to the coast for a week, and I would do "The Elgin Hour." They would
allow me to do a show if everyone was wearing their own clothes, I could
do it.

I: Then there was no actual creation of designs?

N: No, I was just learning. I was just "picking up my pins." One way
or another you're just "picking up pins." Eventually I got a job with
the first year of the Stratford, Connecticut Festival. I worked as Bob
Fletcher's assistant.

I: An old friend of mine.

N: Oh, boy. Yes. What did I do? Well, I worked 18 hours a day for $50
a week. My permanent salary for quite a while. That place was kind of
a rip off because they kind of used us mercilessly. They were under a
summer stock contract, so that there we were really working around the
clock for nothing, but we didn't realize that at the time.

I: It also seems to be part of our society's use of bright young talent.
There are more bright young people than there are jobs and the result
is that there is a tendency to use that.

N: Well, they know they've got us. We must do it.

I: I think it's no different than the intern in the hospital who is misused
and it's the nature of... it probably goes back to the medieval function
of the apprentice.

N: That's right. Well, the substitute we have for it. If there is an
apprenticeship system it's simply a low-salaried job. I always looked
upon them as apprenticeship periods. This whole thing I'm talking about
here is nothing but a long apprenticeship - Charles and Trigere and
Les Paul and Mary Ford, or anything.
I: You were also participating in the society itself. You were seeing theater, you were seeing ballet, you were hearing opera, seeing opera.
N: Yes.
I: Were there other areas? Did you still read a lot?
N: I think probably I made a shift in my reading pattern. I shifted over from books to magazines.
I: It became more visual?
N: No, it was more like Harper's and Atlantic and Time, instead of a book, because when you really get busy there's only so much time to read.
I: The short article becomes more viable.
N: Yes, the short article became my reading, because I had just that much time.
I: Did you watch television?
N: No, I never owned a set until I moved to University Place, about ten years ago I bought my first set. I didn't have anything to do with it except I worked in it. It wasn't that good. "The Elgin Hour" was good, and "Playhouse 90," but there was no Channel 13. I got to see "The Voice of Firestone" live - so what did I need a television set for?
I: Movies. Did movies influence you at all?
N: Somewhat, not a great deal. Somewhat. I'm not the movie goer that you are.
I: Yes, I'm a movie buff.
N: I'm really not a buff at all. I love them, but somehow or other I think Robert... you see I've been poor for so long, really down to the nub, that things like television sets I literally couldn't buy myself, and movies, unless someone took me, I couldn't go to. Literally couldn't
go to, or if I did - well there was something else I'd rather go to, like the ballet. I had to make my choices very starkly.

I: When you saw theater, did you see most of it from the balconies?
N: I stood, or sometimes I was taken and I would be in the orchestra, "because I was running with a lot of people at the time who did press and photography and who were always doing stories, so I had good seats too. I got very spoiled by seventh row center.

I: Sure.
N: But I would go and stand. I would stand to this day. I love to stand.

I: I was a walk-in-backwards person.
N: Second act? All those second acts?

I: I saw more second acts and third acts than anybody in town and developed a great skill at being able to fill in what the first act must have been. I learned how to understand a very important thing, which was that a good playwright never wastes language. A good costume designer never wastes a change of costume. It serves a purpose, it constantly forwards the action of the play itself to its inevitable resolution. It was years later that I developed the skill of being able to go to the drama bookstore fairly well-dressed, looking as though I might buy any book in the place, and I would read all the first acts of all the plays I had ever seen and had never observed and would sometimes discover things that absolutely amazed me; other times I would find myself thinking, "I guessed correctly, I did understand what that first act was all about." It was an interesting kind of training. When I say "walk-in-backwards," it was a cheating technique of course of finding a play on a matinee day particularly and I would talk. I would walk in backwards saying to any person whose eye
I could catch, "Emily, I will talk to you tomorrow because Mother is livid with you that you haven't called, but I've got to get back to my seat," and no usher in the world would ever stop me.

N: No. No, stop you Robert L.?

I: Now, the next step that developed for you. In other words you are now doing for television and you are doing all that.

N: I've done my little bit at Stratford...I think a major step in terms of assisting was that I was determined to work for Irene Sharaff. I had worked by this time for Bill and Jean Eckart on...

I: Did they do both costumes and sets?

N: Yes they did, so I was their costume assistant, and Jean and I had gone to the same high school, so we had...she was somewhat older than I...her sister and I knew each other, so we had a little connection. We were all from Kennelworth. It was a Mark musical with Eddie Albert called...I can't remember, but it opened and closed and produced it. I worked with them and I worked with Fletcher and I worked with Rubin a great deal, and I loved working...my favorite person to assist was Rubin.

I: Did these jobs come out...you mention the Eckart association with... Did the other jobs comes out of personal contacts or was it...

N: Well, once you're moving, you move, because you become visible and you're seen in action working and I was in the costume shops. Once I started I was moving because good assistants are hard to find. I was obviously looking for work and...
I: ...and willing to work hard.

N: ...and worked all hours, it didn't matter. I was getting good at being an assistant too, I knew what it was about. I was desperate to work for Irene Sharaff...... because she, like Karinska, like James, was the person I selected as...this was the finest designer I knew at the time. So I started writing her letters, and Mr. Mealy took her to lunch and said...they were both out in Hollywood...ta da da da da da...she said, "I remember she came in first in that examination!" That's how I think I found out about that. John said, "Did you know that? Did you know you came in first?" No, I didn't know. (screams). Irene knew.

I: Irene was a judge?

N: I guess so because...well, she must have been. So anyway, Miss Sharaff was always nice, she would always write back. She always answered her mail, which is not easy to do when you're busy. She said, "No, I'm sorry but I have an assistant, thank you." One time she did two shows at once and she remembered me and she said would I come by and show her my portfolio and talk with her.

I: Two Broadway shows?

N: Two Broadway musicals. One was Candide, "Glitter and be gay" (singing), which Ann Roth, who is her constant assistant - you see the reason I couldn't get the job was because Annie was working with her all the time, out on the coast and then in New York. The other show was Happy Hunting with Ethel Merman. She put me on Happy Hunting. I can see by your face that I've said something that's struck a note of terror.

I: This is Fernando Lamas?

N: Right!
I: Do you know that my career in terms of New York started with my doing a definitive article for *Town and Country* on Mr. Lamas' clothes? That's how I entered the field in men's wear.

N: Oh, wait until...Oh Robert L., we have something yet again in common. Oh, oh, oh!!

I: Extraordinary! Peter executed all the clothes. Peter

N: Tell me! I went to all the fittings. Irene wouldn't go.

I: You see it merely supports my theory of the threads...everything is connected.

N: I know! I was speechless! I have stories about those clothes that you will want to know!

I: I knew as we did this particular tape we would find additional reasons why...

N: ...come across these crossroads. There's a book by, I think, Som'er set Maugham called *Of Human Bondage* which does have the Persian Rug philosophy of the strands...I've kept that with me all the time.

I: Me too, the same influence. Interesting. That's where I got the idea originally.

N: Oh, well let me tell you about Irene. I went to see her and it was pouring rain. I was always getting to see people in the pouring rain. I would arrive just dripping. If I had lunch with Arnold Weissberger, it's raining and my fur coat looks like skunk.

I: I understand that your lunch with Arnold Weissberger gave you bad marks. You flunked lunch.

N: Yes, I always flunk lunch! (laughs) It's true, it's true! I went to see Irene and at that time my hair was almost black and...which I thought...
was a wonderful color for me, and...

I: Was that your original color?

N: Yes, sable. It was long and straight back and in an enormous bun. I was Miss Dancer now, don't forget - the ballet look. There was Miss Sharaff...

I: Miss Degas perhaps?

N: Miss Degas, yes, with her black hair straight back and in her navy blue linen sheath, but she was dry and we both looked at each other and "Uhhhh!" She was dry, I was wet and had the portfolio, that was the difference. So, she looked at my portfolio and she really liked it. She said to me, "I'm not altogether sure about the schedules, do you have anything else that you might be doing if this doesn't work?" I said, "Actually I've been asked to do a Broadway show." She said, "What?" I said, "Yes, it's such-and-such-and-such, but I'd really rather work for you." She said, "Are you crazy?"

I: Do you know which show it was?

N: I'll think about it when we take a break, I think that I can pull that up. I said, "No." She said, "You've been offered a Broadway show, your first and you...? Why?" I said, "I'll tell you. If I'm going to do Broadway shows it doesn't matter, and if I'm not I'd better be a good assistant. Once I start doing them, I'm not going to be working for you."

I: You know that brings up a very important point I think in the whole process of one's career development. It is a matter of understanding one's limitations at any given time. It is also the matter of understanding the function of timing, of when it is that one makes the move.
Not too soon.

N: Right. Right, and do the things that can't be done later because you cannot do them later.

I: And you cannot go back. The nature of our society does not allow you. If you have been a star it is uncomfortable to take anything but a cameo. You can do a cameo but you cannot go back and reduce your status to a featured performer because somehow or other it's interpreted as failure.

N: Yes, and you don't know how to do the work anymore. It's funny the way you lose it.

I: There is a point when it is wise to do exactly that. It almost goes back to the original analysis to get your basic liberal arts education and then develop your talent.

N: It's the same thing. Everything in its time. It's ecclesiastian.

I: Very important I think as part of the educational process.

N: I will say that I never had any doubt, never had any doubt in my mind that I couldn't be a star designer - for whatever that word means. I mean, I could be the best that I could be.

I: You believed in yourself.

N: Absolutely.

