

Interviewee: Mott, Manning

Interview Date: November 7, 2008

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**  
**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Manning M. Mott**  
**Houston Art and Culture – Hobby Center**

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés

Date: November 7, 2008

Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes

Location: 800 Brazos, Hobby Center, Houston, Texas

EV: What is your full name?

MM: Manning Mpinduzi-Mott.

EV: M-A-N-N-I-N-G?

MM: M-P as in Paul, I, N as in Nancy, D as in Dog, U, Z as in Zebra, I as in Idaho.

EV: (laughter). Is Mott?

MM: Mott.

EV: M-O-T-T?

MM: M-O-T-T. Mpinduzi-Mott is my last name.

EV: Okay, is it hyphenated?

MM: Yes.

EV: Okay. French?

MM: No, Zulu.

EV: Zulu?

MM: Zulu.

EV: Really? Did you add it on?

MM: It was added. It's actually my married name when I got married the first time.

EV: Okay. This is Ernesto Valdés I am interviewing Mr. Mott with The Hobby Center

and it is November 7, 2008. I got the year right. We are at 800 Bagby Street in the

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conference room. We are going to talk about the theater. So tell me where were you born?

MM: I am a native Houstonian born in 5<sup>th</sup> ward Texas.

EV: In 5<sup>th</sup> Ward, Texas alright. When were you born?

MM: In '53. 1953.

EV: Okay since you were so easy with the year can give us the month and the date too so we'll know? I might send you a birthday card you'll never know.

MM: Sure. February 26<sup>th</sup>.

EV: Alright. 5<sup>th</sup> Ward back then was kind of a mix, was it all black?

MM: 5<sup>th</sup> Ward was black until you got to a rail road track when it turned Mexican.

EV: That's what I thought okay. Because you know the first pianist for the Houston Symphony was a Mexican-American.

MM: No I did not know that.

EV: And he was raised in 5<sup>th</sup> Ward. They came from San Antonio and lived in 5<sup>th</sup> Ward. They were

mariachis and he followed his father. He came down here to play music and he finally... anyway, when I read that it surprised me I didn't realize that the Mexican-Americans had moved here in 5<sup>th</sup> Ward. Can you tell me something about your family? Were your folks from Houston too?

MM: Let's see my mother was actually born here and my father was born in Madisonville, Texas. If it hasn't been sold yet, we still own property up in Madisonville. Family of ranchers, family ranch ran until I guess 15, 20 years ago when my aunt was unable to work it any more. I grew up here and my mother was a school teacher and my

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father a laborer, died when I was 10 of a heart attack. Mother lived up until she was 80 years old, retired as a school teacher.

EV: Where did she teach?

MM: She taught in the old Crosby School District, spent her last I think probably 23 years at Booker T. Washington in HISD.

EV: So you went to HISD schools yourself?

MM: Yes.

EV: Where did you go to school?

MM: Let's see I finished high school from Jack Yates. I was part of the group that integrated colored and junior high school in the course of three years. It went from a white school with 90 black people to a black school with 90 white people.

EV: That was in the 70's?

MM: That '60... let's see counting backwards, I was about 10 years old... would be up until '67 so yeah, '63 to '67.

EV: That was early. That was before court order.

MM: That was right on the court order. The court order happened while I was at colored. The entire neighborhood and school changed just [clapping].

EV: Did you squeeze any college in?

MM: I went to Williams College for a while, stayed there a couple of years, dropped out, a year at U of H and went later to an ITT Technical School got a degree in Electronics.

EV: When you were... were you in just general courses when you were in U of H?

MM: I was physics major.

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EV: You were a what?

MM: I was physics major.

EV: Physics. When you were in high school did you play sports or anything, or sang in the choir?

MM: I played football, I ran track. I was a member of every organization that would let me join.

EV: Keep you off the streets? That's what my mother let me join to keep me off the streets. Did you letter in all these sports?

MM: I gave up track in high school. I let it, I played football all the way through freshman college so yeah.

EV: So you have your letter jacket?

MM: No my letter jacket fell apart a long time ago. My ex wife threw it away because I would still wear it every now and again.

EV: (laughter). Oh wow okay. Now did you ever go in the military?

MM: No.

EV: Okay. You're married or you were married at some point?

MM: I've been married twice, twice divorced.

EV: Oh really? Children, do you have any children?

MM: I have three grown sons, 32, 31, 27 and a 14 year old.

EV: Son? Are they in school are they following in your profession or are they more...?

MM: Well this wasn't supposed to be my profession. I've been dropping out of theater and I've done some of everything. But I've been dropping out since I left high school.

