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SPEAKERS

Thom Guthrie, Timothy Vale

- T** Timothy Vale 00:00
Okay, this is an interview with the University of Houston libraries dated Tuesday, March 19 2019, at the Moores Opera at the Moores Opera House with Thom Guthrie. Thom, how are you doing?
- T** Thom Guthrie 00:13
I'm doing great today. How are you?
- T** Timothy Vale 00:16
Good.
- T** Thom Guthrie 00:16
Yay
- T** Timothy Vale 00:17
So I figured we'd start from the beginning of your life, so to speak and talk about you know, where you were born and also your kind of experience growing up here in Houston.
- i** 00:29
Well, I'll be happy to talk about it. I was born on September 27th 1948, at Memorial Hospital in downtown Houston. At 6:04pm, by the way. My father was Robert Stewart Guthrie. He was the youngest son of Thomas Hall Guthrie who was a well known realtor the man who I am named

youngest son of Thomas Mann Guthrie, who was a well-known teacher, the man who I am named for. My mother was Kathleen Childress Guthrie slash Harrison, as he did later remarry. And she was the daughter of Gaston Childress, who was one of the seven founders of the Houston livestock show at that, actually, at that time called these fat Stock Show. I grew up in southwest Houston, in the little bitty community called Ayrshire was a subdivision which was between Braes Heights at the city of Bellaire. I went to Mark Twain Elementary, and John J Pershing junior high school. And then I went to Bellaire High School in Bellaire high school, I was lucky enough to study with Cecil Pickett, who was my drama coach and mentor. Those were certainly events that were incredibly important to my life as my life progressed, I loved living in southwest Houston, it was a wonderfully diverse within its own right, although it was still the the era of segregation. My neighborhood was extremely ethnic, with a large Jewish population. So I grew up feeling a great affinity for different religions in different places and different people and different things. It was a quiet, happy life. We were really rather sheltered from the troubles of the world. And we all had a really good time.

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Timothy Vale 02:09

So what were some of your interests growing up as a child? And how did you eventually decide to work in theater?

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Thom Guthrie 02:16

Well, I was always interested in particularly movies, I've really enjoyed old movies, and more specifically, I enjoyed old musicals, had a great love for them. Whereas other kids would race home to see where their friends are. And when they could go out and play. I'd race home to see what was on the Early Show. And if it was an old Hollywood musical, I'd stay and watch that. Otherwise, I go out and play with my friends because I just love the singing and the dancing and the glitter and the glamour of it. And it actually, in when I was about nine years old, I guess I was, my parents allowed me one indulgence, and that was to sit up on that night on Friday nights and watch the Late Show. And one of those nights there was a film called Holiday Inn, which is a wonderful musical score by Irving Berlin and historic Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire and Marjorie Reynolds. And the story is convoluted, like everything in Hollywood is basically to Broadway performers who get tired of the hustle and bustle of nightclubs and Broadway. And one of them decides he's going to build an inn in Connecticut where people from the industry would come and perform, but it would only be open on the holidays, hence the name Holiday Inn. It is by the way, the film that gave us the song White Christmas. Well, of course, it's a love story, and the boy meets girl boy loses girl boy fights to get girl back and Bing Crosby and his battle to get the girl back Goes to Hollywood where they just happen to be making a film of the story of Holiday Inn who would ever think that and he goes into the soundstage. And they they pull back the big doors that open into the soundstage. And there's the set, which of course they've used for the rest of the film. And they start making a start filming and the director calls for the playback on the music and the snow bags and the lights. And I was so fascinated with the way that that set was constructed. And how the magic was created at that moment that I decided at that point in my life that I wanted to be a set designer. Most kids at that time in their life want to be firemen or policemen or a school teachers or doctors No, I wanted to be a set designer and it became a passion of mine. So from that moment on, every time I watched anything I would study at trying to figure out just how they made it happen. And, again, Cecil Pickett, my high school mentor asked me, what was I going to do with my summer this was I was graduating in 1967. And this was in early May 1967, asked what I would be doing with my