I: Where'd that come from?

N: I don't know. I don't know, but I just knew that if I took the hands and eyes and my spirit and all that I had become - growing up and my education - and put it in the right place, it would only be the best, just top. But if I put it in the wrong place, I'd be in trouble. I've been very happy that I guessed right.
I: Of course I find that what you're saying is, again, one of the vital forces...there seems to be a peculiar sort of lag in our society between what we suggest is proper behavior coming out of the 19th Century Victorianism of humility, and denial of one's talent and denial of one's ego even, and reality which is that the people who seem to succeed are the people who have appreciation of their talent, an awareness of their ego and the desire to not play false games. To simply say, "Yes indeed I am good. Yes I do that well" rather than playing the socially...the more socially acceptable and I think dishonest projection of, "Little ol' me? I'm glad you like it" rather than saying, "I am good, I can do this well, I will do it, you will allow me to do, and therefore one does do it. I'm fascinated by what you've said in relationship to that.

N: I never could say it out loud, I just knew it. I hung onto it inside and that's what I knew. I had no trouble in taking the work with Irene and letting the other thing go, that was just simple. That was falling off a log, that one. I knew that given the full development of time that I would have my own space, that I would strengthen myself.

I: What did happen?

N: On Happy Hunting? Well, her real interests were in Candide, because Candide is maybe one of the most brilliantly designed shows of the world - of the world. Karinska was building Candide and her number one assistant was on Candide. Brooks Costumes was cranking out Happy Hunting, and I must say that if my memory is right, in 1959 the budget was $300,000 for the costumes.

I: In '59?!
N: I might be wrong, but it was unbelievable. There were almost 300 costumes. We had dress parades for two nights. The shoes alone, there were about 200 pairs of shoes, all with their own labels. That's how I know. Anyway, the point of that being that both shows opened rather closely in time. One opened in Boston, *Candide*, and *Happy Hunting* opened in Philadelphia. *Happy Hunting* opened first, so the minute it was open - and it was a back breaker because it was huge, it wasn't going to be a good show, it had a lot of weight of the wrong sort, but Irene got it open and then off to Boston she went anchoring me in Philadelphia with your friend and mine, Fernando.

I: ...and Ethel

N: ...and Ethel...

I: That's Ethel Merman.

N: Yes, it's Ethel Merman folks. It was not a good trip at all because, number one, before Irene had...before we opened...number one, there were three dress parades for the show. This was back when we did dress parades.

I: Define what a dress parade is.

N: A dress parade is when every actor wears every costume in the order of sequence so the director and the producers and the producers' wives and the agents and all can pick things apart before they're in their context of the scenery on the stage. It can be a terribly destructive time. It can be murder. Nothing looks right under flourescent lights.

I: You also spend your time defending them.

N: Right! And you're also trying to get people into things, and they're sewing as they're being put on and...oh, please! It's a waste of sewers'
time. Things could be finished, and everyone sits and drinks while you're killing yourself.

I: Is this something that was inherited from a much earlier time?

N: Yes, I think it's from back when life was leisurely in the theater, and it's practically non-existent now. If someone says, "dress parade" you say, "Oh, please!" Who has time? Let your actors rehearse. Don't let them stand around waiting to put on something that's not finished till One in the morning and pay them double-time. Oh, it's ridiculous! Anyway, this horror was still happening and there were two nights devoted to the chorus and featured players, and one night devoted just to Ethel's clothes, which were done by Miguel Ferraras, another Charles James graduate. The roars of approval were deadening - "Oh, Irene! Oh, my God! Oh, Ethel you never looked better!". We get to Philadelphia and the first thing in our path is a little low fence around some kind of a building, I forget what, that the director, instead of having Miss Merman go through the gate, which Joe the scenic designer has provided, he wants her to step over this way, and in her ball gown. So we start cutting the dresses and I see Irene.... I learned something that time. Talk about watching people conduct themselves under fire! Sharaff is tough. Sharaff is a fighter, she's stubborn, she gets what she wants, she's top professional, and I thought "Wow!" because oddly, all these clothes of Ethel's were being struck. The clothes that they had all adored, Lindsey and Crouse and and so on, that they had spent magnums of champagne on, were all being cut or shortened, these gorgeous ball gowns. Heavy satin, and satin doesn't even exist anymore. Irene Sharaff sat
in that house in Philadelphia, and I sat about six seats from her, because she was in such trouble that no one would get near her while this was going on. She just sat there in her black hat and her black suit and Abe was saying, "Bang, bang, bang". Well, after three days and three nights of this the wardrobe was decimated. All this work!

I: Now, you defined it in terms of the one dress which had to move over a fence, therefore one had to reconstruct it so it would not get caught on the fence; why were the others being cut?

N: For one reason or another, because it's like my little saying, "If the song doesn't work, change the dress". The show was in trouble. It was glue and Ethel knew it and Ethel was getting difficult and Fernando was pulling his scene, and there was nobody really running it. Abe wasn't...Abe kept saying, "You want a book doctor? I'm here already! What are we going to do?" The midnight conferences were eye opening. So, the clothes go. When the book is in trouble forget the clothes. The first thing people get their hands on...it's much easier to destroy than the scenery, and much easier to get rid of than a song. The song may lead you to the heart of the trouble and you have to face it. But, no. "Get rid of the dress," the dress is the problem. The song doesn't work because the dress is yellow. But the point of this is that Irene was sitting there saying not a word. Her "space" as they say in "est" is getting wider and wider and people are getting farther and farther away because the vibrations coming out of that small person are enormous. You just know what's going on. But, not a word of self-defense. "Anything you want Abe" is the line. He's just unchecked, and
he does what he's going to do no matter what she does. He's going to do it until opening, and the night before the last technical preview, and it was her last crack at him. She was standing in the back and I was standing in the back near her and Abe was standing in the aisle, saw her, and he went absolutely white. OK, we're going to say it. Abe came up the aisle and he has a fleshy face; and he just turned white. He knew that she was going to nail him. He came to the point where he had to pass by her, and she just looked at him and she said, "Abe if I had a rusty razor I'd castrate you!" and he flew. She left and I got stuck with the show, but I learned that when it starts to slide, don't lose your power by fighting. Know when you can stop it, and know when you have to let go, and don't waste your energy saying, "But you told me that was wonderful in New York. You liked it..." don't lower yourself to their anxiety level. Go with it.

I: It's also a demonstration of a position of power, that the director has the power and he has to have his "space" to resolve whatever is not working in his own terms, and that he has no time to play clinic with you in terms of resolving your position. It's within the corporate structure, which is the way we function in our society in most cases. It's wise advice. I think Patricia, we'll stop at this point for this particular session and pick it up from here.

(END OF SIDE ONE)
I: This is part two of the Patricia Zipprodt interview for The Oral History Program at the Fashion Institute of Technology. The date is November 10, 1979 and we are still at Tollgate Farm in Pennsylvania. Pat, we left off with your bringing your career up to the Irene Sharaff position, and you were telling the story of what happened with Happy Hunting and Abe, and let's take it from there. Incidentally just because I'd be terribly interested in knowing, what was it about Sharaff's talent that made you want to go and work for her?

N: Well, in my opinion her design work which I had seen was absolutely top level work. I liked it, and found it stronger and really more impassioned than either M. or Lucinda who were very fine, excellent designers, but just for my own spirit I liked Irene's pungent attack on what she was doing.

I: I think that's also an important point about developing one's career: that one has to be true to oneself rather than responding to whatever either is the accepted accolade, the assumption that that is the top person. It's rather like the ridiculousness of Cecil Beaton being asked to do the clothes for Coco, it made no sense at all in terms of selecting a costume designer. It was merely selecting someone who was thought of being the best and having some name and value. Anyway, to go back to your career. We've finished Happy Hunting...

N: Or have we? I should do a little on that.

I: If you have something to say about it that is relative to the costume problem in the theater...

N: Well, I think it's very relative to an assistant's job, because I was really left with that show night and day for three weeks. I baby sat
that show, and I baby sat every change in Ethel's wardrobe, of which there were many. I suddenly found myself having to go out and get things and have them go on stage.

I: Now, the changes are initiated by whom?

N: By whoever wants them, literally.

I: The actor?

N: The actor, because both of these people were enormously powerful. If they wanted fly's wings in their suit, they got fly's wings in their suit. If Abe wanted anything, if Lindsey and Crouse wanted anything, if anybody who had any clout at all wanted anything, because the show was so expensive, so big, so out of control and so uninteresting—essentially all the greatest talents of the Broadway musical theater had put together something that they couldn't make work, so anybody who wanted anything so long as there was bread could get it. So, if Ethel's skirts went up then her skirts went down. Then Fernando started to get in on it, and he began to... if Ethel got a red dress in such-and-such a scene, he would turn up the next day, as he had learned where the stores were in Philadelphia, he had turned up in white shoes, pure untouched white. Of course all he had to do was to cross his legs and move his foot and he took the scene. So then Ethel would see this white shoe and she would get white shoes. Then Fernando would need a blue jacket and I would take him to Fiorentino, which is the of Philadelphia, and we would make him blue jackets. All the time Irene was up in Boston with Candide, or she was hiding because Karinska had delivered five days late and they were hardly able to open and she can't be found by phone. I am merely forced as an employee of all these
people to undo what is left of Miss Sharaff's work in several areas of it.

I: Which essentially means that if you are a good assistant to go beyond the technical role of the assistant, because you may be called upon to produce behavior, talent, activity that would be worthy of the full-fledged...

