

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
WEST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

RALPH LEE

By Sarah Dzedzic

New York, NY

October 3, 2019

Oral History Interview with Ralph Lee, October 3, 2019

Narrator(s)	Ralph Lee
Address	Westbeth, 55 Bethune Street
Birthyear	1935
Birthplace	-
Narrator Age	84
Interviewer	Sarah Dziezic
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Ralph Lee, Photo by Sarah Dzedzic

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Ralph Lee

Sound-bite

“Well, my name is Ralph Lee and I live here at Westbeth, which has been a great advantage to me because I have plenty of room here to do most of the making of things that I do.”...“The Theater for the New City had been bugging me for a couple of years to do some kind of a Halloween event. [laughs] ‘Well, yeah, let’s do some kind of a parade.’ And so we did. There were scenes that took place on balconies of buildings, or on the doorstep of a church, or near a flagpole, or various kinds of locations. We’d stop the parade at various places and this event would happen, and then the parade would move on. Home base was a block north of here on Jane Street, and that’s where the parade started. It came through the courtyard in Westbeth and over to Bleecker Street, and then down Bleecker Street for a while, and then kind of zigzag around and ended up in Washington Square. And, well, we managed to pull it off. That’s what the first parade was about. I had dug up all the masks that I possessed, that I’d made for one thing or another, and put them in this event.”

Additional Quotes

“I think both my parents had a pretty profound influence on what I did with myself. We lived about a mile and a half out of town in a house that my dad built, which was kind of like a log cabin lodge, and was in a really nice location. It had a beautiful view of fields and the green mountains in the distance. We were surrounded by pastures and they became a very strong part of my environment as I was growing up. I spent a lot of time kind of exploring what was going on in nature and the world around me. My brother and I were somewhat isolated, living where we did. And it was not so often that we had playmates, so did spend a fair amount of time on our own. I think that was one of the reasons that I started doing artwork of various kinds.

There were some neighboring farms, and I was friends with some of the kids who were on those farms. I’d spend some time visiting on the farms, and I think I had a longing to be on a farm, actually, and be engaged more specifically in all the activities of a farm. But these farms were some sort of a distance and I’d walk there—might have been three-quarters of a mile to get to one of my friend’s houses—and I did have a good time when I was there. I can remember helping put hay in the barn and stuff like that and being very envious of the degree of activity that these kids had.

So I was in this kind of sheltered atmosphere, and I started doing artwork of one sort or another fairly early on. And let’s see, I think I was around the age of seven or eight that I became interested in puppetry. My parents had taken a trip to New York City and had brought back some hand puppets for my brother and I. Those were the first hand puppets I played with. It did happen

that there was a woman who had a notion to do puppet shows, and I did some puppetry with her.” (Lee p. 1–2)

“I also worked with Jean Erdman. She was a well-known dancer in those days. She had worked with Graham and then started her own dance company. I made masks for them, and I also started making masks for Erick Hawkins, who was I think the one person that Martha Graham was ever married to. And he went off on his own, had his own aesthetic and his own dance company. He became a really strong influence on my life. He wanted everything to be very simplified and be like a work of modern art. Like the simple shapes that Brancusi would make, and everything had to be made out of balsa wood, paper, or horsehair. Maybe there would be a few exceptions, [01:39:58] but he wanted the balsa wood because you could make a headdress that a person would wear on the top of their head and it wouldn’t be particularly heavy. And also the carving of balsa wood, you could do very simplified forms carving. That bird that’s hanging up there is a reject from one of his dances. Most of the people I’ve worked for as a mask maker will come and see what I’m working on and they would say, “Oh, that looks so great. Go ahead.” Erick would come and he’d peruse what I was doing and he’d say, “Not good enough. Not good enough.” And he’d walk out. And I’d be [laughing] just totally pissed off but at the same time, I’d know he was right. He made me work harder, and push harder. Ultimately, I’d come up with something that he would approve of and I would think to myself, “My god, I never would have made that if it hadn’t been for him pushing me that way.” (Lee p. 17)

“I was thinking, well, I’ll do some more directing. This was the year before I taught at Bennington. Then my friends were teaching at Bennington and they got me a job at Bennington. So I went there the following year. And I decided, ‘Ok. What am I gonna do? I’ve got to do a production.’ And I said, ‘Well, maybe I should do a Brecht play.’ And I said, ‘Or maybe I should do something that incorporates a lot of the masks and giant puppets I’ve made over the years. And I’m going to be teaching a course in mask making and I can incorporate some of that.’ So that’s what I decided to do.

I had a friend of mine who was a playwright to sketch out a theme for this event, that it would be a voyage of discovery for a young woman. Partially with her and partially by myself, I found all these locations in Bennington College that could be fun for a scene, and that this would be a traveling event that went from one scene to another around the Bennington College campus. And so that’s what we did. I brought up—well, the pig beast and the lobster, they already existed, and I think the rooster already existed. These figures are very old. Oh, and this fat guy up there, the emperor Hadrian, they were they were all part of the production. They all appeared on one scene or another.

The first scene was on the balcony of a building at one part of the campus, and then there would be a procession that went to this walled garden, and this lizard was along the wall of the garden. I made that lizard with the students. Then they came to a pond and the pig beast—this guy over here—was on the pond and he got paddled across this pond. Then we went down to the major campus and some other figures of mine were dancing like crazy, and then they ended up going out on a field. There were a lot of people in the company who had been pulling these things. Most of them had painted their bodies different colors and were all naked—the ‘60s! [laughter]

We did this event and it had been a kind of a depressing spring at Bennington. The weather had been just awful. I think it was the first of May, and the weather was just sublime. And this event went off. I had gotten to the point where I felt like I was some general in the army [laughing] having to get these maneuvers together. Whether everything would be complete or not I said, ‘Well, it’s gonna be what it’s gonna be and that’s it.’ But it turned out to create so much excitement on the campus because, well, the weather had just conspired with us to make it so ideal, and everybody was ready to have some zany event take place. And so this thing happened that was it was just this amazingly successful event. [laughing] I mean, I look back at it I say, ‘You did that?’ But it just was what the campus needed at that point.” (Lee p. 22–23)

“It just grew in leaps and bounds. Every year, I met with the police and they said, at some point, we had to start putting up police barricades along the route of the parade. I think it was maybe after the third year. That was kind of disappointing because it was nice to have people be able to join the parade and leave the parade whenever they felt like it. But the crowds were getting so big that they would press in on the people marching so much that they could hardly move. That became a kind of a battle in itself. So after the fifth parade, we started having barricades along the route of the parade.

We changed the route, also. We changed the route so that we went over to Fifth Avenue, and down Fifth Avenue and through the arch and to Washington Square. It just had to be. I wasn’t particularly happy about having to make this change but there was no choice. In subsequent years, it just continued to grow and grow and grow, and we would be getting all this publicity and foreign newspapers, all over the place. I think the final year I did it, there was some TV coverage—I didn’t really particularly want TV coverage. What I really had wished all along was that people would come to this parade, but then they’d say, ‘Ok, let’s start a parade in our own community.’ That’s what I really wished would happen. But that didn’t happen so much.” (Lee p. 25)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Ralph Lee

Ralph Lee grew up in Middlebury, Vermont in a house that was built by his father, where he spent many days exploring outdoors or visiting neighboring farms. He was given a set of hand puppets by his parents when he was 7 or 8, and became interested in creating puppet shows and building sets and stages for performances. In high school, he attended The Taft School, which had a well-equipped theater, and he became involved with designing sets and acting. Also during high school, he worked at a summer stock theater alongside its producer, Mary Winslow, and learned how to design sets using creative and economic methods. At Amherst College, he majored in playwriting and considered pursuing dance as a career.

On a Fulbright scholarship, Lee traveled to Paris intending to study mime, and met his first wife, the daughter of a dancer in the José Limon Company. They moved to New York City, living briefly in Riverdale and the East Village, landing on the Upper West Side. Lee began looking for acting work, and also make masks and custom props. He eventually joined the Open Theater, an experimental company. In 1970, Lee, along with many friends from the Open Theater, moved into Westbeth Artist Housing with his wife and three children.

It was while teaching experimental theater methods at Bennington College that Lee produced a play that would eventually inspire the first Halloween Parade in 1974. Drawing on the play's use of multiple sites for performances along a defined route, Lee planned the parade as a moving theater event, making use of existing masks and puppets, and capitalizing on the parade's minimal publicity to create an intimate and odd experience for onlookers. In 1985, as the amount of spectators grew, and the route had to be changed to accommodate increasing numbers of participants, Lee stepped away from producing the parade.

This transition enabled him to devote more energy to the Mettawee River Theatre Company, which he established with a group of Bennington students, and where he was artistic director for over four decades, producing traveling performances for audiences in rural Upstate New York.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: All right. Today is October 3, 2019 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Ralph Lee for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. Could you start by saying your name and introducing yourself a little bit?