summer. And so I said, I didn't know I'd be looking for some kind of a job to make a little bit of money. And he said he'd gotten a call from the Houston music theater, Houston music theater was a professional summer stock theater out in southwest Houston. The building is still there. It's now called the arena. But at that time was called the Houston music theater. And they did Broadway musicals with television, movie stars, Broadway stars, and they had directors from New York and Los Angeles and Chicago and San Francisco who would come in and they'd put the shows on in the round in a very simple form. I went out and applied for an apprenticeship and was immediately accepted, and on May the eighth 1967, a date that will live in infamy. I began my theatrical career. Three weeks by the way, before I graduated high school, I did three seasons there and learned every every every form of backstage work that there was wayward costumes, scenery, props, makeup, we actually had acting classes. Some of us were in little bit parts in the shows I was in several of them myself. I worked up at the light booth, almost exclusively operating the lights and learning from the lighting designer lighting design. And it really just became the focus of my life. But it also led to the turning point of my life. At the end of the third season, we had done a summer season to fall season and now we were doing the spring season. At the end of the spring season. We brought in an acting company from New York called the Prince Street players. Actually the entire name was the Prince Street players limited W CBS TV repertory company. It was a professional children's theatre company that had actually had at that time six national broadcasts of their shows on CBS television, and had actually won a Daytime Annie just sent me a New York me at a Peabody Award. So they were very well thought of. And wonderful casts are super people they came in, they were doing Pinocchio and Aladdin. And of course everything arrived from New York and some of the stuff had been damaged. And I had stayed up nights working with the production manager and some of the cast members helping to get everything ready to director in particular Jim Isler wonderful human being. And on the last night, the company was there. The company manager asked me if I'd like to join him for a drink. Now, there's a couple of things there. First of all, I was 19 years old and a up and coming gay person just becoming comfortable with my sexuality. And my fantasy was that he wanted a date. It turned out that what he wanted to do instead completely and totally changed my life. i He told me that the next morning at nine o'clock, he would be resigning his position as company manager. And that if I felt I wanted the job, I should be there because he knew how much Jim was impressed with me. And he felt I would be a good replacement. So the next morning, nine o'clock in the morning, got my little resume together. I went and sat in the lobby of the offices. He went in talk to Jim, he came out about 1520 minutes later, and I was invited to go in and I told his driver that I'd love to work for the company. And that night at nine o'clock in the evening, I flew to New York City and started two years in New York working with the Prince Street players, and also with the National Theatre Company. It was life changing, of course, because here was this sort of shy, little very awkward gay boy from Houston, Texas who goes to sleep one night in his comfortable bed in the suburbs of Houston. And the next night, he's sleeping in a bed lent to him by a friend in a residence hotel in New York. And I will never, ever forget the sensation of the next day when I walked out the door of the George Washington hotel. And I turned and looked up the street and there was the Empire State Building. And sort of like Dorothy we're not in Kansas. It was Tommy we're not in Houston any longer. What a remarkable sensation to think that in less than one year, I went from a high school nerd to working for the Prince Street players limited W CBS TV Repertory Company in New York City. I really thought, wow, I've made it. And it was so incredibly exciting and truly life changing.

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Timothy Vale 10:25

And so, how did so backing up just a little bit before going on to New York? How did you

eventually come to the realization that we're gay? And what was gay culture kind of like?

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Thom Guthrie 10:41

Let's see, actually, that kind of revolves around the trait, the change in times, I started, I think all of my life, I knew that there was something different about me. We didn't really think of gay people at that time, actually, the word that was most often use was queer. And you didn't want to in school be associated with being a queer. So if you did have any kind of a feeling, you would not ever express it. I was and of course had been made you very shy, because you were afraid to to say something that might be a giveaway. And I guess in many ways, my gay life. It wasn't acknowledged by me as a gay life. I'm tell after I came back, I had had some flings, but it was just different. It was still very closeted, because this is all pre Stonewall. And you didn't want people to think you were gay, you just really didn't because you could get arrested, you could get thrown in jail, you could be beaten. If you had if you if you got held up, if you got robbed on a night that you were trying to go to a bar, keep in mind, I was under age. So that was also a kind of a little problem with going out in the evening. Although after hours were very, very popular. But you were terrified that something would happen to you, because you couldn't call the police because the police would make all the onus on you. You couldn't. You couldn't be gay. That's all there was to it. I go to New York, and I'm living in Greenwich Village. Not only am I living in Greenwich Village, I'm living in West Village. What's the distinction? Greenwich Village was divided into three parts East Village, which centered around Tompkins Square, which was pretty much the center of the drug culture in New York at that time. Central village, the Washington Square District, which was the elite the it was the wealthy if we will part of Greenwich Village. It's where those people who wanted to be stylish li bohemian, would live in their condos. And all surrounding Washington Square which was very beautiful. And then the third square was Sheridan Square Sheridan Square was in the West Village. My the loft where Prince Street rehearsed where I actually stayed. The first six weeks I was in New York, was about four to five blocks south of Sheridan Square. The apartment, my first sublet that I had in New York, was at 55 Grove Street, which is directly off of Sheridan Square. And while I was living there, Stonewall happened at the Stonewall bar, which was on Sheridan Square, probably 200 to 300 yards from where I was, I was completely and totally unaware that it had happened. I found out like everybody did later on and particularly as it continued to be a problem. gay life in New York was about as rugged as gay life was in Houston. People constantly were being rounded up at bars, their names put into the newspaper, and the next day they would lose their jobs. So it began, it was a moment of enough is enough. Let's stop this nonsense from happening. So I come back from New York, post Stonewall, and suddenly it's very fashionable to be gay. Because no problem, really, you still didn't want to get in trouble. You still didn't want to call the police because the police were still a little bit on the Redneck side. But it was socially acceptable to be gay now. In fact, it was highly fashionable gay waiters were in tremendous demand because everybody loves to say, Oh, yes, I know gay people. It's my hairdresser or it's my weight or my interior decorator all those sissy professions. What they didn't realize is that of course they were also dogs. There's lawyers, judges, Priest, well, we won't talk to the Catholics about that. But there was school teachers, college professors, authors, artists, and construction workers, plumbers, electricians, very normal people gay was suddenly realize that it was not some kind of effeminate condition that was caused by your environment. But it wasn't it like your mother dressing you as a girl, that would be something that most people thought would make you gay. Know, it was what you were born with. And they were finally beginning to realize that it was part of the genetic makeup of people. And so suddenly, you weren't being told, Oh, it's just the way you were raised. It's Oh, it's just the way you are. That still didn't make you acceptable to a lot of people, and still