N: It's a very, very "iffy" situation because I never will know to this day whether I should have resigned and ... Irene couldn't come back and do it because she was up to her neck in Candide. So should I have resigned and just stranded these people, or should I have stuck with it and tried to protect her work and interpret it through me, or what? It was a terrible situation and fraught with madness, particularly in the situation that was going on between Fernando and Ethel.

I: That kind of emotional conflict...

N: And no one could control either one of them, and they kept putting it on me. "Pat, go take them to... Pat, Pat, Pat," because they wouldn't face their problem.

I: Also he was a fading motion picture personality, she was a fading personality in terms of age if nothing else.

N: Yes, not in terms of talent because it was remarkable to watch her work. Also that show became a wonderful springboard and I think about it a lot, because Joe designed it and produced. It was his one chance because designers don't make much money in our business. So he produced it, and in his production and design office there were the following people, working hard away at drafting was [name redacted], working hard away at another drafting table was Hugh Hardy, who is now...
Hardy, Holzer and Pfeiffer. He went another way. Working away at casting and as sort of a secretary was a man, Ward Baker. Carrying coffee and doing really lucky errands was a gentleman named Paul who is now the president of the Off-Broadway Theater League and a co-producer of Circle-in-the-Square. Ward Baker is now a director and I was Irene Sharaff's assistant, and I was up there a great deal because I was checking all the fabrics under Joe's lights and gels to make sure they were okay. All of us went out of town, and all of us watched while our elders at these midnight meetings with the Scotch and the chicken sandwiches without crusts kept trying to fix the show. We sat there very quietly and never said a word. We watched and we watched and one day we said to each other, "There's going to come a time when we will have learned from all of this and we will do it better." A right, so after this show opened, and it ran for two years without paying anybody back because the nut was so high, we all got together and it was like, "OK, your dad's got a garage and my mom's got sheets, let's do Jumbo by Monday." We did The Crucible, and Paul found in the Martinique Hotel a space which became The Martinique Theater. designed it, the bleacher system and the lighting system. Word got to Miller himself...their permission to do this play off-Broadway. It was in a sense one of the first major off-Broadway ones. I with my ever ready Singer sewing machine patched up and threw together the clothes and we became a hit. All those people, I think, did come to see our show. That's amazing because it was our generation moving. That's really what it was. People said, "Well, how did you get started?" We say, "Work with people your own age carrying coffee and one day you'll
wake up and you'll do Jumbo by Monday," We all did a lot by watching our elders, because I think that was the last of the really old-fashioned musicals.

I: And talent that had been exhaustingly trained through the whole rigid process of every conceivable branch of show business.

N: Exactly.

I: What happened after The Crucible?

N: Well, let me see. I think other things happened along with it really. After I did finish my work on Happy Hunting, I can't remember exactly what I did next but I know that one way or another I knew...oh yes I do know, I'll pick it up now. The Crucible happened later. I knew, like after my period of time with Charles, I knew that my time of assisting was really over. I really had to call a halt to it, because I had gotten to the point where I had taken the cream of my experience, and there's always a point where things start to go down after a crest, when you learn less for the amount of time you invest. I was at the point where I had to go and do it myself.

I: Also I think there's another element there that should be mentioned, and that is that if you do that, stay in a situation - whatever the level may be - too long, you stop growing.

N: Absolutely, you just start treading.

I: You use what you're already familiar with and you become very sort of dinosaur-like, in other words, there's no growth and there's no change and one day you wake up and discover that everything you're doing is over and done with and nobody told you.

N: Right, absolutely. Magic motion.
I: It's very important I think for young people to understand that, and realize that it is the constant change. You have to gamble. You have to be willing to risk in your own belief of your own talent that you are now ready to move on, or else you settle for the artificial security of the minor position, which I think then produces a negative talent rather than a positive one.

N: I think you're right.

I: What specifically came directly after Happy Hunting?

N: I realized that I had to go my own way and do my own number. What I didn't realize was that I had been trained for very large shows, huge shows. Shakespeare and huge musicals - I had just been on the big organized show trip, because that's where they hire assistants. They don't hire them for little teeny "go to Macy's" shows. So, then I had to figure out what I could do. No one knew who I was except these people I would meet as I was going along. Someone said, "I know that there is a show called The Potting Shed at-the-Carmen that those guys are doing, and I bet they don't even have a designer, why don't you go check up on that?" So I got my little portfolio together and I trot down to see Carmen, but he really doesn't want to see me and he doesn't know my name, and how do you spell your name? So I sat, I did one of my sitting tricks. I sat and sat and sat and sat and sat and so finally it was Friday and they said, "Ohh, we'll see her, we'll see her. We'll have to see her to get rid of her." So they looked at my little evening design project and they heard my story and they suddenly realized that they indeed did not have a designer, or a costume person. It was modern dress and they figured you just wear your
own clothes. So I did that and, well, I was ruined by that because my first star was Dame Sybil Thorndike and her husband Sir Lewis and Lillian McGregor. They were just an absolutely fabulous cast of wonderful people and made me think that all stars were just deliciously divine and were willing to meet me at quarter to nine in the morning at Bergdorf's when they'd open the shoe salon for you. So that show I did. At the same time a person who had watched me around the shops named Florence ... I had been offered a show called Visit to a Small Planet and she was not at that point doing shows, she was assisting all the time, but she recommended me. So I went over and I did that one too. I sort of did them somewhat at the same time, which was when I learned right away not to do things at the same time unless you really plan for it. But, The Potting Shed and Visit were both modern shows and I found myself, particularly in Visit, in this wonderful position of having this miniscule little budget. George Axelrod could not remember my name, Zipprodt, and he called me "the girl," "Tell the girl...," so someone would tell "the girl" and "the girl" would do, and what "the girl" found out was that "the girl's" budget sent her to Macy's. But Mr. Axelrod's wife, her version of the budget, which she seemed to know about, sent her to Bergdorf's. Her dress for Sarah Miles would out-do my dress for Sarah Miles because mine was for $23.95 and hers was for $99.35. I learned a lot on that show; Cyril Richard also directed it really along with George Axelrod. He spoke to no one. It was really a lovely bunch of...

I: Too many responsibilities being God.

N: Right. Everyone was indulging themselves. Anyway it was a hit, and
The Potting Shed got opened and I got not one notice, except from Variety which said they were satisfactory, and that's what Variety always says about modern clothes if they are indeed satisfactory.

I thought, "Boy, I'm not getting anywhere here," and also I was very shaken up because I did not know how to do that kind of work. I did not know how to shop at Macy's. I haven't been to Macy's since. It frightens me. It's big. I was always losing money because I kept losing my receipts. I didn't know how to handle $2,000. I got bursitis from carrying too many packages. It was just...I couldn't afford an assistant, I couldn't afford taxis. It was impossible, it was insane, and I was "the girl," and "the girl" got very damned depressed because "the girl" thought, "this is not the American theater I had planned on. Where is the ballet?", and there I was in Macy's basement and the people were being nasty to me, vicious, horrible, and changing clothes behind my back, and not spelling my name right. Ohhh!

I: Let's pursue one area so we hit each of the plateaus where you learned. For instance, and I'm going to play Devil's advocate, why cannot you depend upon the actors to just bring their own wardrobe if it's a play in modern dress?

N: Well, indeed if it is a low-budget production, you're grateful if the men have good suits and it's a suit show, because otherwise you're not going to be able to get them anything. But in truth it's a very elusive thing you're talking about Robert L., because it's harder to say what is the difference between a dress that has a theatrical quality to it, although it can be totally simple and not "dramatic"; "dramatic" is different from theatrical, and a dress that doesn't have
those qualities at all, that maybe looks perfectly smashing on somebody in a room but not on a stage.

I: What is the difference between dramatic and theatrical?

N: I always used to think that 'dramatic' is a kid's word for...a shop woman's description of a red dress. "Oh, this is for the theater, well our red dresses are over here. It's very dramatic. Here's a red dress, it's very dramatic." What you're really after is that stunning, inoffensive little beige dress that is theatrical, and I don't know how to verbalize that.

I: Where the line flows in such a way that the character calls attention without asserting themselves. But, it registers completely with the audience, but since it is a little larger than life in terms of what the body is able to with it, with what movement is able to do with it.

N: Yes. I can give, to illustrate what it isn't, an incident I had in a Tennessee Williams play called *Period of Adjustment*. Here are all the disciplines that attack and limit and frame a costume of any period, all wrapped up in one. It was a dress that the girl wore, Barbara Baxley, for her wedding trip. It was on stage all night long, she never got out of it. It was in a certain...there were two or three rooms within the one unit set that designed, so there were two or three different colors that this dress was working against, there was a light plot which designed, which was very involved with amber which was his characteristic and which is a very difficult color to lay...a difficult gel tone to lay a color under.

There is the size of the star, Barbara Baxley, there is the style of the star, there is the coloration of the star, there is the character
in the script, there is the director's point of view of the character in the script, there is the playwright who has opinions, and all of these have to be captured and contained in one dress. One. All these limitations and definitions. Well, I designed a little sort of salmon colored dress-suit, a one piece dress with a jacket, because the jacket can come off and there can be a little teeny pretty little sexy body and the jacket could come on and it could be a traveling suit. There was exactly one color that looked well on the set on the models under those very heavy amber lights, Barbara's skin and hair - and it seemed right for a bridal going away suit and it was a peculiar color of shrimp-salmon. I did it in a very soft wool crepe with a little blouse that was dyed the same color as the fabric and scaled to this little teeny person.

I: Do you remember the character in the play well enough to be able to analyze why you selected salmon?