Lee: Well, my name is Ralph Lee and I live here at Westbeth, which has been a great advantage to me because I have plenty of room here to do most of the making of things that I do.

Dziedzic: I want to hear a little bit about where you grew up and about your early life.

Lee: Ok. Well, I grew up in Middlebury Vermont. My parents were both involved with Middlebury College. My dad went to Middlebury College. He was the first person in his family to go to college, I think. He was from a farm in Connecticut. And I'll say he was a real Yankee. [laughs] He was also a writer. He wrote several books on historical subjects about Vermont and New England. And before World War II, he was teaching at the college and I believe he was in charge of the college press, putting out whatever publications they had to deal with, which in those days I think were relatively minimal. And he was in the Navy in World War II, stationed in the Hawaiian Islands in intelligence. And so he was away for four years. I was born in '35 and so I was probably seven or eight years old when he went away.

My mother, in addition to being mother to my elder brother—two years older than I am—and myself, taught modern dance at Middlebury College. She was from California and she had studied dance with Mary Wigman and Hanya Holm for a short time in Germany, and also in the States. So dance was really very much a part of her life. And she ended up—I believe she was the first person teaching dance at Middlebury College, and at that point it was still in the Phys Ed department, but it managed to force itself into a more artistic category as time went on.

I think both my parents had a pretty profound influence on what I did with myself. We lived about a mile and a half out of town in a house that my dad built, which was a log cabin lodge, and was in a really nice location. It had a beautiful view of fields and the green mountains in the distance. We were surrounded by pastures and they became a very strong part of my environment as I was growing up. [00:05:23] I spent a lot of time exploring what was going on in nature and the world around me. My brother and I were somewhat isolated, living where we

did. And it was not so often that we had playmates, so did spend a fair amount of time on our own. I think that was one of the reasons that I started doing artwork of various kinds.

There were some neighboring farms, and I was friends with some of the kids who were on those farms. I'd spend some time visiting on the farms, and I think I had a longing to be on a farm, actually, and be engaged more specifically in all the activities of a farm. But these farms were sort of a distance and I'd walk there—might have been three-quarters of a mile to get to one of my friend's houses—and I did have a good time when I was there. I can remember helping put hay in the barn and stuff like that and being very envious of the degree of activity that these kids had.

So I was in this kind of sheltered atmosphere, and I started doing artwork of one sort or another fairly early on. And let's see, I think I was around the age of seven or eight that I became interested in puppetry. My parents had taken a trip to New York City and had brought back some hand puppets for my brother and I. Those were the first hand puppets I played with. It happened that there was a woman who had a notion to do puppet shows, and I did some puppetry with her. She was a nervous individual and didn't really like to do the performing very much. But I [laughs] think I had to cover for her a lot cause my imagination just kept moving along [laughs] and, well, I could cover for her lapses.

Dziedzic: Where did she come from?

Lee: I don't know where she came from, offhand. But she had some knowledge about how to make puppets—hand puppets—and work with papier-mâché, and so she passed those things on to me and I just sort of took those ideas and ran with them. [00:09:59] And before long, I had made a little puppet stage out of—back in the days when radios and victrolas were all in one huge, architectural [laughs]—

Dziedzic: Console?

Lee: Console. And I managed to take a console like that and make it into a puppet theater. The puppets were pretty small. I also started making scenery for the puppets. My first puppet show was—my mother had, as part of her dance teaching, a dance club, and after their concerts they always had a party at our house. And I did a puppet show to this captive audience. It was all about some kids who went to a graveyard and got spooked. [laughter]

Dziedzic: How old were you?

Lee: I can't remember exactly. I think I must have been around eleven at the time that happened. But I was in it full-time from then on. I built a bigger puppet stage and did shows based on various kids' stories, like *Ferdinand the Bull*, chapters from *Winnie the Pooh*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. And once I had a bigger stage, I started performing at birthday parties and assembly programs for kids, and did a fair amount of that up until I was, let's see, about fourteen, fifteen years old, and earned a little bit of money [laughs] in the process. And learned how to sew. If there were a show at my school, I would always be right in the middle of that. Also, if they needed a kid to be in the show at the college, there I was! Ready and waiting. And just before I went away to school, I was in a dance program of my mother's dance club at the college. So I was really into performing as well.

Dziedzic: I'm wondering if you enlisted anybody to help you in these early years of putting on shows.

Lee: Actually, it was all a one-man show. [00:14:59] You know, I didn't have a pal, and so I was doing things all by myself. I would write the scripts. I'd make the sets and puppets. And I'd have to arrange the script so that there were not more than two people on stage at the same time, which was a little bit tricky with some stories. But I shifted the action around a little bit so that it was possible.

Dziedzic: So, two people [puts each hand up in the air, alluding to one puppet per hand], am I right? Two hands. That was the determining factor.

Lee: Yes. And then there'd be a little bit of a shift when I had to, with just one hand, move from one puppet to the other if the characters needed to change. But I became pretty adept at that too. You know, if there were any kind of theater thing that I could do, I would become engaged with that as well. I remember there was a small summer stock theater just outside of Middlebury for a couple of years, and I one day I bicycled out there just to ask them if they needed any help doing things. And so they actually put me to work building scenery and painting sets and stuff like that. And I really felt, yeah, ok, I'm at home here.

It was a little bit of a shock my junior year in high school—my parents sent me to a prep school because they were concerned about the kind of education I was getting at the Middlebury

High School and what kind of college I would get into and so forth. And so I went to the Taft School, which is the [lowers voice] The Taft School. [laughs] Watertown, Connecticut. And I was pretty much in shock [laughing] there for a while. It was a very preppy place and, well, I didn't have many of the necessary clothes. It was the kind of place where you had to wear a coat and tie to breakfast, and all of us learned how to tie a necktie as we ran down the hall to breakfast.

But the saving grace for me there was that somebody had endowed the school with a theater back in the '20s, and it was a fairly well-equipped theater. It even had a fly space, and so they did plays, and it really became my home, as much as I could. We had to study Latin and all these other subjects, and I was not a very good student and not particularly well prepared for this either. I somehow managed to get by, but my home was this theater. [00:19:52] I started designing sets for the plays we were doing and performing in most of them as well.

It happened that the first fall I was there, they were doing a wonderful play called *The Hasty Heart*, and the play takes place in the South Pacific in a hospital during the war. There are a bunch of soldiers stuck in this hospital, some of them pretty badly injured. Among them is a guy from Scotland, and all he can think about is going home. During the course of the play, his compatriots in the hospital make a point of befriending him, and somewhere along the line, he finds out that he's going to die. All he's been talking about is getting home to Scotland. And he finally realizes that he's got a home. [choking up] It was kind of a metaphor for me in that situation in the school. [laughs, tears up] As I get older, my emotions get much closer to the surface. Ah! Anyway.

So the Taft School, it became a home. I actually had some pretty good friends there.

Dziedzic: Can you tell me about some of the other students that you had connections with, or faculty that you had connections with?

Lee: Well, it happened that a guy who was going to be teaching English courses at the school was also a theater person. He was young, and so the theater became much more alive once he was there. I think he was the one who wanted to do this—thought this was a good play to do. I found out later that there was another guy that had been considered for the role but his grades were too low [laughs] and so he couldn't do the part. And so that's why I ended up with the role. Oh, and this young teacher actually got me a job working at the summer stock company that he

had worked at. I got a job as one of two assistant designers at this theater. And that was a really phenomenal experience. [00:25:02]

It happened that the woman who ran this theater, who was the producer, also built the sets. And so I was working for her. She was a phenomenal person. Her shop was so well organized, and she managed to keep everything very economical. They were doing all these plays that took place in one kind of a drawing room or kitchen, and they had a whole bunch of standard size flats, which you built the scenery with, so that they could be maneuvered into different combinations. Usually you had to build some things from scratch for the show, but the bulk of it could be done with the stuff they had in stock. Monday mornings we'd wash the paint off from the show from the previous week, and start putting things together for the next week. I always I loved washing the sets—we were all getting wet in the backyard of the theater, and it was kind of an exhilarating time.

Dziedzic: What kind of stories were being told in that theater?

Lee: Well, they always did a couple of mysteries. They were shows that probably had had a run on Broadway, but they might have been there a long time ago. They actually did a production of—oh, what is it called? It's a play by Oscar Wilde. Everybody does this play—

Dziedzic: Is it *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

Lee: Yes!

Dziedzic: Ok.

Lee: Yes, *Importance of Being Earnest*. That would be the most classy kind of show they'd do.¹

Dziedzic: Were you able to build any puppets or continue that through the theater that you were involved with at the Taft School, or also this summer program?