My 14 year old is the first one that I have been able to get interested in the theater. He is

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at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts now, just started over there. He loves musical theater and will hopefully stay in it. The others went to the theater with Daddy too much so they got sick of it and don't want to be caught dead in a theater.

EV: Did you have another profession you wanted to do?

MM: My plan was to become an engineer which is why I was physics major.

Throughout school, junior high and high school there was always a battle between the drama department and the athletics department because all the events and practices happen at just the same time. So I am torn between coach says "You must be at the track meet, show up at 7 in the morning." And drama teacher says, "We have speech tournament show up at 10 in the morning."

EV: Yeah I had shades of that myself. So did you act in plays I guess when you were in high school?

MM: I am still an actor, up until the point that I took a staff position here I was working regularly doing industrial videos and voice-overs, stage plays at Main Street Stage, The Ensemble. I said I was going to keep doing it but this is eating up so much time that I haven't done a show in a year and a half.

EV: Do you have a favorite of the ones you've done?

MM: A favorite play?

EV: Yes or role?

MM: Let's see, probably "Valley Song" where I actually... It is a 3 character play and I played two of them. No I can't say I have a favorite, that's not true. As soon as I said that I thought of three other roles. So...

EV: Do you have any that you maybe want to do, that maybe you'd like to do?

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MM: Well actually the one thing that I've got that I really want to do right now is direct "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" again.

EV: Really?

MM: I did that probably 15 years ago and I'm looking forward to it again.

EV: Did you direct it here?

MM: Yes at an old theater behind what is now the Convention Center it was called the Karen Douglas Actor's Theater. Karen had left, it was in the last years of Actor's Theater and I directed it once there but I'd like to do it again soon.

EV: So tell me, your job now, the thing that helps you buy your bread and milk and everything, what is that job description?

MM: I am officially the Assistant Technical Director of Zilkha Hall, which makes me second in command to Russell Bounasera. Practically, my primary function is as the House Electrician, but because we have a two person staff then I do a little bit of everything.

EV: When a play shows up or a musical shows up, do you sit down with them and say, "Alright what does this musical call for in terms of lights, sound and all this other stuff?" Is that what you do, you do that?

MM: Well it sort of depends on the event. When we have a play or we do a lot of modern dance. Usually they will have a lighting designer. So that then I will work with him. I design the house plot, the rough plot that is in the theater now. And I will work with him or her on adapting that to their needs within mind that what we have up they can change it any way they want but when they leave it has to go back. But Zilkha also takes, or rather gets a whole lot of people who are not knowledgeable about theatrical lighting

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at all. In that case they usually say, "Manning make it look it look like this." "Manning can we that?" and that's what I do.

EV: Has your career always been here in Houston?

MM: Yes primarily. I spent a couple of years on the road touring with a couple of plays, primarily Thomas Meloncon's plays, a local author and producer.

EV: How do you spell his last name?

MM: Meloncon, M-E-L-O-N-C-O-N.

EV: Okay. I'm sorry I have to ask for the transcriber.

MM: Yeah I understand.

EV: Did you ever go up to the Big Apple and work up there?

MM: You know I hate New York with a passion.

EV: (laughter).

MM: When I was in school I was in Massachusetts, so it wasn't far, we went there infrequently but I got a chance to see it. I really did not like it at all. I have never performed in New York. We have taken a couple of (well in New York City) we've taken plays to up state New York, Albany, Buffalo and to Newark but I have never performed in New York City. I would just because it pays enough but it's not somewhere I want to be.

EV: I understand you worked here in The Music Hall?

MM: Right.

EV: I mean you got in awfully young to this stuff right?

MM: No, not at all. I'm 55 years old now. As I said, I kept quitting theater. I quit theater when I went to college. After I dropped out of college I did theater with

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Meloncon. I quit that to concentrate on raising my first son and for two years I did no theater. Then I came back because I just stumbled in on a rehearsal with a role that had written especially for me by Thomas Meloncon.

EV: Just for you?

MM: Well it was from three or four years worth of discussion that he had been working on this play and he developed a role that was for "Manning" but "Manning" wasn't acting anymore. So he was actually looking for an actor when I decided, "I can't stay at home with my two year old. I'm going to go out." I just walked into the role and I toured with that show for a while. That was "The Diary of Black Men." It's just been off and on since then. The Music Hall was the point that I actually decided to stop doing other jobs and make all of my living in theater.

EV: By that time The Music Hall was about how old?

MM: Oh this is shortly before it was torn down. I was only there three years and it was torn down I think in '94 or something like that.

EV: Did you ever hear of, there used to be a place called The Auditorium here in Houston right, or Houston Auditorium?

MM: Houston Auditorium?

EV: Yeah.

MM: Yeah.

EV: It had the old fashion classic design and all that stuff?