doesn't today make you acceptable to a lot of people. But it is the reality that people finally began to see. It's how you were born. after all. If it was the way that I was raised, then why aren't my two brothers gay? Interesting question. Why would they both be married men with children? And I wasn't? Was it because I was the baby? Wow. No, it wasn't. It's because that's the way that I was born. And it was, it was a great change in gay life in Houston, suddenly, all kinds of people started coming to the bar. I'll never forget the first time that I met Barbara Jordan, Barbara Jordan was sitting at a folding table in the entrance to one of the gay bars registering people to vote. And I thought, wow, here's a politician. More than just a politician, a person who really went on to become a great icon of the state of Texas. And she's sitting at a folding table registering people to vote. I guess Voting is important. And I guess finally, the gay vote is considered to be important. And so we were able to watch this whole transition to suddenly there were activists, and there were people making demands. And there were people saying, listen to us. And it's very odd that in a city like Houston, Texas, which so many people think of as horribly redneck, that I found acceptance, and appreciation. I felt welcome. I've rarely felt that my life was being threatened any more. Now, you certainly had to be careful about where you walked at night, because there still were people out there, beaten up the queers. But for the most part, we had arrived. And we were now highly fashionable and in demand, which was really kind of a nice change.

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Timothy Vale 18:17

So moving back towards your career in theater a bit more. What was it kind of like working in New York, kind of at the center of theater there? And what were some of your most memorable experiences?

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Thom Guthrie 18:29

Well, you know, it was the center of theater at that time, it still is, in many ways, the center center of of theater, but theater has now gotten so incredibly popular and important in so many cities like Houston, that New York significance is markedly diminished but still Broadway musicals are the number one form of entertainment as far as live theater is concerned. It's just it's still incredibly important. People flocked to see Book of Mormon or Hamilton or those shows come to town and they're booked solid forever. But some of my fun experiences Wow. I've met incredible people in my career. The very first show I did professionally, by the way, was a production of West Side Story that started out in Maria advocate tea, and David holiday. And it was directed by a man named Donald driver. But what was most significant was it was choreographed by a young an up and coming choreographer by the name of Michael Bennett. And over the next two generation new tissues the next two decades after that show, Michael Bennett would go on to become one of the kings of Broadway. Many, many shows that he choreographed. He worked very closely with Harold prints on a lot of shows, but also Michael can be very much remembered for being the genius behind the Broadway musical Chorus Line. Truly remarkable, my very first First show. My second season was choreographed by a Houston boy who had gone off to make a name for himself and came back to do a season in Houston, a wonderful, tall lanky dancer and brilliant choreographer and Person of the theater by the name of Tommy Tune. So I had been working with some pretty significant figures. Some of the stars I worked with in those years included Van Johnson. I worked with John Wright, the original Billy Bigelow doing another production of carousel, Linden Lab, and I'm trying to go through show after show and come up with some of the important names. I worked with Debbie Reynolds.