Lee: Well, there was one play called *Bell, Book and Candle*, one of those comedies. There was supposed to be an African mask as part of the set—it sort of figured in the action in some way or

¹ I remember just as Lady Bracknell was saying, "I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of of this particular part of Hertforshire," outside the theatre a skunk had just left forth.

other—and so I built that mask. And I must say it was a pretty good mask! [laughter] [00:29:56] I built it out of wood. I think one of my daughters still has it on her wall. [laughs] But aside from that there wasn't much that I could do in terms of masks and puppetry.

I was actually in some of the plays, which was really great. I had some small parts. And so that kind of fulfilled that desire for me to some degree. I worked there after my senior year in high school as well. That year I became really—well, I designed some of the sets, and I worked more specifically with Mary Winslow, the producer-designer, building the sets. There wasn't any secondary [laughter] associate designer. I was really right in there painting all the sets and spending as much time as I could before I went there looking at techniques of painting sets, so that I'd have some clue as to what I was doing. I also had done some painting itself, both in oils and in watercolors, and so I was fairly adept in how to use oils, and mixing colors, and stuff like that. That was a really great experience.

I ended up going to Amherst College, and I feel really lucky I ended up at Amherst. It wasn't as desirable a school as it is now. It was a men's college then. It was a pretty stimulating atmosphere. I tried to do my homework. I did pretty well with the program that they had for freshmen and sophomores at the college, and at that time, everybody took the same courses. And they were all basic courses. There was no sort of dilly-dallying around with other courses. I don't think they do that anymore, but that was how they did it. So the learning experience was pretty stimulating.

There was a required physics course and what the professor really wanted students to do was to learn how to think and think like a scientist thinks. [00:35:10] And he was a challenge, and nobody got a very good grade in his course. But that was not the point. He was a very dramatic fellow. He would give lectures, and I think he gave one lecture about Galileo and Galileo's problems with the Inquisition—and this was in the middle of McCarthyism—and he ended this lecture by saying [shouts] “And we still have our Inquisition, the Senator from Wisconsin!” or wherever he was from.

Dziedzic: [laughing] Right.

Lee: And everybody [laughing] was totally silent, and then cheered like crazy.

Dziedzic: What did you know about Amherst before you went? What—

Lee: Very little.

Dziedzic: What drew you to it or led you to decide to go there?

Lee: Well, from Taft, most of the good students would get into Yale. It was just down the road. It was the place to go. I applied to Yale, and it was suggested that I apply to Amherst. And that's why I applied. That's where I got in. And in a lot of ways [laughing] I'm glad I didn't get into Yale. I don't think I would have fit in very well there.

Amherst is in the countryside, and I could take long walks and get on my bicycle and go off. There's a nature preserve that's part of the campus, and so it was it was a good place for me to be. And the theater department, it was a good theater department—just three faculty in the department at that point. I acted in plays both at Amherst and at Mount Holyoke, and at Smith College, where I got better parts [laughs] than I got at Amherst the first couple of years.

You could major in theater, either in design, or performance, or playwriting. And I felt like I knew enough about design. [laughs] And so I majored in directing, and that was the first directing I had ever done. I think I was pretty paralyzed the first shows that I did. But then the subsequent shows that I did, these the scripts were written by Robert Bagg, a classmate of mine. The first one was a translation of a little known play by Euripides called *The Cyclops*. [00:40:19] In the Greek theater, you know, there'd be a couple of tragedies and then a satyr play at the end, which was kind of a raunchy play. And this is my senior year of college, and I said, ok, there's a chorus of satyrs and there's a Cyclops, and there's Odysseus. And I said, they've got to have masks! And so I made masks for this production. I'd never made that many masks and but they turned out pretty ok.

Dziedzic: Can you describe some of the masks that you made?

Lee: Well, of course the Cyclops had to have one eye. It was a mask that was kind of larger than life, and I tried to make it as scary as possible [laughs] with the one eye and some kind of a snarling mouth or something. The satyrs, they were very traditional satyrs with horns, and faces that are somewhat human but—I think they had goat beards and stuff like that. Odysseus, he was a full mask, but probably my images were taken from Greek sculpture. So it was a great job, you know? I spent my entire Christmas and spring vacation at Amherst working on masks. And the

play, it was the first time anything like that had been done at Amherst, and it was pretty successful. That was the winter play.

The spring play, my roommate, Bagg—he's taught poetry and is a published poet in his life, he wrote this play. It was based on one of the other experiences of Odysseus, when he is washed up on the seashore as an older man, and he's met by—rescued—by a young woman whose name is Nausicaa, and they fall in love. And during the course of the story, Odysseus becomes younger. [00:45:10] And I don't think I did that with a mask so much as with his behavior. Then after a while he realizes that he's got to keep on his journey, and he takes on age again and leaves that island, and leaves her. It's a nice story, and he did a very poetic adaptation of it. I felt like that was—I'd really done something there. [laughs]

I don't know if you know who Henry Steele Commager was. Well, he was a very well known, I think, historian and philosopher, and he was teaching at Amherst at that time. He had this beautiful young daughter who played Nausicaa, and—woo! [laughter] We were all in love with her. [laughter] Ah!

Dziedzic: You mentioned the physics professor who was trying to teach you how to think like a scientist, and I wonder if you could try to explain how you were being taught to think as a director? Or to read these old stories and think about them as a playwright, or as a director. What was that instruction like for you?

Lee: Well, [laughs] I never thought of relating the two things. Well, the first one was a play already and I could just, in my imagination, start seeing how the action would go. And then I would do funny things, like in *The Cyclops* for instance, there's supposed to be a chorus of Ulysses's men, but we weren't going to have a chorus, and they didn't really have to do that much. And so I got this idea of having a cut-out version of a bunch of men, just out of cardboard, with one actor, with one real arm showing through, becoming the arm of one of these characters holding onto a painted sword. All they had to do was enter the Cyclops cave, and not have much to do until the end of the play when they escape. That made it possible for me not to have to hire a whole other bunch of actors.

Well, I take that back, because actually there was a chorus of satyrs would have had to have been a separate bunch of performers. [00:49:55] But I could have whimsical ideas like that.

[laughs] I never thought of them coming out of my physics teacher. [laughter] More out of my experience with puppets and an extension of that. Anyhow.

Dziedzic: Well, I know that you went to Europe on a Fulbright Scholarship, so I'm wondering if you could talk about how that came about and what your experience was there.

Lee: The summer before my senior year I had spent at Colorado College studying dance. A wonderful choreographer, Hanya Holm, she ran a summer school out there. And she had actually been one of my mother's teachers, which made it kind of interesting. But I never told Hanya whose son I was during the course of the summer, cause I just I didn't want to do that. It was the first time I'd really studied dance, and so I was a real beginner. I managed to get by ok.

I hitchhiked—I think I hadn't even told my parents I was going to do this—but I hitchhiked out to Colorado Springs which was [laughing] an experience in itself. Everybody did hitchhiking in those days; if I wanted to go to New York I'd hitchhike! And people would pick you up. It wasn't a big deal. And so hitching out to Colorado Springs—well, it took me a few days, and I had some moments on the road, but it was possible to do. I don't think I told my parents that [laughing] I was doing this, and I think I called—I did write them a letter after I got out there. [laughter]

I was able to get a job working in the kitchen so that pretty much paid—and I was on scholarship—and I could pretty much afford to do this, to be there. Then of course it's towards the end of the summer, and a whole bunch of us were at a restaurant after rehearsal or something, and I was telling some of the people next to me that whose son I was, and Hanya was there and they said, "Hanya, did you realize?" And she said, "Oh yes, I realized all along." [laughter]

Dziedzic: Wow. Do you think that was true?

Lee: Oh yes! Well, during World War II, we had spent a summer at Colorado. I think I was about seven or eight years old at that point. We spent a summer in Colorado Springs and my mother was at the same summer school with Hanya Holm. She could have put two and two together pretty easily I think. [00:55:03]

Dziedzic: And what kind of dance were you learning?

Lee: It was modern dance. The following summer I studied at Connecticut College where there was—I don't think they have the dance program there anymore—but it was a dance summer school and [Martha] Graham was there and Doris Humphrey and all these amazing people. [laughs] Graham, she was quite a character. She was like this goddess! You'd be doing some combination and then you'd finish and she'd say, "Don't touch the diamonds until the curtain falls." What the hell that means, I don't know. [laughter] But it meant that you've got to stay in this position all the time the curtain coming down. You can't, when you finish your movement, just drop your attitude. [laughter] At the end of that summer school, everybody was rushing up to Graham and I was actually the first person to get there—I was just thanking her and stuff—and she said, "I think if you try really hard, you'll succeed." Whew! [laughter]

Dziedzic: And then you floated away.