N: No, I don't, because the problems became so overwhelming, but I will say that it was a young color and a young person and it was sort of a bridal color, a girl color.

I: It's a happy color.

N: Yes, and it survived those hideous ambers, which are like lead...like lead, and it could go into all those sets. I mean, I was boxed in, and there was only one color that could do all those things, and that was that color. There was only one design that would capture all these requirements and there it was.

I: I assume that she was not a white bride?

N: No, it was her traveling suit, not her wedding dress.
I: Oh, I see what you mean, to leave after...

N: Yes. The ceremony had ended when _Period of Adjustment_ was starting. So it was very framed by where it was in time. Well, I want to tell you that I spent more hours shopping with *Crawford, Tennessee Williams, his boyfriend,* and *Barbara Baxley* and her agent than I ever want to spend. We put thirty different things on that girl and we took off thirty different things. On opening night she was in the same thing she had started with, and in the process I left the theater. I finally said one night up in New Haven to *George Roy Hill* and to *Tennessee Williams,* "I am tired of it with this dress. This is not the problem. The problem is not about the dress, and you're throwing me to the walls every day, are you not?" They said, "Yes we are." I said, "OK, there's an 11:05 to New York and I'm on it. Goodbye." So I walked out, I had had it. I knew what they were doing, that's when I began to see that when a song doesn't work you change the dress. I began to see the maliciousness that can be... that a costume can be attacked by.

I: Is this a significant thing that happens in the American theater?

N: Yes. We know this. We all know this. We are in a nightmare activity that looks fun, but we are really dealing with these harsh realities and it is not fun.

I: Why is the costume designer selected?

N: I think because it is a very low powered job, it is a very...very few people respect it or understand it. Scenery is given far more credit and scenery is far more expensive. You can add a costume very quickly. I can take this sweater, and if I really hate it, I can jump up and down, tear it, burn it, stab it - I can't do that to a chair or to a
$400,000 flat painted by Chagall.

I: I suppose psychologically everyone has clothes, everyone does not have a set.

N: That's right. Modern clothes are death. I stay away from them now, because everyone and their uncle knows about modern clothes. "Well, I wouldn't wear that if I were going to that party. What is she wearing that dress for? Henry, do you think that's right?" Suddenly it's everyone's game and if no one has real control it becomes everyone's place to play, and they do, because they cannot usually play effectively in their own areas or they wouldn't be doing that. It's not pleasant at all. Anyway, I quit theater for a while and one day the phone rang and it was saying, "Pat?", I said, "Yes." She said, "You know that... that dress?" I said, "Yes, I know that dress. You mean the one that I designed in the first place that you're using every night and that's falling apart?" It hadn't been made to fit right and I had torn it apart in Wilmington and put it back together again. She said, "Well, we've decided we like it. We'd also, by the way, made it in two other colors." They'd gotten to that point where there was nothing on the market that would work in that slot, so they made it in white, and she looked like a nurse! I said, "Come on, you spend $400 for this idiotic white... please!" The same design! The same fabric! White! It never even was on stage. This went on and on and on from city to city to city. So anyway, said, "Could you possibly do us a little favor, and see that that dress is made so it's fresh and nice by opening night?" I said, "I surely will, Miss," and on opening night in New York she was...
in the dress that had been designed for her three months before.
I don't think I even went to the opening. I was so disgusted and so disillusioned and I had had such an eye-opening experience. All the things I had seen Irene go through and all the other designers that I had assisted, and they were always getting it. All the baloney I went through with those two shows when I had to go to Macy's while Mrs. Axelrod was going to Bergdorf's, really came to a head with this experience and I quit. I said, "I've had it with the theater." I went and I got my paints, my little friends the paints, and I still had my cold water flat so no one could get at me. I mean, I could do it. I could work at Shrafts, which I had done, or usher at Carnegie Hall, which I had done. I could live and put food in my mouth and I would be a human being and not this little... whatever, that I was discovering a costume designer was. Now, mind you, I had seen Irene take it, pinnacle of pinnacles and pinnacle of people and there she was... ruined... Her wardrobe for Ethel destroyed.

I: Let me ask you a question Patricia, about the kind of show where one doesn't actually design anything and have it made, one shops, by your own description. You find yourself going to Macy's even with the conflict of the producer's wife going to Bergdorf's. Explain to me why one would feel that the term "designer" would be appropriate for somebody who shops.

N: Well, I'm not quite sure that it is, in an apparent sense, except that if you are... if that is your problem, if you have a modern script that will respond well to using other people's designs, you see, that's what you really want for it. My design is not going to help it, it may
even hurt it because I'll stamp it too hard. I still have to analyze my characters. I, being any costume designer. I still have to understand my color problems. I have to control my flow of color. I have to edit and make a statement about what is happening where. If it's a cocktail party in The Graduate...or something this or that, decisions have to made and the point of view has to be established.

I: And the totality has to be looked at.

N: Right.

I: When I raised the question before about people just bringing their own wardrobes, it seems to me the weakness of that, unless there is a controlling designer, is that you can get extraordinary conflicts, visual conflicts on stage. The other thing that I think happens...

N: It's most men's clothes that you can do that with.

I: Even there, I must say, because men's wear is so close to my basic interest. I have noticed that there are times when you deal with an actor who personally has no sense of style about his own wardrobe, thus the fit is never accurate. He's brought up to wear just off the peg clothes and he doesn't know the difference between a well-tailored suit...that's fine if the character shouldn't know the difference, but if the character is somebody you are respecting because of his international position, sophistication and wealth, then it is unlikely that he would be wearing a suit that doesn't fit. The same thing is true of a person who either puts his foot up and has an Adlai Stevenson hole in his shoe, or has brand new shoes with the soles shining on you and he's just described how he's been tramping the streets for days.
N: Exactly. It's true.

I: Well, the essence... you've covered a lot in this particular area of discussion and I think what we'll find ourselves doing a little later is breaking this down question by question in terms of the relationship to the designer to these various forces. I want to get the sequence of your career...

N: We're at kind of a thrust point, which is why I think I instinctively went to the example of Period of Adjustment, because I really drummed myself out. I said, "I cannot live this way, life is not about this in my vocabulary." So, with want of anything else to do I went back to my paints and brushes and I did a lot of work for six months and people called me up about a show, and I'd hang up. One day... I also knew that I wasn't doing it right. I thought, "Well, maybe if I had gone to Yale... or..." The things that I was good at weren't being used. I thought, "Help! I've got a problem. Here I am out on this limb."

I: What did you think you were good at?

N: I thought I was good at designing. Not doing these funny little plays and not being treated so nastily either by people who were terrible. So anyway, I hurt, I was hurting a lot and I went and did my painting, and one day the phone rang and it was something about a play called... much had happened before by the way... I'm way ahead now... maybe I should go back.

I: Go back.

N: Yes. Let's go back to Potting Shed/Visit to a Small Planet. My next show after that was... almost immediately after that was a show called
The Rope Dancers, and this time it didn't come to me through somebody who didn't want to do it, or through my camping out on the producer's doorstep, it came through Boris Aronson who recommended me for the show, because frequently, particularly at that time, the set designers were always hired well in advance, and they frequently in these minor shows could suggest people for the costume work. So, ultimately Joe and Boris became like my agents. They were putting me up a lot. Me and other people, they never picked just one. I had wonderful legs up through them. Well, I got the script and I practically burst into tears because it said, "turn of the century." I thought, "Oh my God! I don't have to go to Macy's! Ohhh, ohhh!" I couldn't believe it. I was just ecstatic. I was practically in tears. Anyway in the cast, it was a play by Morton about an Irish poor couple who lived in the Irish part of New York City in the tenements. They had a child who was born with an extra finger. So the little child wore a mitten, and the little child has this little extra finger because the father had sinned and then come home and laid with the mother. So anyway the child was conceived and therefore the extra finger was a guilt trip for momma and dad.

I: The finger that points.

N: Yes, the finger that points. It was fantastic because it was Art Carney and Joan Blondell, believe it or not - who was fabulous, and Siobhan McKenna and played the doctor, and Joseph... I can't remember his last name, was the school superintendent. It was a fabulous cast, and Peter Hall, now Sir Peter Hall, came over from London at the age of 25 and directed it. He's now head of the
National theatre and he's been knighted by the Queen. It was quite a nifty little group. I believe Rosenthal led it, I'm not sure.

I: Was it a happy experience for you?

N: It was very happy because we all got...we really swung with this play and everyone was very caught up in it. My actors were wonderful people and real theater people, genuine theater people. The producer was Gilbert Miller, it was really...it was theater. I got to go to a costume shop! Whoopee! Where I knew what I was doing, and I got to do a big sketch. That's when I first started doing my sketches which, and I think I'm the only one who works this way, particularly with a small show I can put the whole thing on one page and lay it against the basic scenic color, these figures. So, I had the whole bunch, and you could see the inner relationships right there and what the different colors of white were, and what the color of red was, and how grey was the doctor's suit...so that when I went out...and for that one I did go down to the Lower East Side and shop, and I found a doctor's suit that Brooks Atkinson wrote six lines about of sheer ecstasy. "Such character...and the buttons, and...", dadadadadada... I can practically quote it today because it was my first notice. All this was very wonderful and we were very happy together. Boris took me really, under his wings. He's very much a teacher. We had one wonderful color problem when the little girl was in bed, she was sick and needless to say she had to die, under these conditions, and he said, "Now I want you to come to the scenic studio and we will discuss the values." So, I go forever on the subway to the scenic studio and there is Boris driving the painters mad..."No! Paint it more this way!"
Paint it a little that way!" Our problem that day is this girl Beverly or whatever her name was had very pale skin and very pale blonde hair and further more she was sick and she was little and thin, and she's got to lay in this bed. She's got a nightie with long sleeves because the tenement is cold and she had a pillow and a sheet. Now, what colors would we use in the frame of the whites so that we could see her? It was all one thing.