I've worked with Ginger Rogers. I've worked with just Jane Powell and just incredible, wonderful talents in those first shows. And so when I went off to work with Prince Street, it was normal that I would be working with people who were in Broadway shows. I mean, that's what they did. And I got to work with some that I had actually known previously who would come and do their shows with us. So we have a lot of fun. Prince Street was a touring company. We did most of our productions outside of New York State, actually, we toured all over the East Coast and throughout the United States. While we were we were touring a show called Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack had been one of the shows that Prince Street had done on television, it was one of their favorite shows and one of the most popular shows in the repertory. And we were at the Bucks County Playhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The first of two shows and in the show y'all, y'all know the story, Jack gets the magic beans traits the cow for the magic beans, the magic beans, creative Beanstalk and he goes up to A to the land of the giants. And there he sees the golden harp and the golden goose that the giant owns and he steals the golden goose to take it back down so he can bring the golden eggs to his mother and get them out of dire poverty. Young boy makes good by stealing. So real good lesson for everybody. So we're the first of two shows at Bucks County Playhouse and the lady who was playing the part of the golden goose had a nest that she sat on. And as she went to, she made her entrance and went to sit down. And as she did, she missed the nest fell and she broke her wrist. A compound fracture. It was horrible. I could see the blood from off stage. She held her arm together to finish her lines. And then she did her number golden eggs. And you could really tell she was in horrible pain. And then she left the stage and walked off stage and promptly collapsed. So we very carefully and we lifted her up and it was decided she needed to go to the hospital where the problem was we were in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and there was no hospital closest hospital was with an emergency room was about a 10 to 12 Mile Drive. So I took her to the company station wagons. They told me how to get there and I took her Ronnie Cunningham was her name. I took her to the hospital. And they very carefully removed her costume because they really didn't have very many people check into the hospital in a golden fleece poncho. And we carefully remove the costume. And I told her I'd really be back with the rest of her things. As soon as the second show was finished that would come by and check on her and that we would you know, obviously, Prince Street was guaranteeing any expense that might happen. So I go back to the theater with her costume on my arm. And Jim Isler, who was the president of the company said, Well, we've been trying to figure out what to do because the problem is that when the golden goose comes on to do her number, everyone in the show is on stage. So you're gonna have to do the part now. Part was created by a woman named Marcy Stringer, who was about five feet tall costume had been made for Marcy when she was at the television production I am six foot two. What had been knee length on paci pot of paci talking too fast on Marcy came to my knee came to her knees came to my crotch. Fortunately, we had an extra pair of blue tights. And so I went out and performed the role of the golden goose now, we had literally two minutes to work me into the musical number. So we just kind of walked about tucked in here and these people come and join you there you're coming. You're this you're this verse you do by yourself. I knew at the park because of course I had the stage manager. We didn't think anything about it. So we go out there the moment comes and I go out very strange looking golden goose. And sit down on the nest and I start my big number a golden goose Am I And I started singing the number. And I'm really kind of proud of myself because I'm doing it pretty good. And I'm out there having a good time. And I do the first verse by myself. And then the second verse, the heart comes in, join me and the third verse, the harp, and I dance together. And the fourth fourth verse is a tap break for the golden goose. We didn't think about this little detail because I had never tapped danced in my life. So basically, there I am getting my little poncho, flopping my feet around in my blue tennis shoes. Then we did the remainder of the number, I walked off stage at the end of the show, and collapsed myself from sheer total nerves and excitement. And Jim came to me and said, You're so good, you're gonna do the rest

of the run. So when we got back to New York that night, they staged me into the rest of the show. And so because of a broken wrist, I got to actually use my equity membership as an equity performer. On a New York area stage. It was my stage to view it was the scene right out of 42nd Street, and a star was born. And at the end of the two weeks, Cinderella puts away the Golden Fleece outfit, and that's the end of his performing career as an equity performer.

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Timothy Vale 26:23

So kind of moving to a little bit more unfortunate kind of topic. But how did the How did obviously, you grew up through the 1980s. And all you probably witnessed the AIDS crisis, and how did it impact your life? And what was it like during those years?