Lee: And then I floated away. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Now did she know at that time that you were pursuing theater in a broader sense than dance, or was she referring to you as a dancer?

Lee: Well, at that point I was thinking of being a dancer. That was one of the ideas that I'd had. But then that was before—when was that? Oh, that was just before I went to college that that happened. And so dance was still sort of in the back of my mind. But by the end of college I had thought, you know, I've never been an athlete—I'm a mover, but I've never really been an athlete. I really felt that that was necessary to be a real dancer.

When I got this Fulbright—I went to the dean's office to get an application for a Fulbright and he said, "Oh, you'll never get a Fulbright. Forget it." But I took the application anyway. And it happened that I was the only person from Amherst to apply in a creative field. "A" students were applying for the historical study of Great Britain or something like that. But I was the one who [laughing] got the Fulbright! I mean, if I had tried to get a Fulbright from New York City, forget it! There would have been all this competition. But since I was applying in dance from Amherst College I was unique.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Lee: And so I got this Fulbright. [01:00:00] And I went to Paris with the idea of studying mime because it's like dance, it's movement. And I so I went to Paris to study mime, and it happened that Etienne Decroux—who had been the teacher of Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau, who were the two people in mime that had caught the attention of the world at all—that he was the person I would study with. It happened that he came to New York that year, and so I went to Decroux's school for a while but his students were doing the teaching, and I really didn't like the technique. It all had to do with treating the body like a bunch of geometrical pieces—nothing that has muscles and sinews and bones. I didn't last very long studying mime there.

It wasn't till later that I realized that there was this other younger guy, who was just starting to teach mime at that point, whose name was Jacques Lecoq—who now is the person that everybody goes to study mime with in Paris. But I ended up studying modern dance with one of the few people in Paris at that point who taught modern dance, and she had been a student of Mary Wigman's and was a great teacher. She was just what I needed because she didn't care whether you did the movement right or not. She just wanted you to go across the floor with energy. She got me out of the habit of being really careful of what I was doing, and so that was great.

While I was in Paris, I met the woman who was to become my wife, my first wife. It happened that the José Limon Company was performing in Paris, and this young woman was the daughter of one of the dancers, and she was going to be spending the year in Paris. I knew some people from the company and I think I was having lunch with some of them, and I met this young woman and we became attached, sooner or later, [laughs] and spent that year in Paris together.

At the end of that year, I decided I was not going to do this mime stuff. There was a theater program at the London Academy of Dramatic Art, which was designed for people from other countries than Great Britain. There were people from New Zealand and Canada, and people from the States as well. [01:05:18] So I got into that program and I studied acting. It was the first time I'd ever studied acting and I learned some good stuff. At the end of that year—well, some intermingled family and career—the end of that year we had a kid. And so we came back to New York with a kid. We'd had a marriage in London before a judge—that kind of marriage. And I was looking for acting jobs.

We lived for a while with my in-laws and I got to know them pretty well. My wife's mother, who was a dancer with the Limon Company, she and I became pretty good friends especially. She was a beautiful dancer. A lot of dancers, on stage they look like girls, but she looked like a real woman. And she was in a lot of the Limon dances, and there's one dance that's particularly beautiful about a man and various women in his life, a girl—a young woman bride—and an older woman. She played the older woman. She was a beautiful dancer, really extraordinary.

Dziedzic: Was this the first time that you were living in New York? That you came from Paris and then decided to move to New York?

Lee: Yes. I started out living in Riverdale, where my in-laws had a home. Then my wife and I and young kid moved to the East Village. We had a friend there who knew of a vacant apartment on 12th Street between A and First Avenue, or A and B, I can't remember which. But it was really the East Village. And so we lived there. [laughs] My wife was very nervous about living there and insisted that she wanted to get a Doberman Pinscher. And we went to look at these Doberman Pinschers, growling and gnashing their teeth. And I said, "Stephanie, you're crazy. You don't want this kind of dog." But we had this violent argument and she insisted. I said, "You want this dog? We'll get this dog." Well, the dog bonded with me. [laughs] [01:10:04] It was a good dog actually. Tompkins Square was right nearby and I could take that dog to Tompkins Square, tell it to sit at one end of the park, and I'd walk to the other end of the park, and then I'd say, "Ok, come." And it would come. We had a good relationship.

Dziedzic: And what was the neighborhood like? What made your wife afraid of living there?

Lee: Well, right where we were, it was pretty friendly. Although [laughs] two of our immediate neighbors was a couple and they may have both been alcoholics, but he'd come home drunk and she'd scream at him, and it seemed like she was beating him up. But they also had an out of tune piano in their apartment [laughs] and then they'd play songs on the piano and sing, [laughing] and it was quite audible in our apartment. So we didn't last very long there.

My wife at that time was taking courses up at Columbia and we were looking for an apartment, and she, early one morning, saw this apartment listed in the *Times*. There was an address of the real estate agent in the ad and we said, "We're gonna get there as fast as we can."

We got there I think just a little before eight when he opened. He described the apartment to us and we signed on the dotted line. Or, I think we ran to the apartment and ran back and signed on the dotted line before anybody else had a chance. The rent was quite reasonable because it was being rented as a semi-professional apartment. Semi-professional means that at least part of your income is made by work you did in the apartment. The fact that by then I was making masks and using part of my home as a workspace as part of my income made it so that I qualified.

Dziedzic: Can you describe the apartment?

Lee: Well, this was an incredible apartment. It was on West End Avenue. It had a foyer. In one direction, there was maybe a sitting room and a master bedroom, and then down the hall there were a couple more bedrooms and at least one more bathroom. Then in the other direction there was the kitchen, and there was the maid's room, and another bathroom. [laughing] This was one of those big apartments! And when we first moved in—well, in those days it wasn't that economical—but it was like a \$185 a month. It pretty quickly moved up to \$225 but still, that was a pretty good rent. [01:14:58] We were there for a couple of years and I started doing mask work and—

Dziedzic: Who were the other people that lived in the building? I imagine a dancer and a mask maker weren't exactly a common occurrence.

Lee: Right. I didn't get to know too many people except our immediate neighbor, who was a violinist with a family and we were good friends with them. And it happened that I think their daughter was close in age to my daughter at that time. Oh, by that time we had a second child. [laughs] Ah!

Dziedzic: So who were you making masks for? How did that become a vocation?

Lee: Well, I started studying acting with a wonderful man. He was somebody that my in-laws knew of. His name was Michael Howard, and he was a great teacher, and a great man. He was going die last year but didn't, and I'm not sure if he's still alive or not. I've had it on my mind all fall to give him a call and I haven't done it. But he taught me a lot about acting and was a really good teacher, and he taught Stanislavski. He had been part of the Actor's Studio, and he was a real New Yorker. And he and I had—I told this story again recently—but a lot of people in the

class were Jewish, and the class took place down on Second Avenue and 8th Street, which was a Jewish enclave—rapidly becoming a hippie enclave—but it was a Jewish enclave at that point. And I was once at a cocktail party and talking to this young woman and she said, “You know, before really get to be much of an actor, you’ve got to get rid of your Jewish accent.” [laughs] I had learned how to act with a Jewish accent. Pretty much! I could probably shift it off, but there were certain things that I just learned how to express in that way! [laughter]

He was responsible for my getting my first acting job, which happened not too long after I had moved to New York. Sidney Lumet was directing a production of a play by Camus called *Caligula*. Very seldom done play. It takes place in ancient Rome and the lead character is kind of an angry young man, sort of in the tradition of the angry young men that were appearing in a lot of British plays at that point. I can’t remember the name of the writer of those plays, but anyhow, the lucky straw for me in that situation was that Colleen Dewhurst—I don’t know if you’ve heard of her but she was a really fine actress. [01:20:25] Really fine actress. She played opposite this young man, Kenneth Haigh his name was—English. And what I learned about Broadway theater of that kind was that you hire a couple of stars, you hire some primary actors, you hire some secondary actors, and you hire walk-ons. Everything was sort of broken down—it seemed like the stars, they might have talked to some of the primary actors, but nobody talked to the stand-ins the walk-ons. Except Colleen Dewhurst. She embraced everybody. I’ll never forget that. She was the trooper.

Well, this play didn’t last very long. It lasted about seven weeks, during which time—well, one thing that happened was that we went to have our costume fittings at this place where they make costumes and I had never been in a place like that before. And it seemed like they were making hats and all kinds of stuff. And I just said to myself, “Hmm. When this play closes I’m going to go back here and see if they need anybody to make things.” And so I did, and it happened that they were going to be doing a production of *The Tempest* up at the Shakespeare theater in Stratford, Connecticut. Part of the concept of the production was that there were these inhabitants of the isle. The play takes place on this strange island, and they wanted to have these inhabitants of the isle. And there were all kinds of drawings by artists around the time of Shakespeare that showed these people who lived on “strange islands”—the West Indians, and stuff like that, who didn’t look much like Europeans at all. And so they wanted to have masks made for these inhabitants of the isle, and they sent me home to make a mask according to this

designer's sketch. I came back with one and they were really enchanted with the fact that I'd made it out of papier-mâché, and I got the job. Well, that started me in a whole other career.