MM: I'm a little bit too young to remember that. I went to one wrestling match at the Civic Auditorium and I only remember that I went with my Grandmother but I was very young.

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EV: Well that's the one that was next to The Music Hall here right?

MM: The Coliseum.

EV: Right the old Coliseum.

MM: Well the Coliseum was still standing when I went on staff at The Music Hall.

EV: Okay. Because I remember those two, but I was doing some reading on the history of theater in Houston and a guy by the name of John Carlos set up a theater here and he remodeled an old building and that was the first theater. Then some guy came from New Orleans with a play and that was the first venue where they had real formalized theater here. Then, but I found in the archives, a picture of a thing called...

then I found a diary of a guy who was working the Salvation Army who was originally from Houston and came... he came back here to see it like in the early 1900's and he walked around and took the... anyway the point was he said he saw that Houston was building itself a City Auditorium and they were completing it just before completion the State or the National Baptist Convention was in town and they had it in that hall. He kept talking about it but I don't know, I can't find out whether or not they would perform there. So as far as you know from your experience or from rumor or whatever, before The Music Hall where were they putting on musical productions or were they?

MM: Okay my understanding and this is half remembered was that The Civic Auditorium was here and was actually replaced by The Music Hall so I am strictly guessing. I know that The Music Hall and the Coliseum were actually joined. The Coliseum was built first and The Music Hall was attached to it. The Civic Auditorium I don't know where it is. Like I said, I am told that I went there once and I don't know, I was too young.

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EV: I wonder if that was the one that... you don't remember anything about it right?

MM: Well I remember that I remember going to things at the Albert Thomas Convention Center and it was right ball the Coliseum Music Hall. My first actual knowledge of the, you know, of the layout, geography and function was when The Music Hall and Coliseum were the primary venues right before they opened Jones Hall.

EV: Okay, alright. Have you ever written anything yourself?

MM: In terms of plays? No I have written and performed poetry but not plays.

EV: Alright. Have you got your stuff published?

MM: I've had a couple of things published in periodicals but that was long, long ago.

EV: Now when, let's get to the present now. So, I don't know say "Show Boat" comes to town and so you meet with the director and they say this is the layout. Who quarterback's all this stuff the director?

MM: Okay, I work in the small theater. The large theater brings in all these big shows from out of town that are prepackaged.

EV: Right you work for the little.

139 MM: Our small theater was designed especially for the local groups and you know that's why I am there because my interest is in building the arts if you will.

EV: So you do a lot of teaching? If you have a lot of people coming in that don't have a lot of experience in this. So you kind of do some teaching in there don't you?

MM: Yes quite a bit. We've got any number of high schools that go in there. I'm a member of Local 51, of IATSE and our union has designed Zilkha as a "training house," meaning that the inexperienced stage hand, the people who are trying to get cross-training in other departments are the people that we get in there. They make less money. Most of

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the more experienced hands don't want to come in there. Simply because they make less money and if you could make an extra \$5 working next door in Sarofim why would you come to Zilkha. Which makes what we do a lot harder because we do have people that don't know, but again my interest is in all of these arts groups and at some point I'll have to tell you a story of the actual planning of that building, a meeting that I sat in on and it was... it actually was held in that building.

EV: You're on the mike.

MM: Okay, when they were planning this they were tearing down, primarily at the request of Theater Under the Stars, they were tearing down The Music Hall and the Coliseum and building a more modern theater and something that was designed specifically for musical theater with enough wing space and all of this. So they build this big beautiful 2800 seat Sarofim hall. Next door was supposed to be a space that was for the smaller arts groups so that there was something for the local artists as well. They had a meeting; the original design was it was going to be a multi-purpose space. They had a meeting of the arts groups that they viewed as potential tenants and invited them to come in, bring any consultants they needed. There were ten groups at the meeting that I attended. Like three or four of these groups asked me to come in as their technical consultant to help interpret what was said and you know help them ask for what they wanted because I had either built sets, designed lights or had actually been the technical director for the Ensemble Theater. So when we came in they presented all of this pretty multipurpose space and all of this and it was really nice and modern and cute and when they asked for comments no one said anything. So finally I spoke up and said, "Well this is really pretty and nice but the groups here," (besides the four that had invited me I think