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Thom Guthrie 26:46

Well, I was actually living in Los Angeles at that time. And I had a wonderful group of people that I knew in Los Angeles, most of them had been performers in the golden era of the Hollywood movies, some of them had been dancers, and we would see hours of film clips of them when they were young, energetic, athletic people. Now they were in their 60s, retirees certainly couldn't dance anymore. And we had parties, we had fabulous parties, and one party in particular, they took a group shot. And there we are all together in this fabulous group having a wonderful time. And aids hit, like a terrorist with a machine gun at that time. The impact was swift. And it was colossal. It got to be you didn't want to answer the phone. Because every time you answered the phone, it was either someone saying goodbye, or someone calling to tell you that someone had died. Years later, one of my friends and I looked at the photograph and realize that 90% of the people in that picture are all dead, victims of AIDS. It decimated the arts community. Being in performing arts had always been a refuge for gay people. Because I mean, what's more perfect, you get to be pretend to be someone else. And after all, you most likely had been doing that all your life. You had been pretending to be a straight person, dating girls and going to the prom so that people wouldn't beat you up. And now, because of a very human aspect of your life, sex. He were risking dying. And when it first came out, they first started to identify this disease. They didn't even have a name for it at that time. And I remember watching a report on the local CBS channel in Los Angeles, about AIDS. And they were talking about it as a hate health crisis. When called aids actually, at that time, they referred to it pretty much as gay cancer. They were really trying to find a name. And they interviewed some of the very early registered victims in Los Angeles people who were living with age AIDS. And their number seven was a man named Ross, Ron Mueller, who had been the musical director for the third season at that I did at the Houston music theater all those years earlier. And it really brought home to me how this was affecting people I knew. And you certainly learned to be careful, you had to. And once again, it was no longer fashionable to be gay. Now you were a pariah. Because you could be sick. You could be infected with AIDS. You people gained weight intentionally, they would go out and do it for years that were gym bunnies, who are all exercising and just because trim and beautiful was sexy. And now trim in beautiful mint, you probably were sick. And thin definitely was a sin. Nightlife changed. Everything about gay life changed. And families now became who had not worried about you. You were fine. You were comfortable with who you were and what you were doing. Suddenly, were worried that you were going to die. It really, really was a dark cloud hanging over the gay community for quite some time. Finally, they began to find medications that could help people fight the disease and live they began to understand how it happened. The concept of safe sex

was very much pushed all over. The arts last. So many of its brightest stars, not just performers. But it lost directors and writers and composers and art directors and the people who made life beautiful fashion designers, makeup designers, hair designers, people who created the concept of glamour in this country. Were some some for some horrible reason. Dying, because they fell in love with the wrong person. What a cruel, cruel time it was. And what made it even worse, was to hear the religious zealots saying it's God's Revenge on gay people. Words that stung. So is you know, all of the hereditary diseases in every culture of the world. Sickle cell anemia is that God's Revenge on black people? Well, then why didn't all the black people die? You had so it became a it became a moment and it became a rallying cry. And it made the people who lived who survived, more determined to preserve the culture, and the heritage and the beauty. That was gay life. And we all worked our asses off to make sure it would never be forgotten, where we came from, how it changed, and where we were going to go. And it started the battle that eventually led to the repeal of the sodomy law. That was a Houston case, if I remember correctly, they got the sodomy laws changed. What you do in your own bedroom should be your own business and no one else's. Because believe me, I know heterosexual couples who would involve get involved in things I would never do. But I don't have the right to tell them what they should do. And they don't have the right to tell me what I should do. Then eventually, of course, this led to landmark decision after landmark decision after landmark decision culminating in that incredible day. A day I will never forget, when the Supreme Court of the United States of America said that gay couples have the same rights as straight couples. And it was about freaking time that people realize that we're just people who want to be left alone. So we can live our lives. We can do the things we do. And if we're lucky enough to find the right person, that we can make a commitment and live the rest of our lives together as husband and husband or wife and wife and no one has the right to tell us that we cannot do that. They these are things that was a long struggle. And I wish that things had been done differently. I wish you know, I wish that a few more states had legalized gay marriage Before that Supreme Court decision came down, because it's left it to be such a question that people think they can get overturned, well, I have a big warning to any politician out there. If you want to go and think that you're going to get rid of gay rights in this country, you're not going to be in politics any longer, because it's not just the gay vote. It's the vote of any person who values human life, and human dignity, and the concept of love. And if those are things that are important to you, that you cannot deny that to people just because you may not like their lifestyle. I have both a niece and a nephew that are both in interracial marriages. When I was a kid, that was unheard of, no one would have thought of that. I am so proud of them. Because they found the people that they love, and they have made homes and they have children. And those children will grow up in a society that accepts everybody for who they are, not what they are. It's taken us a long time to get there, but we're there. And as God is my witness, it will never go away. Because I am so proud to be a gay male, living in a country that now finally accepts me and my rights.

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Timothy Vale 36:45

So moving a little bit more towards the present, when did you How and when did you hear about the Diana Foundation? And when did you exit? When did you join?