[01:24:53]

Ray Diffen [phonetic] started recommending me for other jobs. I made some masks for the Public Theater. They were still in Central Park at that time, and I made some masks for them.² One of Diffen's designers was working for Shari Lewis and I got work making props for her puppets for her television show. I'd make a little miniature cauldron for something, or a snowsuit for Lamb Chop to wear and only funny little things for television. That became one of my jobs. Ray Diffen would recommend me for other jobs and before I knew it, I was pretty busy making masks. Not necessarily masks but odd props, and various kinds of strange things. There was a production of this play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, which had to do with these Venus fly trap plants that grow a monstrous size. It was being done at a place called the Phoenix Theater, which was over at on Second Avenue around 63rd Street at that point. I made giant Venus fly traps for this play.

At the same time, just [laughing] to give you an example of my sometimes-chaotic life, I was in a Broadway production of *A Passage to India*, a dramatization of the Forster book by Santha Rama Rau, and I had this bit part. I played a servant and there was one scene, the final scene in the play, that takes place in a courtroom. In India in those days, there was a guy named the punkhawallah, who kept this fan going just to keep some motion in the air in the courtroom. And I got this part [laughs] and it meant that I had to put on all this makeup on—I was practically naked—didn't have to put it on my back because it never showed, but the rest of me, I had to put all this this bronze makeup on and sit onstage and make this fan move by a string that was attached to my big toe. So I had that job.

But I was also directing a play up at Barnard College, a production of *Yerma*, the play by Lorca. [01:30:17] I think I did a really good job with that play. And Lorca's brother, who actually was on the faculty at Columbia, saw the play and said, "That's the best production of that play I've seen in a long time." [laughs] So that was a nice positive note. So I was doing those two things and also making [laughing] Venus fly traps at the same time for *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*.

² One in particular was the ass's head for *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Dziedzic: And this is in the early '60s, is that right?

Lee: Yes.

Dziedzic: And when did you start getting involved with more experimental theater?

Lee: That happened a couple years later. I spent a year in Seattle. It was the first year of the Seattle Repertory Company. The following year, I worked for the theater called the Theater of the Living Arts in Philadelphia, and the associate director was André Gregory. He was doing a production of *The Firebugs*, a play by Max Frisch. It has a chorus of fireman in it, and André and I had gotten to know each other a little bit before the season started because we both had families and we'd gotten out there before the season started. And he asked me to be sort of like an assistant director. I had all these visual ideas about things that the chorus could do, and one of the ideas—my best idea—was that we should go in training down at the Seattle Fire Department, which we did. We bonded as a group, and learned how to rappel out of windows, and how to handle hoses, which are tricky because there's all this pressure within the hose when it's got water coming out of it. It really enriched the life of this chorus. He and the other director of the theater in Seattle didn't turn out to be on good terms, so André left after that show was in performance. A year later, he was starting a theater in Philadelphia, and I went down there and acted in a few shows and made masks for some of them. I played the Ballad Singer in Brecht's *Galileo*.

The summer after that I got a job working for the World's Fair in the Chrysler Pavilion. They had hired the puppeteer, Bill Baird, to contribute his know-how to the production. [01:35:08] And Bill Baird was looking for puppeteers. I had a friend who'd gotten a job with the show so I applied and got a job working for Bill Baird out of the World's Fair. But I was already making stuff for all kinds of other people, and theater companies and dancers.

I made masks for a production of *Galileo* up at Lincoln Center. That was a really great job. I was on my own—nobody told me to do anything, I just did it all myself. That mask over there, that lion mask, was part of a whole set of ball masks that were all elegant, mythological creatures from the Renaissance. Another set of masks were for a parade that is part of the play. These things were on an astrological theme of planets, and suns, etc. There again, they gave me free reign and I just invented all kinds of crazy things that were worn on top of people's heads. Occasionally I'd get jobs like this.

I also worked with Jean Erdman. She was a well-known dancer in those days. She had worked with Graham and then started her own dance company. I made masks for them, and I also started making masks for Erick Hawkins, who I think was the one person that Martha Graham was ever married to. And he went off on his own, had his own aesthetic and his own dance company. He became a really strong influence on my life. He wanted everything to be very simplified, like a work of modern art, like the shapes that Brancusi would make, and everything had to be made out of balsa wood, paper, or horsehair. Maybe there would be a few exceptions, [01:39:58] but he wanted the balsa wood because you could make a headdress for a dancer to wear and it wouldn't be particularly heavy. And also in carving of balsa wood, you could easily make very simplified forms. That bird that's hanging up there—

Dziedzic: Yes.

Lee: —is a reject from one of his dances. Most of the people I've worked for as a mask maker will come and see what I'm working on and they'll say, "Oh, that looks so great. Go ahead." Erick would come and he'd peruse what I was doing and he'd say, "Not good enough. Not good enough." And he'd walk out. And I'd be [laughing] just totally pissed off but at the same time, I'd know he was right. He made me work harder, and push harder. Ultimately, I'd come up with something that he would approve of and I would think to myself, "My god, I never would have made that if it hadn't been for him pushing me that way."

Dziedzic: And in what kind of ways did the masks develop? When you would look at it and say "this was better," what kind of changes had you made?

Lee: Often I would start all over again. Sometimes it would be a matter of simplifying, abstracting further. There was some human masks but most of them were simplified forms of animals. Kind of really like modern art. I mean, there's that one there. I could show you—I could quickly get a book, a magazine.

Dziedzic: Let's wait on getting that, if that's ok with you.

Lee: Yes.

Dziedzic: And you can show me at the end.

Lee: Sure. I can show you later. But he was he was really a major influence on my life.

Dziedzic: It sounds stylistic, like those were the kind of changes that he pushed you to make. Is that right?

Lee: Yes. I was never an apprentice to anybody. [laughing] I just went for it, and he forced me to go further. He'd call me up in the middle of the night and say, "I just had an idea." And I'd go over to his studio at two in the morning. He'd be up looking at something in the mirror with nothing [laughing] but his underwear on. And he'd say, "I want it to be kind of like this." "Ok. Erick. I'll go home and start working." He had a real strong intellect too. And he'd have all kinds of really wonderfully far out ideas. This dance that the bird I made was for was called *Plains Daybreak* and it's all about the First Man and his confrontation with these various animals that he is co-existing with on earth. There was an eagle, snakes, antelope, buffalo, porcupine, fox, a couple others. All these things were icons he had me make out of balsa wood. [01:45:32]

Dziedzic: How do you find your style when you're working on commission, which it sort of sounds like you were straddling both of those in a way. People would come to you because of your style but then you were also being pushed to hone it in one direction or another.

Lee: Yes.

Dziedzic: How did you experience that process?

Lee: Well, with Erick, I learned how to streamline—to simplify or get to the essence of something, if need be, and make it less realistic. Or, in another situation, make something really funky and cartoonish, more exaggerated features in a playful way, if that seemed to be what was required. I think I still do that. And when I'm making masks for my own work, which I've done a lot of in more recent years, I can kind of figure it out by just talking to myself [laughing] a lot. Or maybe talking to somebody else. That sometimes helps more than anything. [laughter]

Dziedzic: You mentioned the that the Open Theater was a way for you to do some of the things that you'd been doing in different jobs in the same place. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Lee: Well, most of the work of the Open Theater was also not realistic acting. You'd find a gesture or a series of gestures that would encapsulate or summarize the thing you were talking about. A lot of the work we did was done through finding those kind of gestures and also finding the sound that would accompany that gesture. You start with something like that and then build off of that. [laughing] Hard to describe but—

Dziedzic: It sounds like it maybe your role there involved more senses than it had in the past.

Lee: That's true. Yes.

Dziedzic: Was that typical for working with more experimental theater, the companies that developed in the late '50s and early '60s? How was the Open Theater unique?

Lee: That was specifically, I would say, with the Open Theater, the premise they worked from. I don't really know how other companies worked very much. [01:50:11]

Dziedzic: Ok. And was the Open Theater political at the time?

Lee: Yes, sometimes more so than other times. But it seemed like there was always some kind of a political message. The first work I did with them was called *The Serpent*, and it starts out with the serpents, and Adam and Eve and those—where it all began. And then there were other scenes in it that were more political. When, in that year, Martin Luther King was killed, we added a scene about that. In the original production, there was also a scene about the assassination of [President John F.] Kennedy. Then we were touring—it was somewhere in Italy. Milan! We were in Milan and Robert Kennedy was killed. And we inserted a scene about that in the show. [Pauses]

Dziedzic: So when did Westbeth come into your life?