I: It would become white on white.

N: Exactly, she would vanish. You put any kind of focus light on her and the kid's gone because she's so little. That's when I began to learn about value. I learned that there are perhaps 95 whites, to say nothing of 3,000 reds, but we ended up with making her nightie... because she was cool...we ended up making her nightie in a blue-white and made the pillow and the sheet, which came up to here, in a beige-white. She popped right out. If you didn't know what you were looking at, you wouldn't know what we had done, but we never lost her because the blonde hair was cool, and the little blue and the cool face pulled out of the unit against the beige-white.

I: Do you have any recollection as to where you learned that?

N: That particular thing was put right under my nose by Boris, that's why he called me up there, because he had to get across to me...he knew he was helping to shape me. He was my "Yale" he and Joe, but he was a painter so I knew all about...have you ever seen a white flower in a bouquet? They're not white, they're any color in the world but white. You think they're white because they're in a context that tells you they're white, but they're not white. So you know that as a painter,
you know that as a person who’s studied color, and it goes right to work here. So, that’s the story about "value," that’s Boris Aronson for "value." The relative values. Well, that show cheered me up, I must say, but it also got me... I really had to face the fact that one thing I did not have was a sense of my own style, because I hadn’t done all those summer stocks, I had done nothing. I just snuck my way in, and I was very deficient in areas where I needed to do work. One day, my dear friend David Hays said, "Can you come help me? I’m in a mess at Circle-in-the-Square." This was when Circle-in-the-Square was on Sheridan Square... that was Nineteen Fifty something, and he was doing a show called The Choir Fellow. David had gotten himself in a mess because he had decided he would do the costumes. Scenic people on the whole should not do costumes. They know about lumber but they don’t know about fabric, and they have no patience with people as a rule - which you have to have. He had gotten all these dumb uniforms and had dyed them a certain color of maroon, and they all looked like they were waiters’ uniforms dyed maroon, and he was in something of a pickle because it was supposed to be an Irish jail. It was a Brendan Behan play. So that’s when I started to teach myself how to age. I figured out that you get vegetable graters and bleach and I began to break these costumes down until they looked like prisoners had been in them.

I: That they’d been used a long time.

N: Yes, used a long time and handed on from prisoner to prisoner. That’s when I began working at the Circle, and David stopped his costume designing, which was wonderful that he did, because his scenery was
fabulous, and I began working with Jose and Ted...Jose Quintero and Ted Mann. The first show I did following my little work there was Our Town. Does that ring a bell?

I: Sure does.

N: 1938? Tempered the way we did it.

I: You see, I go all the way back in your career, you must understand that.

Long before I knew you I saw the Potting Shed. I'm a theater buff as well and I see everything, good, bad or indifferent, and the shows that you did on the whole were excellent shows. I saw Cyril in Visit to a Small Planet...

N: Oh, I was lucky. I was lucky. I got class shows, no question. We did Our Town. We did The Balcony, and Camino Real. I used to go and I'd do all my own designing naturally, and I ran the shop. I hired people. I got a hold of sewing machines. I shopped my own fabrics.

I: Question. When you do a revival, Our Town was a revival, how much are you influenced by the original costumes?

N: I don't know, because I couldn't tell you what the original costumes looked like. I think what I was influenced by was what we did at School in 1938 for Merchant of Venice, because the costumes...This is what I did for our Our Town, because first of all I had to make everything including men's suits, was make all the women's dresses cut alike except for Emily's wedding dress, and all the men's suits cut exactly alike. Then I got a cotton denim that came in eight million zillion different colors and I used one fabric with different colors for everything, and the cut of the women's dresses was exactly like the cut I wore in Eighth grade.
I: Which was, if I remember correctly, taken from Our Town.

N: Was it? Maybe it was then, maybe that was the root, because I never saw Our Town... but I had the same yoke pleats, except here I had puffed sleeves because it was...

I: Do you have any knowledge of other designers for instance who might conceivably do a revival...I've always wondered if they go back to the original...

N: I think if it's a very strong revival--and a recent one like Most Happy Fella, I'm sure is...I don't know, but The King and I, My Fair Lady, they have strong designs and they...

I: Well, I think there's a difference between something like The King and I, where all you're doing is rebuilding those costumes which was...

N: Yes, essentially that was what was going on

I: Yes, as opposed to...because that's Sharaff, isn't it...The King and I? You cannot...you cannot top them.

N: No, you can't.

I: But that's a question I've often had because there are times when I've gone and would swear that I've seen both the original and the revival and left with the impression that I'm seeing the same costumes. It may not be valid, it may simply be that if the costume designer has done a good job, what you are into is a support of the clothes that are absolutely accurate for that particular character, and of course a character can have more than one outfit.

N: Well, let's look at it in a broader sense because every time Hamlet is done it's a revival.

I: That's true.
N: Let's take a big sweep and say that there are possibly 82 ways to do *Hamlet*. You could do *Hamlet* in modern dress, which we have seen in our time. You can do *Hamlet* in Elizabethan dress, you can do early Danish peet bog dress, you could do the Peter Brook thing of leather - well, that wasn't *Hamlet*, it was *King Lear*, but you could apply it to *Hamlet*.

I: Sure.

N: And it's all what the director wants to do with that material.

I: ... and the whole ballet attitude now which is to strip down to leotards.

N: Yes. You can put it into any period. If the director says, "OK, this is the way we're going to attack and deal with this material," then that's the way you go because you can design, for example, gorgeous gorgeous gorgeous versions of *Hamlet* which are totally useless if that's not what the production is about. Now, to take it to something more interesting, more intimate, like an immediate revival of a 20th Century play, say, because Chekov is a revival. Everything is a revival if it's done more than once. I would say that either it is done in the spirit of the original production or someone is brave and takes another tack on it. Like there is a production of *Chicago*, the musical *Chicago* in London, which has nothing to do with our physical production at all.

I: The clothes that you designed.
N: Right. It has nothing to do with scenery, lights or costumes. They took another way to do it and I can't even imagine what it would be. This is so imprinted. But that is "a revival," or another production of...
I: Now that we're about to do the movie with Liza and Goldie Hawn is it?
N: Maybe.
I: And that probably will be another interpretation.
N: I'm sure.
I: Of course that brings up an interesting point. What about the difference in media - designing for theater and designing for film. What are the essential differences?
N: I always struggle with this question, Robert L., because the experiences I've had, and I've done four films that really are films and not TV, I have used the same approach that I have used for most of my theater work. But a lot of that is by the nature of the film. I've done The Graduate, and I went to not Macy's but Saks. I did a lot of designing in that and then I shopped within my concept, all the extras, everything.
I: The one difference that hits my own head would be the difference of the camera's ability to do a close-up. On stage the human eye doesn't do a close-up. It takes in the whole figure within the limits of your concentrating on somebody's face or a detail of their costume. But using the camera, you do have the reality of a close up, which I think would have some
effect. Adrian, for instance, when designing for Joan Crawford in the films, always was terribly concerned and conscious of the fact that there would be many close-ups, so that the things she wore on her head and around her neck area, just above the bosom, were always designed to frame that face and they really only worked for close-ups. They didn't work a lot in long shots. It also explains why there were as many costume changes, because he frequently would design things that would work for the kind of situation which really was a bank. Which brings up another interesting thing that he said and I'd like your reaction to it. Adrian said that when he designed for a dramatic scene, in a strong emotional interplay, either with the camera or another character he always designed very simple, relatively un-adorned almost classic clothes. When he designed for something that was trivial, light, fluffy, then he could let it go. I asked him if he could give me an example of what a trivial light scene might be, because one assumes that one knows what a dramatic scene is, he said, "Watching a horse race."

N: Something I would take quite seriously myself. (Laughter)

I: Well, I can understand when you think of those beautiful ladies at the track and those outfits...

N: Yes, with outrageous hats and chiffon...

I: Exactly. How do you react to that?

N: I like it.
I: So do I.

N: Yes, I like it. You're talking about a man who has concentrated his work in film, and I certainly haven't.

I: Yes, well that's my point. In other words I think there is a difference based upon the function of the camera.

N: I think that's very true.

I: I wonder, you're not describing in your own case, not that as much as your personal technique of how you work. In other words your analysis of the script, and your evaluation of...

N: Yes, the same things... the guideline... I mean, what I do, I do. For me, and the kind of films I have been assigned, it works. That's all I can say.

I: Now you've concentrated more on the theater than on Hollywood. Is there a reason for that?

N: I don't like the West Coast.

I: That's a good reason.

N: I really don't like it, and I see no reason why I should give any more of my life than I have to, to a place I don't like to be in. So I turn work down and I've sort of annihilated a career that I could have had - a very substantial one if I had been willing to do that. But, I found nothing in it that was worth it enough for me. I get a real thrill and a genuine joy out of theater work, which I cannot and will not be able to find in film because there's a different
time thing. In the films you are feeding clothes in. You feed clothes in, and you feed clothes in, and it doesn't matter how gorgeous they are or how dreary or whether it's a sweatshirt and a pair of blue jeans or Elizabeth I's coronation costume. You feed it in, and you feed it in, and you never see it all. In theater the madness is just the reverse. You throw it all in at once, and by hour X it all has to be there.

I: Yes, opening night...