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Thom Guthrie 37:00

Okay, well, you might want to diagram this sentence because it's a little bit complex. I had always heard of the Diana's because when I was born when I was a young gay person of the

Diana's were the most exclusive club in Houston and you waited years to become members of the Diana and I knew I'd never have time to wait. So I never thought of that. But what happened to me is having been in professional theater, now 52 years I had really had so little social life, because in theater, you're doing shows at night, or you're rehearsing shows at night, or you're building scenery whenever you possibly can, so you don't get around much and hopefully you'll find people in your own little group that you can sort of be part of, but I found myself I stumbled into this job. The year I celebrated 30 years in professional theatre was the year I was hired by the University of Houston to manage this hole that we sit in right now. And I was able then to cut back on my freelance design as I was doing 25 to 30 shows a year hard for me to still to believe. I was able to cut that back to simply the work that I was doing at the Opera House and so I was able to have a life I was able to go out and enjoy things and socialize and think about being in a social club. Well, my my roommate had a friend, Sir Mark hellhole who was a member of the Diana's the Diana's are required to buy a ticket every year for the Diana awards. The Diana awards is a commemoration of the founding of the Diana's which happened in 1953. At the first national broadcast of the Academy Awards, group of gay men got together to watch it with their beards, their wives or girlfriends. And they lost signal. And during the loss of signal, they made up their own wards, and they were satirical. They were talking about the nasty things that people might have done that they might be embarrassed about, in order to roast them. Well, it became a tradition. And after it became a tradition at them, it started to become bigger and bigger, and eventually a show was incorporated into it. It became one of the most fashionable things in Houston. Every socialite in the city wanted to have a table with the Diana awards. It survived aids, it survived turmoil in the club, and it kept going and it was Diana 59, which was held at these Zaza. So Mark had a ticket to it. He gave the ticket to my roommate at that time, Tommy Thompson. Tamika got sick that day, and quite frankly, I don't think he really wanted to go. So at 530 He gave me the ticket for the event that started at like six or six already, fortunately, I just happened to have a tuxedo. So I slipped into my tuxedo and raced to the Zaza getting there truly as it was beginning. And it was a lovely evening. And there was a big cocktail reception, champagne and open bar. And then we went in and dinner seated dinner. And the award show began, and I decided to take a little break. And so I went into the silent auction, which is another Diana awards tradition. And there I was in a room filled with wonderfully good looking gay men in tuxedos all looking spectacular and I thought, I have arrived, I have waited for this for so many years. So I talked with Mark, thanking him for the ticket. And he said, Well, would you like to join? And I thought, because I was thinking back the days when, wait years to become a Dyani. So we're looking for new members right now. So I applied and I joined. So my first Diana year was the year of Diana 60, our Diana Diamond Jubilee. And I just thought I was destined for this. So now we're getting ready to celebrate Diana 66. So as best as I can figure it was either 2013 or 2014. Only because it's a big conflict as to what year what award was given. I know, we think the calendar would solve that, but it never has. Last year, I received my five year plaque in what I contend was my seventh year so I have been a Diana for more than five years. Let's just put it that way. What attracted it to me? Well, as I said, being in a room full of handsome men, and tuxedos has always been a fantasy of mine. And there I was, and they are a fun group. It is a social club. It's a social club that does good. We raise money for social class causes. Historically, over this period of time that Diane is they've given out well over a million and a half dollars. They provided seed money that helped create the AIDS Foundation and stone soup kitchen, the Montrose clinic, they were very active in the early days of AIDS causes because the big foundations wouldn't give money to gay causes. So somebody else had to raise the money, the dyad has made it their goal. So we still raise money for social causes. This year, we're raising money for Alper education. And we're raising money for the gay and lesbian archive at the University of Houston, something I think you might have heard about. We have supported the bots foundation whose archive is being incorporated into that collection. We're supporting pet

patrol, which helps victims of AIDS with materials and supplies and assistance in taking care of their pets so that they can be accompanied by their pets through their demise, which is terribly important. But most of all, we just have a hell of a good time. I used to joke that it was all about drinking. It's not. It's really all about raising money for social causes. But the drinking is a good part of it that we all enjoy. We have lots of parties, lots of social we have four major events a year two of them are black tie. You it's it's a dream of mine to be part of something. And it's a good way of meeting gay people and creating new friendships. I mean, I've made some wonderful friendships through the Diana's people that I treasure, and I hope that I will know for the rest of my life. So how's that?