Lee: 1970, when it first opened. We heard about it from somebody—maybe it was Joe Chaikin, the director. I don't know why he would have known about it, but anyway, we heard about it. At that time, we had had this fantastic apartment on West End Avenue, but we felt it was time to have a different lifestyle. And so we got on the list for Westbeth, and came down here and looked at this apartment and one other that I can't even remember, and decided we'd take this one. We argued about it for a certain length of time, and we said, "Well, let's keep the apartment

on West End Avenue for just a little while, and meanwhile we'll move down to Westbeth.”

[01:54:54] By the time we got down here, we pretty much had decided to move down here. And we did!

Dziedzic: What was the hesitation?

Lee: Well, the fact that we had this incredible apartment on West End Avenue with all these rooms. And the rent wasn't as reasonable as it had been when it started, but it was just such an incredible reasonable rent. It just seemed, on one hand, kind of crazy to give it up! But on the other hand, just the idea moving along, moving ahead. And we did have [phone rings] several friends who were moving to Westbeth from the Open Theater.

[INTERRUPTION]

Dziedzic: So what was Westbeth like in the early days as people started to move?

Lee: Well, we had three kids. And we pretty much let them have the back room. The ceilings are particularly high back there, so we were able to build a loft and so each kid could pretty much have a space of their own. I worked out in this area here. The bed was right—we walked into the bed, and then there was sort of a living area over there. And it was fine. As I said, a lot of friends from the Open Theater were living here, and so we could all see each other as frequently [laughing] as we wanted to, or maybe a little more often than we might want. And, well, at the beginning, one of the ideas was that there'll be the Westbeth Theater Company, and the Westbeth Dance Company, things like that. But that didn't ever materialize. There were some efforts in that direction but it never materialized because Westbeth wasn't going support us. Everybody really had to go out in order to earn their living. And so it didn't have that sense of community in that respect.

As it's evolved, there's a gallery where, most of the time, it's Westbeth artists. Actually a lot has become more Westbeth-centered in recent years and I think part of it is that a bunch of us are getting older, and we're maybe not as actively employed outside of doing our artwork, or we're bedridden, or one thing or another. I think it's good stuff that has happened. An old friend of mine who lives in Westbeth has started an acting class for elderly Westbeth residents. She's into a lot of improvisation and Open Theater material. Her class has been tremendously successful—even people outside of Westbeth want to come and take this class.

Another wonderful thing that happened in the last two years was somebody got the idea of celebrating the lives of individual artists who've been in Westbeth for a long period of time. [00:04:58] And so whatever person is being focused on will be interviewed, and pictures of their work will be collected, and then there'll be an evening in the community room when that person's life is celebrated. A filmmaker from Westbeth will have taken a video of this person talking about themselves and showing their work. And also they'll be asked questions from people in the audience on that evening, and you really get to know—maybe somebody you've nodded to in the halls for forty years and you're finally getting to, "Oh, whoa!" And I was the subject of one of these evenings last spring and I feel like a lot more people say hello to me on the street now. [laughing] There is a kind of camaraderie amongst people that hadn't existed so much before.

Dziedzic: I know that you started teaching at some point. Can you talk about that?

Lee: Yes. I started teaching one course in mask making at New York University about forty years ago. It's the one course I teach. It meets just for one semester a year, and there are some years it hasn't met because there hasn't been enough enrollment. And I show people how to make masks using papier-mâché, which is, in my opinion, a really good material to work with. I teach within the theater department within the School of Education. And some of these students are going to be teaching, and this is something that they could include. Furthermore, the materials don't cost much of anything. It's a bunch of newspaper, brown paper, and wallpaper paste, and Elmer's glue, and plaster, and that's it.

Sometimes I've really enjoyed this class a lot; a lot of the times there have been some people in the class who are only there because they think it's going to be an easy course. Last year I didn't teach because the enrollment was not high enough, and that's been true a couple of times. However, on this occasion, there were a couple of people who really had wanted to take the course very badly. And what they did was they enlisted people for the course on their own. They got all their friends to sign up for the course. [00:10:05] And I'm sort of in a state of shock because yesterday the class met and everyone had their classwork done [doorbell rings] on time.

Dziedzic: Wow! That's rare.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Lee: We've got to talk about these two things.

Dziedzic: Let's start with the Halloween parade.

Lee: Ok. One year, I was teaching up at Bennington College. I was on leave from the Open Theater for a while. But anyway, I got this job teaching up at Bennington College. And I was going to teach Open Theater acting techniques, and also a course in mask making. They also wanted me to do some kind of a production that spring, and I sort of said, "Well, what kind of a production should I do?"

I had taught at Smith College for a year and I had done a production of *School For Scandal*, and it hadn't been my choice, but at the time they hired me, it was already on the schedule, and I said, "*School For Scandal*? Aye yi yi, what can I do with that?" So I had all these crazy ideas of having all the performers on little moving pedestals or something. But the more I read the play, I said, "No, just do the play! It's such a great play! Just do it!" And it happened that I did have a really good cast. At that point, Smith College hired male students to be in the theater department. They would take courses and all that. But just to so that the college didn't have to beg other colleges in the neighborhood for men, they decided they'd have men in the theater department. So I had a pretty good company to work with. And I had been doing Open Theater exercises with most of these people, so they had been kind of liberated a bit, and we could incorporate some of that in the production. It really helped energize the production. They were a really good company. The play was just a wonderful success [laughs] and it really threw me for a loop! [01:14:54]

I was thinking, well, I'll do some more directing. Some of my friends were teaching at Bennington and they got me a job there. So I went to Bennington the following year. And I decided, "Ok. What am I gonna do? I've got to do a production." And I said, "Well, maybe I should do a Brecht play." And I said, "Or maybe I should do something that incorporates a lot of the masks and giant puppets I've made over the years. And I'm going to be teaching a course in mask making and I can incorporate some of that in the show." So that's what I decided to do.

I had a playwright friend of mine sketch out a theme for this event, that it would be a voyage of discovery for a young woman. I found all these locations on the Bennington campus that could be fun for a scene, and that it would be a traveling event that went from one place to another around the Bennington College campus. And so that's what we did. I brought up—well,

the Pig Beast and the Lobster, they already existed, and I think the Rooster already existed as well. These figures are very old. [Dziedzic laughs] Oh, and this fat guy up there, the emperor Hadrian. They were they were all part of the production. They all appeared in one scene or another.

The first scene was on the balcony of a building at one part of the campus, and then there was a procession that went to this walled garden, and this lizard was along the wall of the garden. I made that lizard with the students. Then they came to a pond and the Pig Beast—this guy over here—was on the pond and he got paddled across this pond. Then we went down to the main campus and some other figures of mine, the Floozy and the Dandy, were dancing like crazy, and then they ended up going out on a field. There were a lot of people in the cast who had been pulling these things. Most of them had painted their bodies different colors and were all naked—the ‘60s! [laughter]

We did this event and it had been a kind of a depressing spring at Bennington. The weather had been just awful. I think it was the first of May, and the day was just radiant. And this event went off. I had gotten to the point where I felt like I was some general in the army [laughing] having to get these maneuvers together. [00:20:04] Whether everything would be complete or not I said, “Well, it’s gonna be what it’s gonna be and that’s it.” But it turned out to create so much excitement on the campus because, well, the weather had just conspired with us to make it so ideal, and everybody was ready to have some zany event take place. And so this thing happened that was just this amazingly successful event. [laughing] I mean, I look back at it I say, “You did that?” [Dziedzic laughs] But it just was what the campus needed at that moment.

Dziedzic: And the people who were attending this event, they moved along with it?

Lee: Oh yes. Absolutely they moved. Sometimes they’d get so excited, they’d think they knew where the next scene was going be, and they’d rush ahead and it turned out they went to the wrong place, and they’d have to rush back. There was all this pell-mell stuff going on. But it turned out to be an incredible event. And I thought, “Whoa! Wow. [laughing] You did something that you had never imagined yourself able to do.” The kids had been really great, and really with it the whole time. And some faculty people as well. ³

³ And this was when I first got acquainted with Casey Compton. She was a Bennington student and very helpful in getting the event together.

The Theater for the New City had been bugging me for a couple of years to do some kind of a Halloween event. I had been either busy with the Open Theater or some other projects, and just hadn't thought twice about it. But after doing this thing at Bennington I thought, "Hmm. Well..." [laughs] They asked me again I said, "Oh, yeah, let's do some kind of a parade." And so we did. In some respects, it was designed the way I had done the thing at Bennington. There were scenes that took place on balconies of buildings, or on the doorstep of a church, or near a flagpole, or various kinds of locations—or a playground. We'd stop the parade at various places and an event would happen, and then the parade would move on. That's what the first parade was about. I had dug up all the masks that I possessed, that I'd made for one thing or another, and put them on people for this event.