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I had worked with eight out of ten), and “they don’t want that. When they come downtown, if they are going to leave their own spaces what they want is, you know, something modern. Nobody works in the round, we don’t need a multi purpose space we need a proscenium theater. Something where you have flies that goes up and down and a modern computerized lights system, a pit where they can put an orchestra and do the shows that The Ensemble or Main Street or Hoomba House can’t do at their own facilities. If they are going to come downtown and spend some money that’s what we need,” A.D. Players was one of them. You know there were just all of these groups and... everybody was kind of shocked when I said it and they asked one questions about “Wouldn’t this... this could do that too?” I said, “Yeah but you don’t understand. The Ensemble has a theater in the round but every time... almost every time it is played it is configured as a proscenium. The dance groups certainly don’t choreograph their dances to be watched from all sides.” So I never got invited back to another meeting, but much to my surprise as the construction was halfway through I found out they were actually building what I had asked for. There were major problems in the design because they had already allotted the space but we didn’t have enough wing space. We are sitting almost... our space is almost where the old Music Hall stage was and it’s about the same size with the same problem of not having enough wing space for musicals. However, it’s a 500 seat house that is modern, that the groups that we were talking about absolutely love. So I feel like “That’s my house, I told them to build it!”

EV: (laughter) Is the floor of the auditorium, level, is this one tilted here? I know some stages are tilted.

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MM: No, no, no the stage is not raked at all. The stages are flat. If they are the jilted ones, an angled stage like that then they will bring in platforming and build it.

EV: Right okay. They used to be that way right? So you could see the stage?

MM: That's old, old theater, long before you and I.

EV: Okay. Did you happen to know Doug Kornagey.

MM: Yes Doug is a real good friend of mine. He was a house man, one of the house stage hands at The Music Hall when I first started working there.

EV: He was my next door neighbor for 25 years man.

MM: Doug and Donnie his wife.

EV: Yeah. He is a great guy, he is a wonderful guy. His youngest daughter was my daughter's best friend.

MM: Okay you are saying "was," do you know something I don't?

EV: No, I mean that's when we were living next door to each other.

MM: Oh, okay. I mean he's been ill but as far as I know he's still around.

EV: But I think she left for New York. Delores was his youngest.

MM: Yes.

EV: She turned out to be my oldest daughter's very best friend and they were and still are best of friends. Now they have come back...she has written a couple little plays but she stays up in New York. There's another guy. I interviewed... I did an article on the Galveston Opera House so I got the Pye family from the "House of Pyes" they go back about four generations, five generations. They've got great grandchildren I think working out there.

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MM: Yes, I know Malcolm through the union. They are... the unions in both places which have now been joined, you know, have these hereditary families that started it and Pye was one of those that started it down there.

EV: Is there one here?

MM: Here? Let's see here the LaGrandes and several of my union brothers are going to remember me because I don't remember them all the names but there were like four or five families that actually were responsible for starting the union here as well.

EV: What are the major differences between the old Music Hall and what you have now.

MM: Oh yes.

EV: ....in terms of technology and everything else. Was The Music Hall done away with just because it was impossible, what was the deal?

MM: It was antiquated, Theater Under the Stars, which is the primary tenant, could not produce a lot of the things that they wanted to produce because it was an old concert hall, the sightlines were bad, it had poles in the way of much of the audience. The big thing was the loading docks and the wing space. There was not enough wing space for musical theater. You need a whole bunch to be able to change sets.

EV: I'm sorry to interrupt you but for the sake of the readers and everything...wing space meaning the back of the stage for...?

MM: Right, when you are doing musicals you see all of these big buildings moving and coming on and things coming off and on.

EV: Right.

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MM: Well they've got to go somewhere when they go off. I think books usually say you have to have twice as much space off stage as you have on. Well this had about 1/3 as much space off space as you had on. Way, way, way back when, much of the scenery had to do with just flying in a piece of cloth, a drop and that was all you saw to change. Well modern musical theater you have automatic, you know automated machines that push a whole building on and off and there was no way to do that at The Music Hall so touring shows would not come in there and even Jones Hall did not fit most of the modern road shows that are going all around.

EV: Well that kind of insinuates to me that the composers or the writers are doing stuff, writing stuff that the little theaters can't hold. I mean you can't necessarily adapt them right?

MM: Well it's not even a question of what's written. Because if you are doing "Hello Dolly" which was written for back then, the modern productions still are modern. They are based on the new technology, the idea that you do have all of this extra space in the wings to put scenery that every time you go someplace rather than lighting up a small part of the stage and "that's the street" and another part of the stage and "that's the house" the small theaters do around town with large musical theater what you are doing is you are turning the entire stage into the street, then you turn the entire stage into the shop, then you turn the entire stage into the office. So you've got to have somewhere to put the scene that you are not doing. There was also, in terms of The Music Hall, the fact that the sound system was just antiquated, there was no way at all to get decent lighting because the technology has changed so much. I don't remember when that building was built but I think it was built before I was born, or shortly thereafter.

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EV: What was the trouble with... I mean I saw several Broadway shows at Jones Hall, was there anything wrong with that or...?