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Timothy Vale 44:16

So how would you describe the theatre scene currently right now, and especially here in Houston? Certainly you're currently working on one of your

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Thom Guthrie 44:26

yes, if you can see it in the background. It's sets being constructed for William Bo comes opera based on the film dinner at eight. What is the theater scene like in Houston? It's vibrant. It's exciting. Small companies are running into some real financial trouble right now because of a lot of different reasons. So I'm hoping that a lot of people are going to get more involved in giving to the small companies, but a company that I was associated with for several years. In fact, for four years, I was technical director and designer at Stages Repertory Theater and was one of their principal designers for six years. Having done a lot of productions there, they're getting ready to open a new space. I'm extremely proud of them for surviving and becoming big. Here we have this whole thing we have more seats in our theater district than any other city in the nation except New York is a true statistic. It's also a very exciting statistic. But one of the great things that I am terribly proud of is I was one of the original 55 contributors that built the match. The Midtown arts and theater collective Houston are collection Houston is the name changed a couple of times, so I stumbled on it. But I was at a group of people and wrote a check to help create the match. And now the match is the home for so many wonderful small companies, companies that deserve to be seen and to be heard. I'm thrilled to see that happen in Houston. It's always been a town with a great theater tradition. When I was a child, I was my first stage presentation. I was 12 years old. And I was in there I actually I think was 11. I was in the opera street scene, which is at Theatre Incorporated. Theatre Incorporated was Little Theater over on Chelsea since burned down. But it was the birthplace of many great Houston talents. It had a national reputation as a wonderful place. And one of the things that sort of grew out of it, although not directly. But a lot of the people who had been part of the dynamic that was theater Inc, then went on to create theater under the stars. And of course, theater to the stars is one of the major producers of musical theater in this area and and well thought of on a national basis. The ally has survived floods and turmoil and scandal to still remain one of America's top regional professional theatres. Houston Ballet is one of the few year round contracts in ballet, Houston, grand opera, my mother was an opera singer. And she had a role a tiny role, but a role in the second opera produced at Houston, Grand Opera. And here we are all these years later. And it's thought of as one of the top opera companies in the world. It's very exciting to see that advanced there. And of course, Houston Symphony Orchestra, another group I have a wonderful association with for five years. People just don't even think of this as a reality. For five years, I was the lighting designer for the Houston Symphony Orchestra. My goal

was to make them look warmer, because nothing's colder than glaring white light on black tuxedos. And so we use warming gels to kind of warm up the feeling of it. And they are a remarkable group of immensely talented musicians. Houston just doesn't realize how unbelievably unique it is that we have world class symphony, opera, ballet and theater. In the city. We have people like SSPA, who bring in the unusual, the different and challenging. And of course, we have universities with fabulous art programs, of course, right. And of course, obviously at the University of Houston, where I made my home. And when I am gone, my estate goes to create two endowments, one for opera performance, the memory of my mother and the other to maintain and preserve this wonderful, wonderful space. unique in the world. So how is the theater scene in Houston? Exciting, stimulating. I mean, we've got companies like children's umbrella and catastrophic theatre who were doing Main Street doing small theater. Wonderful, wonderful live arts out there. The only thing that's problematic about the arts is that we're slowly aging out in our audiences because it's not emphasized enough in early education. Now, we do have the wonderful High School Performing visual arts and we have magnet programs in the schools that are getting people interested in performing in the arts. But when I was a kid in elementary school, we used to ride downtown in buses to see student performances of the opera. I don't know if they still do that. Because if they do I None of my friends seem to know about it. They do have high school night at Houston, Grand Opera. But I mean, we were elementary school to students and we were going down. We had the excitement of actually going downtown and seeing the opera. And I'd love to see that come back. I'd love to see. Education put a focus again on the arts because it has it has the rest of the dank danger of dying off. Fortunately, in a Metroplex of somewhere between four and 6 million people, depending upon whose statistic you want to read. There's enough people right now that are helping to support the arts, but we need to make sure that that continues on because it's what makes our life rich and rewarding. It's what brings us beauty, joy, pathos, inspiration. Arts challenges the mind and opens the mind to a bigger world. And by not supporting it, we run the risk of becoming a very, very dull place to live.

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Timothy Vale 51:20

So I guess as kind of a final question, so to speak, looking back on your life, everything you experienced and live with. Is there any advice? Any advice you would give to younger people or younger gay people trying to make their way in the world?