N: Yes, there it is. There it is. Then you can play with it, orchestrate it even more finely. It's...you have a sense of your own work. In film it just loses itself.

I: I've always had the sense in the theater that there is a strong community collaboration in the sense that the producer, the director, everybody is involved. Is that true in film?

N: Not as I've experienced it. But then I've had...my film work is The Graduate with Mike Nichols; it's 1776, which I used clothes out of the New York production - don't tell. That's a bracket. And it went perfectly well. And the film with Kate, The Glass Menagerie, which we did for television, but it was done at Pinewood as a film and it was shot for European distribution as a film. And the thing I did with Sidney Lumet called The Last of the Mobile Hot Shots, which we don't discuss.

I: Alright.

N: Even in the Sidney Lumet festivals it isn't run. It is the
pits of the pits. But, those are the four films.

I: Well, the one that I suppose is known to more people than any of the films that one could mention would be *The Graduate*. Were you plunged into the Hollywood scene to do that? I mean obviously you built up your relationship to New York costume shops, and where to shop, and...

N: Right, like turf. New York is my turf. I was indeed plunged into it because I had done *Cabaret*, the musical *Cabaret*, and Nichols saw it, and I got very hot with that one. I was a very hot designer. I mean, I was asked—oh Robert L., let me tell you about this one. I got offered at the same time, *The Graduate* and *Funny Girl*. I went and I saw Ray Stark. Put on my one nice dress, right? I still wasn't all that affluent, went and saw Ray Stark and his wife, and we talked at great length. He really wanted me to do the show, do the film. I wasn't too sure I wanted to lock horns with Streisand because I had heard a lot about her. There was a lot of blood around already. I thought...she designs her own clothes, why does she need me? He said to me, "Miss ZIPPRODT" (sic), they were learning, "I can offer you $750 a week." I said, "And expenses?" "No." I said, "No expenses?" "No. $750 a week." I said, "Well, that's not very much." This is 1966 and I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "But Miss ZIPPRODT, you don't understand. It's 26 weeks of work." I said, "26 weeks on the coast?"
He said, "Yes." I said, "Ohhh." He said, "I'm offering you security." I said, "Mr. Stark, if I wanted security I'd marry a dentist."

I: (LAUGHTER)

N: 26 weeks at $750! Well, anyway I was also offered The Graduate by Nichols. I knew that my price, without having done a film before, wasn't going to be that strong. So I realized that if I wanted to do a film I had my chance to make a choice between the two. So what I did...I had the two scripts and I picked up the little book of The Graduate that was just coming back into print and I went home and I made the movies in my mind. In my mind I put the two films together, and then I ran them through my imaginary home viewer, and I sat through...I ran Funny Girl through and it was just exactly the way it turned out. You knew everything about that film without ever having had it made. Then I ran The Graduate through and I couldn't get an image. I couldn't get a damn thing. I thought, "That's the one I do."

I: The challenge.

N: Yes. The empty space. We're going where we don't know and that's what it's about. Funny Girl I would have ground my way through, and it was a huge film. Ray Stark was going to have Dorothy Jenkins and I split it. The last person he hired was Irene Sharaff who of course did it as we all know. But The Graduate...I had no idea of what Nichols
would do with that crazy material. And, I picked the right one... for me.

I: Oh, I think so... for many reasons.

N: I picked the one that was a significant film, and I learned so much - wow!

I: Did you meet Edith Head?

N: Yes! Ohhh. Are you going to do one on her?

I: Yes, as a matter of fact.

N: Oh, I hope so. Edith Head saved my life. I think almost literally because you have to realize that it was a Mike Nichols film and it was only his second film and he wasn't all that warmly welcomed in Hollywood. It was a Joseph Levine film, and he... no one was in love with him. And, we were using the Paramount Studios, and supplementary supply system. The last thing that Paramount needed in their wardrobe department was me, because their own people were out of work. Their own staff designers were sitting around without a film to do and here I was. Well, I had just been literally at death's door. As I arrived there...

I: You mean physically ill?

N: Yes, I had been in the hospital and I had had some surgery and had a hospital infection and almost checked... but didn't, and did get to Hollywood four weeks late in pre-production planning, and not feeling all that good. I was really weak. I hit a spell of cold weather and these monsters at Paramount put me in an elephant grey room with a desk and a fluorescent
lamp, a real desk and one of those chairs that you whirl around in and that digs holes into things - so it dug right through the rug to the floor. It was elephant grey, and flourescent light and I was supposed to use this to draw on. Well, I can't draw unless I stand up first of all, or in a high position and the board has to be at a certain level in relationship to my eyes, and it's a whole physical thing. I sat there and I didn't know how to read a movie script. I had never read a movie script before, I had no assistant. It was colder than God-knows-what. I had my winter clothes in New York. I was not well, I was freezing to death and I was about to burst into tears and leave or do something because I couldn't get through. Paramount gave me their two lousiest wardrobe people. Old people who rode in Teamster driven Cadillacs at 5 miles per hour, and who were never around. I knew I was in trouble. I thought, "Oh boy, I better..." I didn't know what to do. I wasn't strong enough to really cope because I was barely just getting up in the morning. I needed twelve hours at night and the whole thing. Edith Head had just been let go by Paramount and was on her way transferring herself to Universal. She had a fabulous office there which was locked. One day there was a knock on my door and I was sitting there thinking "What am I going to do?" I've got on my spring coat pinned up to my throat and I had gloves on, it was that cold. I've got electric heaters - it was freezing and they don't have
any heat. My toes are...I'm dying. I'm thinking, "This is... this is not Hollywood. This can't be happening!" I said, "Come in," and this little person walks in. "Hello. Are you Patricia Zipprodt?" I said, "Yes." "Well, I'm Edith Head and I've admired your work..." I said, "Oh my God!"

Well, within ten minutes I was out of that office and I was ensconced in Edith's office. She gave me her key and she said, "Now, there. Now, start." It was warm, and there was a wash sink so you could use your water colors. There was a drawing board and a real lamp and a stool and a window that didn't have grill work on it. I was on the main floor with grilling so that the burglars wouldn't get in. Paramount Studio had to look a little bit differently at this unwanted New York invasion of which I was but one. And Edith saved my life. Because I don't know what I would have done, and my morale was about in the same condition as my physical strength was in. I was just "Uhhhh," and I had two months work to get done in three weeks.

I: It is interesting...the reason I asked you whether you had had contact with her...

N: She was so fabulous.

I: ...because I had my one movie design experience and when I asked her about what her guiding principle was in terms of doing clothes for film, because interestingly enough she approached me the same way saying that I had taught her a great deal about men's fashions and that she was deeply
grateful because it was an unfamiliar area to her, what she said was that you have to think in a three year cycle. Did she tell you that?

N: Yes. I think you told me.

I: Yes, a three year cycle which is that the life period of a film from the time you do it until it goes back into the vaults, as it were, is about three years, and that to prevent it from becoming out of fashion in the same way that, for instance, speaking of Barbra Streisand, Arnold Scaasi's clothes for On a Clear Day You Can See Forever, which were completely wrong the moment that the film was produced because he had allowed himself to be influenced by the immediacy of Courrège's designs in Paris and put that look on this college girl going across campus, worn by Barbra Streisand, and of course the clothes were laughable and I think contributed enormously to making the film a failure. You couldn't believe it made any sense.

N: Yes, it's just ridiculous.

I: Beaton's costumes for the Eighteenth Century retreat, psychological retreat of the fantasy world of the same girl, Streisand, were actually sensational and marvelous because he's at his best dealing with period. But, it was why I reacted to what do you do about clothes to keep them in fashion. She said a very simple thing which I think is a very good lesson to be learned, which is that any given period has its own fashion statement which can be clearly
identified by looking through every magazine and newspaper ad and store window. If you then examine the period that came immediately before it, you will learn something about where hemlines were, or where vents were, or the size of lapels, and if you make a move in the opposite direction - but a very tiny move - in other words if it's to be narrowed you don't narrow it violently you just narrow it a little. Just a little. Take a little pinch away from it, and the same with skirts and everything else. You end with clothes that...

N: That's a very intelligent philosophy.

I: ...that will last for the three year period and nothing will shock your eye so that you say, "Oh, nobody wears that any more."

N: Yes, that's wonderful. That's a very wise approach to it. Very wise. When I started The Graduate I, in my own way, asked Mike in a sense the same question. I said, "Tell me something, do you want this picture to look contemporary when it comes out or do you want it to look like it looks right now?" He said, "I want it to look like it looks right now...this very minute."

I: Creating a period of its own.

N: Right. Because, I think there are many things that that film was, and one of them was that it was a documentary of Southern California life which we all loathed. It did it from a point of view of not liking it. Plastics! Plastics!
I: It was conscious?
N: Oh, very conscious. Oh yes.
I: Was Anne Bancroft difficult to work with?
N: No. Not at all. Not at all. She's a fabulous actress, a wonderful actress, and she knows her character and she's very helpful, very helpful in that sense. She's in marvelous shape at all times so you have no physical problems of any crunchy sort when you're working with her, and she wears clothes like a million dollars.
I: Speaking of that, that brings up a very interesting point. Have you faced the problem of having to design somebody out of a limitation like a dowager hump, or a shoulder that's in a very peculiar slanting position, or somebody who's pregnant? In other words, to use design talent to cover up somebody else's...
N: Oh, we do it all the time. It's part of the job, because no one has perfect proportions, no one is bilaterally symmetrical despite what Plato said. We may be but we're not balanced and our shoulders do funny things, and some people have short necks and some people have long noses that distract from buttons, and some people have high hips and other people have short, short upper thighs and long legs, and so we're always readjusting to proportions.
I: Is that something that should be taught in school?
N: I think to become aware of it must be taught, the fact that
it exists as a problem to be solved, because in the theater we're doing custom work. So it doesn't matter if you have a modern clothes atelier and you're dressing Madame X, or whether you're dressing Joan Blondell in a character costume. You're always dealing with the imperfections and the style, which is not necessarily an imperfection, but the particular style of each human being, each physical human being.