MM: Jones again didn't have enough space for many of the modern shows. There were a lot of shows that just would not come to Houston because of that. Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" was first mounted at the old Music Hall. In order to do that they cut holes in the stage which had never been done before, put in lifts and everything else and I don't think... well I'm sure the modern touring version, still... the version that was on Broadway definitely would not have fit into The Music Hall or Jones Hall. Jones, the primary touring company, musical touring thing of Houston now is called The Broadway Series and it comes into Sarofim hall because it does have all of those modern accoutrements and it's easy to bring the show in, take it off the truck, throw it on the stage and do it, rather than having to totally modify the theater.

EV: When I saw *The Grand Hotel* I think it was at Jones Hall they had, I'm sure this is nothing to you but it always impressed me, it seemed that the crew and the cast would just move the things around. They would move walls around. While they are singing and dancing... it's almost like a magician because you are paying attention to something else you don't notice that happening. But I mean they were just like in broad daylight. But before you know it some would come on and the scene would change... I mean the singers would be like doing something else where they would have to be in the park and like in a nanosecond they were in the park and you weren't even aware that these guys were moving all this scenery around. I thought that was just ingenious the way they did that thing. I mean to me it was pretty neat.

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MM: This is one of the things that lead me to get interested in technical theater was going to the old Music Hall watching the opera because it was just so magical to me to see a castle move onto the stage, then turn around and show me the inside of the castle.

EV: Tell me how this happened: I saw one of those German operas, it might have been *Tannhauser* but somehow by changing the lighting you change the scenery is that what happens?

MM: Well you can completely change the way the scenery looks by changing lighting yes.

EV: You have lights that hit a curtain a certain way and you have one thing and then you switch it hits another way and it re-changes.... How does that happen?

MM: Well there's 100 different ways to do it. There's a piece of cloth, we refer to as a rag, there's a rag called a scrim and if you bring this in and put light on the front of it keeping dark behind it is opaque, you can't see behind it. Then all of the sudden you change the light, you put the light behind it and you have a scrim through where you can see behind it, so you can make things appear and disappear. And again you know that is one of those things I was talking about with the little theaters... you really want to do that but you can't. So you come down here and you can do it.

EV: So you all... I assume you all have internships in your?

MM: No, we don't have any sort of an internship program inside of the theaters themselves. Hobby has a general internship program that is primarily administrative, you know for what's the term (now that's an education) but for the people who have to do with the administrative side of arts because most people don't realize, we are in a building, a huge building that is all about administration. It's about raising the money,

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managing the money dealing with all of the business of the theater and that is a huge thing too. They do bring interns in for that but simply because of the environment we can't really do an internship.

EV: So if a kid who decides he wants to do what you want to do can go straight to a job or is he going to go to some other school, where do they learn this stuff?

MM: The high school's HSPVA has a pretty decent program. There are a couple of junior colleges that have real good programs here. University of Houston has a program. Surprisingly... well HBU has a program that is expanding pretty quickly. I was about to say surprisingly TSU and Rice have very, very small theater programs that don't really teach technical theater. It is something I learned a little bit in high school, a little bit in my year or two of college and a lot on the road touring because I was just like a lot of the shows that we saw coming into The Music Hall, you go in and the person who is in charge of tech really doesn't know anything except where stuff goes and what it is supposed to look like. I design lights now but I got a whole year of design in college so I learned most of that while touring. I'd go in and you'd get into a union house and the union hands...says, I'm sorry on a tape recorder I have to explain...they would just fold their arms, look at you and say, "Alright now what do you want to do?" because they are making big, big bucks and they don't care about your show at all, which is one of the reasons that I am at Zilkah because I want people not to run into that. But that forced me to learn a lot very quickly in order to get what I wanted.

EV: How much of your, I forgot what side of the brain this is supposed to be on, but which side is your creative mind as an actor, writer and all that stuff, helps you in designing or thinking or conceiving of lighting patterns or motifs and all of this?

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MM: Well designers, especially lighting designers, have to be people who can actually use both sides. Most people get bored with those introductory lighting classes because it's about physics and photo metrics and the "optics of a light" and "how it's built" and all of that but that has always been interesting to me. Then when you actually get into the design process, well then there is the whole creative thing of making it look like "this" and mixing "this" color with "that" one and making the lights change at just the right moment so people look where you want them to look. As a lighting designer I consider myself to be one of the most powerful people in the theater because I tell them where to look.

EV: Yeah you create the mood where you want.

MM: Right. If I want you excited, or rather if the director wants you excited then I'm going to bring up a color that makes you sit on the edge of your chair when you don't know why. That's what a designer does. That's the fun, creative part.