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Thom Guthrie 51:36

Yes, because I give the I will give the advice to both of them simultaneously. There are several things that I want to say. Number one, find your dream. Find your passion and believe in your place in your passion. Never doubt it. If it is your passion, it is your passion, you will find your niche with in that passion. I found mine. I could never have been a Broadway performer. Quite frankly, I could never have been a Broadway designer. But I've designed over 1000 Productions in my life, which includes but isn't limited to almost 100 operas, over 200 plays about 125 musicals, hundreds of dance performances and concert acts and, and imaginative creative jobs of lighting. I found that I discovered that I never doubted my belief in it and I pursued it and every single person can do it. If they believe number one in themselves. You have to always believe in yourself. And then there's a little bit of advice I'd like to pass on. This is a bit of a story so be patient. My first season of professional theater we closed with showboat and showboat was a grande DOM of a museum of musical theater. I think it opened on Broadway in

1928, and was thought of right as rather old fashion for a long time it wasn't performed because they didn't like the depiction of blacks in Showboat. And constantly, it was being rewritten in order to sort of soften and make politically correct words that were used in the show. Because what was permissible in 1928, was appalling in 1967. So it was a big deal that we were doing Showboat. And to play the role of Queenie who's married to Joe Joe is the worker who sings the song Old Man River. Queenie has multiple times that she sings throughout the show, they brought in a wonderful Broadway talent by the name of Virginia capers, Virginia would eventually win a Tony Award for the musical reason, wonderful actress and marvelous person. And so I would, one of my jobs was to take the van over to the hotel she was staying at pick her up and bring her back to the theater for rehearsals and for performance. So Virginia, and I became friends, chummy. And this was a bit unusual, because this was still 1967. And I had grown up in a school system that was totally segregated. So I really had not had a lot of black friends in my life. And I was now beginning to have some one of the apprentices was was African American, and there were several others and that I met in different seasons, but Virginia and I really had a bond. And she loved the apprentices. She'd love to spend time with us. So she heard at the quote at the closing of the season party that a group of us were going to go out with one of the apprentices because she was flying out at six o'clock in the morning to El Paso. She was prom. And so we were all going to go out to the airport and wait with her Since, you know, you'd have to get up at four in the morning to get out there. So since it was already too, you might as well just stay up all night. So we stayed up all night. And Virginia asked if she could go along. So we went. And we went out to what is now hobby airport. I used to be a big dog, this house there was open all night. And we all got a big banquette. And so here were these six, high school slash college age white kids with this black woman. And the waitress immediately assumed she had to be somebody's made, it shows you where we were at that time. And here was this brilliant actress who had performed all over the world. But we assured her that know that she was our mother. And we thought she was here with us. So that kind of put up, calm to the evening, so to speak. So we talked in Virginia asked everyone, what do you what do you want to do? What is your life goal? Where do you want to be? Just those kinds of questions. And it was just nice, because here was somebody who was famous, somebody who was magical, who was taking an interest in us, kids, we were kids. We couldn't even legally drink or vote at that time. So here we are sitting around the table, and she comes to me. And she said, Well, Tommy, what are the few people ever allowed Corbin Tommy, Tommy, I think you're gonna make it in this business. You've got what it takes. So I want to give you two pieces of advice. So now I'm gonna pass this advice on you guys. All those listening to these words. She said in life, you're constantly faced with decisions, and particularly if you're in performing or visual arts, because you can find a comfort zone or you can be involved in a show that's going on, or a movie that's being made. And during that period of time you're like a family. And then what's going to happen is at some point, it's going to stop. And you're going to be faced with decisions as to what to do. So with as far as the decision of what are you going to do when you're offered a job? You think about that job? Not? What am I going to feel at the end of the week? In other words, I really need a paycheck right now. Or how am I going to feel next month if I don't take this job? You ask yourself, what is that job going to do for you? And how are you going to feel? Not next year, but in five or 10 years? If you don't take? And when you can answer that question, you will know whether or not you should take that job at once you make that decision. Never look back. Never. And then she said remember that when you're working on a project, it's your family. These are people, your life depends upon them. And their life depends upon you, your family. So when it does come to the end, never say goodbye. Always say, I'll be seeing you. Because when you say goodbye, it's fine. It's done. It's over. But when you say I'll be seeing you, you're leaving that door open for that family to return for that feeling to continue. And for that closeness to always be there. Well, I can honestly tell you I've lived by those wonderful pieces of advice. I have not one regret about

my life. Could things have turned out differently? Sure they could have but you know what? They turned out pretty damn good. And I'm happy about it. I don't regret the changes. moving to New York. Fabulous. I also moved to Minneapolis. Fabulous. I went to school in Canada fabulous. I went to Los Angeles fabulous. Even though I had great difficulty finding work in Los Angeles. I had a really really really good time. meant that a lot of really good people. I did not allow that door to ever close. And just like I said, when I gave my retirement speech in the lobby of the Morris opera house on January 31, of 2017 I will never leave this place. Totally. I will always be a part of it. You will always be my family. And I promise you I'll be seeing here