Dziedzic: What kind of level of coordination was required from you compared to the Bennington event? Were you coordinating all of the different scenes that would happen and all those performances and—

Lee: Pretty much. I had some help from the Theater of the New City but did a lot of the structuring—most of the structure by myself. [00:24:55] They had gotten together a bunch of singers, who had learned some songs that been written for the occasion. They helped coordinate things and get permits to use certain places and stuff like that. They were definitely involved. Their theater was a block north of Westbeth on Jane Street, and that's where the parade started. It came through the courtyard of Westbeth and over to Bleecker Street, and then down Bleecker Street for a while, and then kind of zigzag around and ended up in Washington Square.

And, well, we managed to pull it off. We were kind of amazed. People whose windows faced the parade—"What in the hell is going on?" [laughs] Because there had been some publicity in advance but nobody really knew that this thing was going to be happening. But it really worked out very successfully. Somebody had decided we had to have sparklers at the end of the thing when we got to Washington Square, but the police, once they saw them, they said "No! Danger!" [laughter]

After that we decided, ok, we'll do it again the next year. We hadn't really thought in those terms up until then. But so we did it again the next year. The shape of it was more formed than it had been before. We realized that we couldn't stop the parade because there were too

many people marching. We would still do events along the parade route but they'd have to be things that could be repeated, and done sort of as a loop, rather than an individual performance.

And after that year, which was more successful than the first year, and some more people were aware of it, I realized that this thing wanted to grow. And the Theater for the New City had a pretty busy schedule and it just didn't seem like it was going to work if we continued to be one event on their big annual schedule. So I broke off from them and formed my own not-for-profit organization with the help of a lawyer who was a friend of a fan of the parade, [laughs] and started to get more structured and more organized. Still, for the next couple of years, we continued to have events along the parade route. [00:29:58]

It just grew in leaps and bounds. Every year, I met with the police and they said, at some point, we had to start putting up police barricades along the route of the parade. I think it was maybe after the third year. That was kind of disappointing because it was nice to have people be able to join the parade and leave the parade whenever they felt like it. But the crowds were getting so big that they would press in on the people marching so much that they could hardly move. That became a kind of a battle in itself. So after the fifth parade, we started having barricades along the route of the parade.

We changed the route, also. We changed the route so that we went over to Fifth Avenue, and down Fifth Avenue and through the arch and to Washington Square. It just had to be. I wasn't particularly happy about having to make this change but there was no choice. In subsequent years, it just continued to grow and grow and grow, and we would get all this publicity and foreign newspapers, all over the place. I think the final year I did it, there was some TV coverage—I didn't really particularly want TV coverage. What I really had wished all along was that people would come to this parade, but then they'd say, "Ok, let's start a parade in our own community." That's what I really wished would happen. [laughing]

Dziedzic: What sort of oversight did you have over the events that happened, or the costumes, or the masks and puppets as the parade got bigger and bigger?

Lee: Well, what I tried to do was—I continued to make some stuff for the parade but as time went on, I was so busy just getting it organized that I didn't have time to really do that so much. But I would try to make something for the parade specifically, something on a pretty large scale. One thing I did was I made this giant skeleton. It was like forty feet long, and it was carried in

the parade on poles, at an angle, by a dozen people. And then when it got to Washington Square—and we had access to Washington Square arch by then—it could get hoisted up into the arch, and dance around in the arch once it was there. There were a few big things that we could do like that that were on the right [laughing] scale with what was going on.

Dziedzic: And was that and the other elements of the parade constructed here in this apartment?

Lee: Yes. It was constructed here. It's forty feet long. [laughter]

Dziedzic: I'm just imagining the apartment being a full—the full apartment being a production studio for—

Lee: Absolutely, yes. I would try to plan things that so I could use some help on certain things, and I definitely had help making this skeleton. [00:35:01] A friend of ours would come by and make this enormous pot of borscht to feed the groups that were working [laughter] and putting stuff together.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Lee: And so I continued to do it. Then my wife and I had a kid. This apartment was always operation central for the parade. And somehow I just didn't feel like I wanted people—and people I didn't even know—in this apartment anymore. I began to have second thoughts about doing it.

You know, I had a wonderful crew. There was a person in charge of putting up theatrical lights in various locations all along the route of the parade. She'd have to talk her way into people's apartments. There's a wonderful set of balconies along 12th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenue called Renwick Row, and we got permission from people in all those apartments to have some of our figures out on their balconies. Things like that would happen. I had staff, and the staff increased in size a little each year. I'd say, "Well, maybe I need somebody who is just doing lights on the Jefferson Market Library." I'd made this spider that went up and down the tower of the library. And kids would make silhouettes that they could put in the windows of the library. We'd have projects like that. Some years we had other schools that would build something specifically for the parade—they built a giant cat one time—or it would be something

that obviously parents would come together with the kids and put together at their school. There was a lot of community involvement going on.

But it was getting to be that all of the details of the parade were inside my head [laughter] and I had to remember all of this stuff. Even though there were other people working on aspects of it, it was like the parade was going through my head. And after the twelfth year, I just felt, “Oof, enough already. [laughs] It’s time for me to step down.” And so I did. There was a woman who had worked on the parade for a good number of years who took it over, and she’s been doing it ever since. Her name is Jeanne Fleming. And so it continues to evolve. I think I’ve been once since I stopped doing it.

I have a grandchild who lives out near Ditmas Park in Brooklyn now, and the last two years, we’ve gone—they have a parade out there and we’ve gone to this parade, and it’s a community-based parade. I love the scale of it. [00:40:22] A real neighborhood event.

Dziedzic: Yes, it sounds like with the Halloween parade here, like it got to be too much of a community event in a sense, but also too much spectators or something like that—

Lee: Yes

Dziedzic: You’re carrying it in your head, as you say, and then also hosting it in your home. It seems to close out some of the things about this neighborhood that allow you to have a quiet stroll on the street, or not bump into anybody, or just take in—

Lee: Exactly. I had always hoped that people would just go home and make [laughing]parades in their own communities but the crowds have just continued to grow over time. And of course having TV coverage, which they do now, it doesn’t help cut down on the number of people.

I always used to just walk in the parade kind of incognito, and if something was falling apart, I’d be there to fix it.

Dziedzic: How many months of the year would it take to plan?

Lee: Well, it took most of the fall. Pretty soon after I started the Halloween parade, my wife and I started the theater company. I’d be busy pretty much, at least in the early years, through the summer, Upstate, working with this theater company. So we didn’t even have the opportunity to function on Halloween, which was [laughter]—

Dziedzic: Yes. Well, let's talk about the theater company.

Lee: Well, I think it was the year that we did the event at Bennington, six Bennington students, including Casey, decided they were going to start a theater company. One of them, their family had a house in Upstate New York near the town of Whitehall, and that became the home base for the theater company that summer. There was not room in that house for all of them to live and some of them lived, I think, in an apartment in the town. They put together a program of one-act plays. The idea was that they were going to take it around and perform it in different towns and communities. And that's what they did!

I think there was some success in it. I think they had some difficulty getting an audience but they did this theater thing, and afterwards they talked with me about working with the with the company as a director. [00:44:56] I thought great. I'd always had this idea of having a traveling theater company and going from town to town. Of course, in my imagination, I was doing this in Europe. [laughs] But Upstate New York did just as well.

So the next summer, we put together a play that was designed to be performed outdoors rather than inside. That's what we did the first summer. It was a little rough but it worked. It worked. It happened that it was the year of the bicentennial, and so there were people who were looking for entertainment to take place in their towns. It was an ideal way to get an inroad into various communities. That's we did that that summer, and it was successful, and so we just carried on from there. Most of the people who had been a part of the original group sort of fell by the wayside gradually, and then we would bring in new people, and we'd make a summer of it.

The first three years, I think it was, we rented houses in Upstate New York for the summer months, which was not easy. [laughter] Who would want to rent their house to a bunch of young actors? [laughter] But somehow we managed to do that for a couple of years. But then it happened—my parents, well, they had given my brother a bunch of money. He was living in London and they gave him money to help him get a house in London. So they gave me some money, and I had some savings that I'd collected over the years, and so we were able to buy this old farmhouse outside a little town called Salem, New York, not to be confused with North Salem, which is considerably south of us. [laughs] We're up near Bennington, Vermont, actually, on the New York side. Soon Casey and I had a beautiful wedding in the hills around our house.

Dziedzic: Ok.