EV: Do you know, I'm sure you know this from your theater history, but there used to be that the music used to introduce who was coming on stage next. If the bad guy was coming then you had the bad guy music and all of this. Does theater ever use that or do you ever use that now for lighting? Is that transferred into lighting somehow?

MM: Occasionally. It's not a real common practice. But yes I have seen and done shows where there's a darkening every time this "mystical figure" appears or whatever. There are shades of that in Phantom, you know where there are actually slight color changes that are designed to make folks anxious, get them excited. Yeah it has become more refined, more subtle but yes it still happens, yes by all means yes.

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EV: Interesting. When you... I mean you do put on some productions there in Zilkha Hall right?

MM: Yes we do a little bit of everything.

EV: Okay so who is quarterbacking that thing? That's what I was kind of asking you before about... in the wrong set of circumstances... who quarterbacks this thing in terms of one of the guys back in the booth's or?

MM: Well that varies a bunch. In terms of actual planning... we've got Masquerade Theater which is our resident theatrical company. They do I think seven shows a year, a full season of musicals and they bring a complete staff. They have a lighting designer, a set designer. They bring many of their actors or they bring in people who actually do the stage hand work.

EV: So they aren't local?

MM: Yes.

EV: Oh they are oh okay.

MM: Masquerade is a local, very new. When I say they "bring in" I mean they have their own facility they were performing in a house that maybe held 100 people and just as I said, when we do musicals we want something bigger. So now they have moved to having the third largest performing space of any theater in the city which is Zilkha Hall at 500 seats, only TUTS and The Alley have bigger spaces and they will come in, theirs is almost like the shows that come into Sarofim. But on the other hand we have a dance production that is coming in this weekend that is some sort of a dance contest. None of the people are familiar with working in the theater. They've got a video company that is used to doing industrial video. So Russell, and myself then become the folks who are

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directing everything. "We can do this" "we can't do this" "You can't do this" "You can do this" because it's an unfamiliar environment to them.

EV: How much of the stuff around here, because you all cater to the local theater right?

MM: Yes.

EV: And do you think that the access to that theater is available for just about everybody, every school or group that wants it... I'm sure they have to do something else other than just want it but it's available to all schools and everything else right?

MM: It is available, it is open because of the wonderful way that they set up this sliding scale building, then we do get the small groups, the church groups that come in and want to produce a play, all of the dance groups and the chamber music groups who...

EV: The... which groups?

MM: Chamber music... the classical, the small classical that really, really, really needed a place. When they designed that hall, the acoustics in it are tremendous. The chamber music people love it. Now when they bring in Harpsichords and instruments from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> century that cost more than all the houses on my block and for ½ an hour they are going to play a composer whose name I can't pronounce I... there's not much lighting to do, you turn on the lights and you turn them off. I sit in the light booth and run lights for them. Russell or I are usually calling their shows. You are talking about quarterbacking: in theory there is a stage manager who, once the show starts, makes everything happen. Many of these groups, many of the groups run without a stage manager which again puts me or Russell Buonesera in the position of doing that also. You know, to me it is a snooze. I light them up and I work on something else.

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EV: Work a cross word puzzle.

MM: No, Suduko. My son introduced me to it.

EV: I can't figure that damn game out. But you know I can't even balance my checkbook so all of those numbers mean nothing to me. Do you play that?

MM: Yes. I have never worked them at all until I started working this classical music and my son said, "Well here Dad, do this." Because I can't actually read a book or a novel I get distracted and then I won't realize that they've done something and I need to react. So that's totally out but the Sudoku, being mathematical, is something that I can look at, work, keep an eye on and every time something changes I just ignore it and come back to it.

EV: You know when I was talking to Malcolm Pye and he used to work the Coliseum somewhere, wherever they used to put on the *Ice Capades* around here. I thought these guys would sit down and rehearsed when the lights came on and when they would do an entrance door and some skater would come on the ice. He said, "No you just had some guy talk some code in your ear or something and you just react to it." I mean I just can't understand how you do that. It is beyond me.

MM: Well you have the skill and the stage manager knows what is happening. The stage manager says, whether it is the *Ice Capades* or one of these plays. He says, "Alright you've got... pick up this character coming in stage left, center stage so you turn your light over there and as soon as somebody comes in you pick them up and you follow them and they tell you what to do."

EV: But how do you know where a skater is going to go? I mean those guys, they turn 90 degrees...

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MM: Wel, that's why light operators make more then a lot of other people. Because they have to keep the light on them and you know... you don't have rehearsal. Even, regardless to what it is, the tech will never get the rehearsal that the performers get. We have people come in all the time fighting the fights that I used to fight at The Ensemble, trying to get tech rehearsal for the technicians so that things do come in. We have had a few plays where I have had to stop and say, "No" because they've got big walls that fly down to the ground. Well this is you know 800, 1,000 pounds of weight. We have no rehearsal and you put, because we have no wing space to push stuff off and scenery is often set between the fly-man who is actually bringing things in and out, so he can't even see the stage. It is very dangerous if it is not coordinated well to drop 1,000 pounds while people are dancing around on and off stage.