I: Now, that's your objective analysis of their particular problems, which you can objectively look and see.

N: People look better with different things, some people need a high thing, some people can take only a half-inch up their neck, or however low a neck line is cut depends upon the length from the collar bone down to the center front waist, and how long their face is in relation to that length. All these proportions, you're always juggling them.

I: Now, those are wonderful comments in relation to the trained educated eye of the designer, what happens with the personality of the actor who has preconceived ideas of what they have to wear, or what they can't wear? Have you had that experience?

N: Yes, I certainly have. Only once, really only once did I impose my own feelings strongly over very strong feelings of an actress, in this particular case it was an actress and I'll never do it again. I'll tell how it went. It was
Loween-McGraw in The Potting Shed and all her clothes are being made. Dame Sybil’s are being made - Altman’s made them. They had a little department that made ladies clothes then.

I wanted very much to have her in a rust dress because of the color of the set and the lights and all that I’ve been telling you. I wanted to have it, and I thought it was a good color for her. Well, she couldn’t bear rust. I was... it was my first show and what did I know about people’s feelings. I was the designer, wasn’t I? I gave her all of my reasons and I wasn’t being horrible to her, but I just held onto the rust. I went through two fittings with her crying all over the fabric, crying! Not even being hysterical but just (sobbing). She hated herself in the color. Now, if that were happening today I would say, "Oh my God, get out of it right away. I’ll pay for new fabric myself." I would not do that to someone who has to go onstage. They need all their strength. But I didn’t... I had to experience that. I’ve always felt, maybe I should write Loween a letter saying, "You were so right," because I stood my ground and I won, but it’s not worth it when I could have made it another color.

I: But you also really lose in a situation like that.

N: It helped me, and solved my problem and made her feel terrific. You can do it, you can take all these things that people have - they can be crazy things - and work with them.
I say to my stars and to my strong featured people, I say, "I want to know the following things. I want to know the colors you hate, the necklines you loath, the fabrics you are allergic to, and anything else of the things that you really cannot bear, then I will never bother with showing you those things." I find out what those things are and then I don't put her in yellow. I also want to know their favorites because I want to make people feel good. Then I take the personal information about each person and then I work on my scheme and I never have any problems as a rule. I never feel that I'm compromised because I'm not using a hideous yellow. I'll put it on someone else if I want yellow.

I: Have you ever run into the business of running into someone who holds onto an image that is no longer valid? In other words, I've seen actresses who have a big starring position for maybe a decade with a particular coiffure and a particular kind of costume, silhouette, fashion that they're identified with, and then they get older and what was charming when they were thirty is not so charming when they are fifty?

N: I don't think in my experience I have, but I know exactly what you're talking about.

I: Yes, because I think it's very real.

N: Yes, it is very real but I haven't hit it.
I: You're lucky.

N: Lucky is right. I've hit people who have demanded certain things that were certainly alien to the character and to the period.

I: Well, that's an interesting point.

N: Well, that's Katherine Hepburn in her high neck.

I: What was that for?

N: For *The Glass Menagerie*, when she's poor Amanda in hot St. Louis during the Depression is not... every time she's seen got a collar up to her ear lobes.

I: If I remember correctly the costume that Amanda wears comes out of her trunk.

N: Yes, but she had a complete wardrobe don't forget. She had her bathrobe on the telephone and her coat to the ladies' meeting and what she wore to dinner, thousands and thousands of clothes. It was amazing what Amanda put on. Of course the least difficult to solve was the problem of the famous dress that comes out of the trunk which is period and you can put the rose up there which is what we did. But the other thing, I mean how do you make a bathrobe with a... an old Indian Beacon Hill... Beacon bathrobe... well, you take a sweater and you tie it around the neck.

I: This is because Kate Hepburn doesn't want to show her neck?

N: She will not be photographed with her neck.

I: It's an age thing then?

N: She's done it all her life, and I finally said, "Kate, I've got to see it. I've just got to see your neck. Come on,
be a pal." So she did. She said, "Patty, it doesn't photograph well. It's not age because I started doing it as soon as I really realized it." I found an old photograph of her when she was a Bryn Mar graduate and there she has a very broad based neck, and if the camera is coming like this you're getting something that isn't all that good and it's not age. She's right. She's right, but it's sometimes...I said, "Couldn't we do Mary Queen of Scots again?" How easy!

I: And how beautiful she looked then.

N: How beautiful, yes.

I: Of course if you deal with somebody of that kind of intelligence, because she must have made that decision very early...

N: Long ago.

I: ...in her career, it is hard to ignore it. On the other hand if it's...How do you solve a problem if it's completely inappropriate to the character. St. Louis in the summer is hardly a place where anybody in their right mind would be wearing a high neck, no matter what the vanity.

N: That's right. Well, we did it everytime she was on camera. Every costume had something that had a little ascot, or some little tie for the house dress, the Liberty of London kind of...

I: Now a star of her stature obviously would have approval of
costume.

N: Oh yes. Absolutely. They don't wear anything they don't want to wear... period.

I: You went into a period of enormous frustration yourself that you've designed something...

N: Yes, you do. I had trouble there because, for the same reason that I think Kate took the part. She's absolutely an atypical Amanda, and it was an enormous challenge for her to do that. She used to come into fittings saying, "Here comes the square peg for the round hole!" She was rehearsing the accent already.

I: Talking with a Southern accent?

N: Yes, all the rehearsals were in Southern. I mean, all our fittings were in Southern.

I: Well, considering, that's interesting considering the fact that her voice level is so refined New England, I mean she has such an identifiable voice. It's one of the few voices in the world that everybody knows. How interesting that professionally she would just choose to live with it long enough. Do you think she does that with clothes too? Do you think she wears the clothes endlessly to get used to moving in them? As far as stage clothes?

N: I don't know. I have no idea.

I: Because I've always thought for instance of the reality of say a character like Lana Turner who is completely
contemporary body movement, and had no concept that period
clothes required different posture and different movement,
that people walked differently in the 18th Century than they
do in the 20th Century and therefore she could never...
she was never believable in anything she ever did in costume.
She merely looked like someone who was going to a costume
party, that she was not the real character, that she was
a contemporary girl wearing the costume.

N: Something appliqued on her, so to speak.

I: Did you find a personality clash at all with Hepburn? Was
there...you know that strength is so extraordinary.

N: Yes. I found myself really not comfortable with her finally.
I thought she was overwhelmingly overwhelming. It made me
very nervous and she would lecture me sometimes for about
a half hour on how, for example, if I were to turn up with
an old funny little coat out of Eve Stock for the daughter
to wear. I would deliberately pick sort of a beaten up
garment because I knew we could fix it, but before we fixed
it Kate would put her eye on it and she would start, "Patty,
I would never let my daughter wear that coat," and she would
start on and on and on and on and on, and I would be ready
to just crown her, but I couldn't say a thing. It was
picking a whole performance. I was getting Katherine Hepburn
four inches from my nose telling me about mending - when I
had done Fiddler On The Roof. I was ready to knock her dead,
but I couldn't...She made me so nervous I didn't know whether
to laugh or cry. So I laughed. (Laughs).

I: Wisely.

N: I said, "Oh, Kate. Really! Come on." Then that upset her and we just had a hard time together. We had some outrageous things happen.

I: Does she have a tendency to treat people who are the service people in her films, as servants?

N: I think she'd like to treat almost anybody that way, if she has a chance. I think part of her is Captain . She's kind of a bully and a wonderful woman at the same time, but she does bully people and she thinks she knows all about everything and she doesn't. Then she admits that, and so you love her. It's... she's a complicated lady. But it's not easy to work with her. Everyone knows that, who's worked with her. You may adore her but...

I: You made a reference to something before that I wanted to pursue and that was...it goes way back to your first assignment to do two shows and learning that one should not take on that thing. Can you expand that? Why shouldn't one? Can't you hire other people? Expand your staff? What is the reason?

N: Well, just as I learned from Charles that matter can be neither created nor destroyed, I also learned for myself that you cannot be in...well, from Irene I should have learned...that you cannot be in Boston and Philadelphia at the same time.
Something's got to give, and the schedule on these two shows was overlapping - just dangerously so, and I found that the stress was enormous on me. The people's demands on me...they all want you there all the time because everyone becomes a security blanket. You know, "Where's the design? Where's the girl? Where's the girl?" The girl's someplace else. "What do you mean the girl is someplace else? I need her" Well, he doesn't need me, but he wants me there as a matter of power, as a matter of control, as a matter of, "Oh God, don't leave me."

I: A lot of reassurance as to how you look.

N: Yes. Everyone's got to be there. I can't design up at the Vineyard for too long up to the period towards rehearsal because the director and producer start...you're so far away.

I: The Vineyard is where you have your second home?

N: Yes, my little house. My little God's Pocket. I have a drawing space up there - the whole thing, and they always make me come to New York for the month before the show goes into rehearsal. They want you around. It's just a matter of how you can either....You have to take care of all these people. We're analysts. We're lay analysts and we're running kindergartens with the actors, and design is one-tenth of what we do. If you get people insecure with you they're going to give you trouble, so you do a lot of laying on of hands. A lot. So they don't give you trouble, so you
can get your work done. I don't know how to explain this very well.