Lee: That's become the home for the theater company ever since. Each year, we do a new show—we've done a few repeats—but most of the time, it's a new show. They're based on folklore for the most part, from one kind of culture or another. We've done some things from various Native American Indian tribes, and a couple from Eskimo tribes. We worked with a writer, Howard Norman, who's done a lot of work in Eskimo communities, and he provided us with two scripts. Another script was by a guy, Dave Hunsaker. [00:50:09] He had spent a lot of time working with Eskimo communities, and so he put together a script for us. And he wrote another script for us as well. And we've worked with various writers. I've done some of the adaptations myself.

We did a play based on material, all of which involve the story of Cupid and Psyche. My wife had found this material and we had decided to work on that. It had been written by both Moliere and Corneille. I think Moliere didn't have [laughing] time to finish it, and Corneille did the rest or something like that. She'd found this book with this material in it, and I thought, "Hmm, what great material." Then we found some other versions of it that had been written down around the same time as Moliere, in English, and we incorporated scenes from that as well, so that we could choose material from whichever one of these variations that seemed most appropriate. So we've done all kinds of different shows.

Another one that I'm particularly fond of was based on the Archy and Mehitabel stories. I don't know if you're familiar with them, but there was this incredible writer, Don Marquis. He was a writer for New York newspapers and he had a column, and every week he had to come up with a new column, and the columns were primarily of a comical nature. Somewhere along the line, he came up with this character of Archy, and Archy was a cockroach, and had all kinds of adventures. He had learned how to use the typewriter by jumping on the typewriter, and moving from key to key during the night on the typewriter of Marquis. And so Marquis would come in in the morning and see this material on the typewriter, and he found it worthy to be printed. Archy had this intense love affair with this alley cat, and had fights with other kinds of animals or another, and all these city adventures that would take place. Sometimes he'd accidentally fall in a bowl of soup and nearly drown, [laughter] but we'd work with these particular things and put them into a show.

Dziedzic: What sort of elements went into deciding what you were going to put on? Was it what you thought the audiences might be into or what you were most interested as artists in working with?

Lee: It would be a combination of things. We'd obviously have to think of our audience. Our audience was people of all kinds. For a lot of people, it was the only theater show they'd see in a given year. [00:55:13] Other times, they were more sophisticated. But they all seemed to gravitate to what we were up to, and I didn't ever feel like we were having to talk down to anybody. They were just really with us. Maybe we were being kind of naïve ourselves. [laughter] We would pick things that people could grasp at, rather than something very serious and pompous or intellectual—

Dziedzic: Stuffy.

Lee: Stuffy. One other show that we did that I really liked was a show based on Brecht's *Caucasian Circle*, which is a wonderful play. Actually, I think we were maybe the only people who ever got permission to trim a script down of his. He usually demands that everybody do the entire script, and that would have made a much too long play for us, and added a lot of material that, eh, it's ok in the long run—it's relevant—but for our purposes, it was not so relevant. And it made a wonderful play.

Dziedzic: Did you have any intersections with Bread & Puppet?

Lee: No. Not direct ones. Peter and I had been friends since they were in New York, before they moved up to Vermont, but we never had really worked together. One time, I had come back from a tour or something, and I had some free time, and I worked with him helping build a show. I appreciate what he's done very much, and it's in a different vein than what I do, but it's just wonderful work. You know, getting people to have a conscience about war and an immediate connection with the things happening in the world around us.

Dziedzic: Over the years, you've had a lot of recognition for the work that you've done—various awards, a Guggenheim fellowship, and all sorts of recognition of the uniqueness and success of your work. I'm wondering how that affected your work and what you've been able to do.

Lee: Well, occasionally, it's given us some additional funding, [laughs] which has been very essential. And it's been great to have it happen. Just on a purely personal level, I feel like it's nice to know that it's not only communities in Vermont and New York state that like what we do, but people with a wider focus have been able to acknowledge it as well. We've done a certain

amount of performances in the city. For most of the time we've performed in the garden of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. [01:00:08] That's never been more than a couple of weekends of performances in a given year. But we've gotten an occasional good review [laughing] as a result of that. Most of the time, no review. [laughter] But that hasn't hurt because we've developed an audience here in the city, and so we usually get wonderful audiences for those shows. I think a lot of it comes from people who may have seen us in the country and tell their friends to come and see it in the city. But it's been good. It's been good.

I do a lot of other work up at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. Not so much these days, but in the past, we've done a lot of work on celebratory events there. One of the plays we did was based on this medieval figure called the Wild Man, a mythological figure, who took a lot of different forms during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. He's shaped like a human being, but his body is covered either with hair or leaves, as the case may be. He was not capable of speech. He lived in the forest. He sometimes was a benign creature. Other times, he was not so benign; he would clobber pilgrims to death in the forest and probably eat them. Or, in the female form, he'd steal an infant out of a cradle and take it away, and do god knows what with it. There was this thing really interesting exhibit about this imaginary figure up at the Cloisters one year, and we saw this exhibit and thought, "Whoa! There's a play here."

So we put together a play. It was a series of scenes presenting various aspects of this character, some more frightening than others. During the Renaissance people tended to romanticize him. Here was this being living in perfect harmony with nature, and so they would make him elegant and strong, and heroic almost. But still he couldn't speak, and still his body was covered with hair. We presented the piece up at the cathedral, as well as Upstate during the summertime. At the cathedral, we had the audience sit at the base of the steps going up to the high altar, and looking down the entire nave. [01:05:00] We had a good lighting designer who was able to suggest that the nave was all trees, and so we could have Wild Man making an entrance down the whole nave, and disappearing the distance of the nave. We presented the show without a nave during the summer but were surrounded by nature. We had a really great response to this piece.

Dziedzic: Sounds really beautiful.

Lee: Yes. We had music specially written for it, and a nice band of musicians.

Dziedzic: Do you feel like there are—you mentioned that you didn't apprentice with anybody, and I'm wondering if there's been anybody that has worked with you, someone who you've mentored, that you're watching out in the world developing their own style as you once did.

Lee: There are a few people that I think of in this regard. Not so many. I've been so busy with my own stuff, and so much of the time we're not in the city. The person who has been obviously my collaborator all these years has been my wife, who never gets enough credit. But she helps me figure out what the show is going to be. I can't do anything without her approval. She is responsible for making the costumes for all the shows we've done, and sometimes that means a hell of a lot of work, and a lot of research, and the stuff that she'll come up with has always been really appropriate. I take it for granted but these shows would never have been looking the way they do, and be as informative as they are, if it hadn't been for her working with me on them all these years. She's been just great.

Dziedzic: Well, I believe that's the end of the questions that I have. Finally made it! [laughter] But I want to ask if maybe there's anything that we skipped in the course of the interview, or anything that's still in your mind that you'd like to add.

Lee: Well, I'm eighty-four years old. My faculties are not as good as they used to be. And Casey and I decided that this last summer was going to be our last tour just because remembering stuff and keeping myself together is not so easy as it has been up until now. What we're going to do, we're not sure. We want to continue doing something. What it's going to be, we don't know at this point. [01:09:51]

I don't want to abandon my audience—especially my Upstate audience. One thing that has encouraged us so much over the years has been how faithful they are, and how, in so many different communities, they've grown larger over the years. There are certain communities where a lot of the people may have a certain degree of sophistication, and we can take those audiences for granted in a way. But even in those cases, like the last year, that audience was bigger than ever. But in these other communities, where we may be the only theater event they have, it's really hard to say goodbye. We travel a lot to all these places we go, and that's one of the things that I find hard to do now.

We've had great companies. The last company, we had what could have been a catastrophe: a week before we were going to start rehearsals, we lost two company members.

They had commitments that came up that suddenly overpowered them, so they weren't able to come with us. But through the writer of the piece, and I think one of the other actors in the piece, we found two great people. It was like a miracle. [laughter] And we were just fine in the work they were doing, and really joined us in a great way.

I started out talking about myself, and I owe so much to the people I've worked with. [01:14:50] We've had a lot of good people—most companies we've had good people. And a lot of them have been recommended to us by good people. In both cases, they've been invaluable. And our audience—really good people!

Dziedzic: I'm thinking about how you started out talking about yearning for farm work or something like that, and it seems that you've really successfully grown so much; it's not fruits and vegetables. [laughter] It's audiences—

Lee: Yes.

Dziedzic: —and people who come up who are good to work with, and performers and people who get what it is that you're doing, and that there's an interchange there. But from what you've described it sounds like this is what you've really grown. The activity [laughing] looked different and the product is different but there's a lot to show for what you've done.

Lee: Yes, and most of all, I owe it to my wife, who has stuck with it through thick or thin—one doubt or another, one crazy idea or another. It wouldn't have happened without her.

Dziedzic: Well, that might be the end of our interview if that's all right with you. Ok. Thank you.

Lee: You're very welcome.

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