EV: Yeah I would think so.

MM: I have actually say, stop and say, "No we will not bring this in unless we have a rehearsal because we don't want to kill somebody."

EV: Right, yeah, yeah. Still Russell took me through, that's where I met you for the first time.

MM: Yeah.

EV: Russell on the tour he gave me, kind of indicates to me that some of you all's... you still have the old fashioned "dropping of curtains" right? Everything is not totally technologically advanced?

MM: Oh no, it is normal in theaters across the country and as far as I know still around the world that as much as they try to replace things with machines, machines do not have the variability and in large houses, even the accuracy that you get from a human. You

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know, a human can look at it and stop this piece right when it hits the ground, stop it at the same place every time, see where it is. When you've got something that is mechanized if you are moving a light and it doesn't have to go far that's fine it will always hit the same place but if it it's got... if the light is 300 feet away being  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch off will make the light instead of just lighting up this person's face, light up their chest and leave their head in the dark. So for that and for being able to vary the speed so that you do bring it in just as the dancer clears and the dancer isn't going to move at the same speed every day, then you've just got to have a human pulling the rope.

EV: So job security is alive and well. (laughter).

MM: Oh yeah.

EV: Do you have any kind of a... well I'm at the short end of this thing let me stop this...

End of Side 1

EV: It was really...as a matter of fact I was working when they integrated the schools in '71 I worked for HISD. Okay so we were... I was going to ask you a question I guess wasn't I? Let me see if I have covered anything. Are there any folks that you think that we could talk to Kornegy might be able to give us some history of say The Music Hall before?

MM: Doug Kornegy.

EV: What's the name? Okay Doug...

MM: Yes because Doug was the house manager of The Music Hall for 15 or 20 years, he and Harry Whitten, both of which can be reached through the union, obviously Local 51.

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EV: Who is the second one you mentioned?

MM: Harry Whitten.

EV: W-H-I-T-T-E-N?

MM: Yes. They were two of the house hands who were at The Music Hall when I got there. They are people who for more than thirty years working in these houses downtown so they can tell you a bunch.

EV: Is Doug still, is he still working?

MM: Doug was working just enough, both he and Donnie were working just enough to keep current on the work roster and all of that. I think that's like oh I forget a couple hundred hours a year or something.

EV: Is he still doing his magic and all of that?

MM: As far as I know he finally gave up on the magic.

EV: Yeah?

MM: He had cut back and was doing very little when I first met him.

EV: Yeah what a guy!

MM: Doug the magician.

EV: Yeah he had a...he actually had us over to his house one time to go in there and see his little rabbits and all of his stuff. I never realized, I remember in the morning I would hear all those doves, you know how they are in the morning. But he had that collection of white doves I guess...

MM: Right the ones that you released into the...

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EV: And a whole bunch of rabbits and stuff in there. But I thought... then he cut way back, he had to cut way back. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you think history should know about The Hobby Center?

MM: The Hobby Center? You did talk to Bud Franks right?

EV: Bud what?

MM: Bud Franks.

EV: I'm going to talk to him. He's the one that lives in Galveston now?

MM: I have no idea where Bud is now just that he was so instrumental in putting this whole thing together.

EV: Yeah exactly. He got hit pretty hard by the hurricane.

MM: He is in Galveston.

EV: His house and three or four of his cars went under, so we've had two appointments and... so we are on scale to go ahead and talk. I've talked with Becker... Mr. Becker, one of the fundraisers and next week I'm going to see...

MM: Fran?

EV: Frank?

MM: Fran.

EV: Fran. He goes by Fran?

MM: Fran McFarran current head of the facility. Let me think, talk to Jim Garfey. He will give you some of the historical perspective on how the union and minorities playing into the union has worked. He was the first member of the stage hands local here.

EV: Get to him through the union?

MM: Yes.

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EV: Okay.

MM: Jim, Harry and Doug. You can reach all three of them through the union.