I: You said something before, with a slight edge of bitterness in your tone, about how costume designers don't make a lot of money.

N: We don't. You out there! We don't, of course the Seventh Avenue people when they hit they wallow in it, or so we think, but we don't. We are union people and we work with union contracts, we fight to get above scale, and if you get too far above scale you're not going to get a job. There are always people treading right behind you, and if you don't do this show Madame, we've got four people right outside the door waiting to do it. Take these terms, or else. And they do it to you. You fight for your royalties, and then you fight to make sure that they keep sending them to you. We don't make good livings. We just do not. I wouldn't have a house in the Vineyard if I didn't have hits. My money comes off hits, my royalties. Like four companies of Fiddler and then not much. But relatively... You have to know that. You have to go into the business and know that you're never going to make any money. Joe died I think broke. Boris is... I mean the big designers are the only ones I think who have gotten anything out of it financially I think is Oliver...

I: Oliver Smith?

N: Yes, because he did a big fat movie called My Fair Lady and
he went right out to Brooklyn Heights with the money and bought a house. He told me this one day when I met him on the subway coming in from...I mean we just don't make money and we are easily disposable. We are fad people, most of us don't survive. They come and go. Peter Larkin? Hello? Rob P ? Well he's back again for Sugar Babies, but where was he for the last two years? Where's Miles White?

I: Interesting.

N: The talents haven't dropped.

I: I must admit that I've never thought of it in those terms.

N: Oh yes.

I: I am aware that I must be honest, I've seen, going over the really extraordinary list of shows that you've done, but I wasn't really aware of you as a name, you know where I consciously went out screaming, "This woman is a genius," in the full sense of that, I mean I would be aware and know that if I saw your name on the program as costume designer that I was going to see very professional work and very good work, but where I really got turned on to the point where I really wanted to meet you and have you as part of my life was in Pippin.

N: Yes.

I: Because there I felt something else was happening that I'd never seen before in terms of costume design, and that was the inventive originality of it. We've kind of gotten off the track of our sequence and I really wanted to build the
sequence of what you did.

N: How much more time do we have at this session so we can shape it?
I: Well, we're... we have about fifty more minutes.
N: Fifty or fifteen?
I: Fifty.
N: Oh, we've got plenty of time because there's something I want to tell you about...
I: Please!
N: ...that I want to get on this tape because I think it's part of this whole kind of lurching progression that we've been going over, and it has to do with the misery of the experience with Planet and The Potting Shed and really realizing that I didn't know what my style was, because I hadn't worked to find it. I was very impoverished in certain areas of my background. So, I started working off-Broadway and that's when I got to the David Hays thing. I've got my little Singer sewing machine and I've got my three-quarter inch plywood and my wooden horses and I can go anywhere and make you a show, and I did! I went a lot of places. I made The Crucible at home. I made... I built things up at the Phoenix. I mean we set up huge shops, like Arabs in the night... tents would be raised, and sewing machines would come from anywhere, and people... there was a whole underground of people, other designers-to-be floating around, everyone willing to work into the night and throughout
the day, stirring dye pots over electric burners, and running
and going crazy, and having a fabulous time. We always had
very loving workrooms. I insisted on that. Everyone that
worked there had to be there because they wanted to be there,
because there wasn't any money and we all ate in a lot -
sandwich time. But we really built fabulous things. When
you think of The Balcony, those great over-sized figures,
we built them upstairs on Bleeker Street. The Blacks, those
wild weird clothes, those masks. I made all those masks
myself.
I: Did you?
N: I'd never made a mask before in my life, but there was
supposed to be a Black sculptor who would do the masks.
They wanted everything very Black in that show, and there
I was, "whitey" sitting there with my sewing machine and my
crew.
I: Was that because there wasn't a Black costume designer at
the time?
N: There wasn't then. There is now.
I: Geoffrey does...
N: Yes, well he designs only for himself.
I: That's true.
N: I can't imagine that imprint going on any one else's...it's
too strong. He has to...because he knows how to use them.
I: The Geoffrey I'm referring to of course is Geoffrey Holder.
Yes. I think Bernard Johnson is doing... anyway there I was. There was a White director and a White set designer and all these Black people who were rehearsing right next door to where we were sewing. Anyway, they wanted a Black sculptor to do the masks, and I thought to myself, "They'll never show," and no one ever showed. So two weeks before we went into dress rehearsal they came to me rather frankly and said, "...we've got these masks!" So I had the most outrageous time. I bought a book on how to make masks. I never charged for it. I've got $300 for designing The Blacks and sewing it up. That's big money. Why charge for making masks. I bought my little mask book and it said you put vaseline on people's faces and then you do this and this. So I got this whole group of people - Godfrey Cambridge, James Earl Jones, and...oh God, please...uh... Maya Angelu...our great Maya. This whole group of people who are now just extraordinary. Ramon St. Jacques...and...oh, I can't think of his name right now, but I can see him... anyway they all laid down and I put vaseline on them and straws up their noses and I made plaster casts of their faces because that's what the book said. So I had all the cheek points, and all the touch points for the masks. Then I would take my little plaster casts and make a positive of it, and then on that I would build the masks with plasticine. The book said, "Use plasticine." Then I learned how to use , and I made the masks . Then a
very fabulous woman who was in Karinska's millinery department, a Chinese woman named Tiya, covered them with things like kid leather and satin, and it was white upon white upon white upon white, and long ostrich feathers for eye lashes. The Bishop had coke bottle tops in his crown for stones, and we just had a time. The amazing thing about that was that after about a week of doing this night and day...we'd stopped sewing and the shop was running itself and I was just fitting. I noticed when I would get home at night - when I did - that my left hand always had the plasticine under it, and my right hand was always clean. I realized that while I'm a right-handed person, I was using my left hand to model, to sculpt, and I had been sculpting all my life, doing intricate masks. This hand had to hold the that had never been used. I've never gotten over that. It has to do with the hemisphere thing.

I: Have you ever used it again?

N: Yes, I use it for padlocks, dealing cards, opening locks. I use it for very fine things. I use it when I paint, you know when my arm gets tired I use it. When I've done masks since then, I've used my left hand. My left hand is my sculpting hand.

I: If I remember correctly the masks got considerable notice.

N: They were fabulous. I know it, and they were really good. The only person who didn't like them was Jerry Robbins, and
I never asked why. He said, "I didn't like your masks."
I don't know why. Someday I'll find out. But they
were interesting I thought.

I: Yes. So did I. I wasn't aware that you had done them.
I was always under the impression that it was something that
was a new kind of ethnicity.

N: No, I did them. I just didn't take any credit.

I: I know you didn't, because I was at the time looking for it.
I find that one of the rewards of seeing plays of that
nature is that sometimes you get ideas that you can use
personally, either in your own decor at your home, or to
trip ideas for a fashion presentation which I was doing many
of at the time. I remember looking for the credit on the
masks. It was a very conscious thing, and thinking, "Well,
whoever did it doesn't want any credit for it."

N: Well, I didn't have the sense, Robert L., the sense! No money.
No credit. Got it? Got it? (Laughs) Dumb! I had such a
ball doing it. I really didn't care.

I: Running through this entire thing is the thread of your
pleasure in doing the work. Of course, I and many people
before have said that acting and the world of the theater
is not a profession, it is a disease and that you contract
it and...

N: It is truly terminal.

I: ...it is truly terminal! One is truly struck with the fact
that the real reward for most people is the strange
that strange wonderful fascinating special quality that interchanges between period and people. I, I must say, my own identification with it is very strong. So many of the people that I adore are in the theater because they are marvelously alive by not really paying that much attention to reality.

N: Yes. Well, we have our own drummers. It's as real as it can be.

I: Oh, absolutely. I think I'm using reality in the sense that...

N: ...in the conventional sense.

I: ...and because they're so into their own worlds. This is the point where I have to tell a story on you.

N: Oh...

I: Because I think it demonstrates...

N: I can turn this machine off you know, I'm sitting by it!

I: Well it's just...this is the year 1979 and this is November, but this was just in October, a few weeks ago, that we all went to see the opening night of a pastiche called One Mo' Time, which was a panorama of a segment of Black vaudeville as it appeared in New Orleans in the Twenties, with a wonderful cast of people and a marvelous expression, and a crystallization of that era - clothes and everything else. Anyway, we had a wonderful time that evening, and in talking about it at a dinner party a few, like a week later, and discussing it enthusiastically, a producer who was
interested in why we were so enthusiastic turned to you and said, "Gee, that's interesting. How was the material?" and you didn't miss a beat and you said, "Oh it was classical, crepe de chine, velvet...", and of course what he obviously meant was the nature of the book. I thought, "Isn't that true of all of us that we do see things from our own point of view, that we draw upon that climate of reference as it were". We surround ourselves by seeing things in terms, in your case, wardrobe, and I found myself thinking "Do you think dentists all walk around looking...oh, what interesting incisors!"

N: Yes!! Laugh some more!
I: You have a lot of work done in your mouth!
N: Lots of white gold!
I: Yes!
N: I think it's probably true. We tell stories on ourselves about..."Oh, it was a terrible show, the hems were awful!" I mean, all those classic stories and here I fell right into it didn't I?
I: Absolutely, and it is a classic...
N: "Oh, chiffon and silk and..."
I: Yes ...all the basics.
N: Oh I meant it. I meant it!
I: Crepe de chine, chiffon, velvet. (Laughter) I love it!

Well...