EV: Okay. I'd like to know just on my own because I, I mean you look around at The Broadway shows and if you look at even the themes that they pick, the story lines, are pretty one sided. I mean you've got "The Color Purple" and you have "Porgy and Bess" and we have "Westside Story," the Puerto Rican but that's pretty much it. And there are fantastic stories out there

MM: You know we have all these untold stories because they only want to tell their story. My whole interest in education is a lot based on the fact that when I was in The Music Hall, okay, we'd have the little black touring shows that would come through. Like I say I'm one of the few people who would actually help them and offer information because union hands, unless they really feel some affection for you, there was what we would consider an old union attitude that says, "alright you have been awarded the privilege of being in our space so now... we are in control, we know the rules and you don't." Places like Miller Outdoor Theater used to rip folks off regularly. You are paying the low staff and then you are paying them to be on the union pay roll and in fact some of them aren't even here they are at another venue working on another job. So they are drawing, you know, they loved their, I'll go ahead and call them, they loved their racist bosses. Because they set this up for them, this means I got three checks on the same day from three jobs, worked one of them and it made it almost impossible for a small group like The Ensemble Theater that I was working with at the time to go out to Miller Theater because they couldn't pay the bills. The labor was enormous even though they weren't doing that much. So I also saw this when I was on the road touring with

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Meloncon, which is part of what made me feel like “I have to learn fast and learn how all of this works.” Because if not, then they just bill us for anything, we don’t know the rules. They say, “Oh yeah we should have had a break two hours ago. So now you are paying us an extra hour for every hour we work.” That kind of crew of 15 people (even though you don’t see but six of them) it kept us out of these buildings which is why I’m at Zilkha, why that interest in teaching folks how to work in these union facilities.

EV: So what was your... what greased the wheels for you to come in here, you touched on it before?

MM: Tony Lapazo. The fact that he was one of those folks who saw the inequities that you are talking about and said, “It would be nice if we had somebody. But I’ve got to have somebody who knows something.” The people, even the folks in the union who actually...you know they felt like, “well if you haven’t been working with us you can’t know anything.” Whereas I had worked with[unintelligible] Touring. Had worked with a sound and lighting company that did little venues, did churches, did clubs... okay so I’ve learned how to take apart and put together lighting instruments more than most of the union electricians. I know how to take apart the boards. I’m an E.T. I can do that. So I can do a lot of stuff he’s sending things out for.

EV: Yeah you have to... you just have to become superior; you have to make yourself indispensable.

MM: That was it, the fact that I knew so much and could do so much. I knew nothing at all about sound I told him. So they sat me down and said, “Do all these sound tapes” and to their surprise, unlike the guys who were union hands who were used to “Well you know I’ll work a couple, I’ll go get some coffee, I’ll go talk here, I’ll go talk there...”

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I'm used to working in electronics where all you do is sit at a bench, take something off the shelf, fix it, put it on another shelf and get the next one. So I'm doing the repairs like this and I'm repairing more than a crew repairs in the course of a week.

EV: Yeah well anyway that's really interesting. I don't know how you change the creative part of it other than, you know at one point I was complaining I was in El Paso doing... I had gone back home to do some research and I walked around. They had a room about this big that had the Mexican-American, Spanish and Mexican-American history in El Paso area. I thought, "How come all these books are written by Anglos?"

The lady who happened to be a Mexican-American said, "Well write one you son of a bitch!" (laughter)

MM: And you're working on it!

EV: I'm working on it!

MM: Alright!

EV: But that's what we... I guess we have to do it ourselves and get it. The problem is that I have discovered or that I think is the head of that one is getting these guys to produce it and put it on and how do you make it acceptable to, see this is where they get you too, "we don't think" (as you probably well know) "we don't think this has the general appeal, the wide enough appeal of the people." Well *The Color Purple* had wide enough appeal. "*Porgy and Bess* had a wide appeal to the world and there is a thousand stories like this. Because it is the interpretation of what you see, how you see life differently.

MM: I know that but only because they used to bring shows into the Coliseum when I was working at the Coliseum and that's where someone told me that.

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EV: Yeah incredible.

MM: I mean Houston, now we are getting this painting as this international city but we've got the largest Nigerian population supposedly in the country. The largest Cherokee population in the country, one of the largest Indian populations in the country, when I say Indian I mean American-Indian. We've got all these huge international communities but nobody is telling those stories. Now when Broadway is in trouble then "Porgy and Bess" then "Color Purple" then "Top Dog/Under Dog" you know then they produce a [unintelligible] but the stories are there. We've got to produce them ourselves if they are going to be told.

EV: Right. *Evita*, excuse me but that's Argentinean. That's in my mindset that's Spanish.

MM: Yes.

EV: That's not American here if it happened in this soil, in this hemisphere.

MM: But there are so many compelling stories.

EV: Sure exactly but they won't... Did you know this is kind of funny, b.s. we probably ought to turn this thing off first. Is there anything else you want to add to any of this that we were talking about?

MM: I don't think so.

EV: Manning if you ever think of something that you want let me know and we'll put it on because this is going in the archives. So anything you want to add or anything, you are more than welcome to do it okay?

MM: Okay.

**End of Interview**