GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
LORCAN OTWAY

By Liza Zapol
New York, NY
April 15, 2015
### Oral History Interview with Lorcan Otway, April 15, 2015

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<th><strong>Narrator(s)</strong></th>
<th>Lorcan Otway</th>
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<td><strong>Birthdate</strong></td>
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Lorcan Otway outside of Theatre 80, 80 Saint Marks Place, New York, NY. Photograph by Liza Zapol.
Quotes from Oral History Interview with Lorcan Otway

“Scheib believed there to be $12 million dollars in two safes in the basement that were the property of his boss, who was the real owner of the speakeasy back during Prohibition. Scheib was the front man for a Bavarian gangster by the name of Frank Hoffman. Sometime after Prohibition and before 1945—probably right when Roosevelt passed an executive order not allowing for the stockpiling of gold certificates—Hoffman left, probably back to Bavaria, with the bulk of his money. Being a friend of Al Capone’s, he left the tax money here, so that if he was ever caught Hoffman could pay the taxes on the tens of millions that he made in this place during Prohibition….

My father and I began to build Theatre 80…Dad comes across the two safes, and he calls up Walter Scheib and says, “I’m too curious to leave these safes closed, but I’m too cautious to open them without you,” which probably saved all of our lives.

Scheib showed up with a safecracker and, in the middle of the night, we spent hours opening the first safe. It was, as I say in the book I’m writing, a complete Geraldo Rivera moment—it was absolutely empty. Scheib presumed that Hoffman had been back and emptied the safes, and he was half right.

Just to make sure, he told us to turn the other safe over on its side, and he had the safecracker peel the bottom, where you cold chisel the thin underside of the safe, peel it back, and you chop through the concrete inner lining. As soon as we got into the inner safe, the smell knocked us all back. It was this horrific smell. Scheib reaches in, and he pulls out a blackened mildewed packet of newspaper, rips it open. It’s hundred dollar gold certificates. He finds $2 million. Didn’t give us a dime of it; used it to build the Promenade Hotel in Miami Beach.”

(Otway p. 1-3)

“…there was a diner on Saint Mark’s and Third Avenue called the Village East, which you might have heard about, run by a fellow named Tony. He thought that by using the term ‘Village East’ he could bring people into what was in many ways an extension of the Bowery…As the jazz clubs started to die, and the neighborhood became more seedy, Tony was kind of a progressive thinker in realizing that by changing the name of the community, you’d be able to change the impression and very soon the East Village began to kind of emerge as a term for the place as the art revolution happened here.”

(Otway p. 6-7)

“The other interesting thing about Angelica’s -slash-Greenberg’s [health food store] is one of the things that always stands out in my mind about going there was the uneven floors. The reason for that is our smuggling tunnels run out under the buildings there, and Hoffman, when he built the tunnels, didn’t put lintels in, so the buildings are sagging into the tunnels. In fact, if you stand in the middle of the block on First Avenue and you look east, all the buildings are completely plumb and unsupported. Then if you look at our side of the street, it’s like a rolling beach, because they’re all sagging into the tunnels. Where the shoe store is on the corner, that building fell down in the mid-[19]30s, early [19]40s, because it was so undermined by the tunnels there. We have a photograph of it from 1939, and it’s held up by massive wooden posts because of the undermining from Hoffman’s tunnels.”

(Otway p. 8)
“…In many, many ways, New York worked when organized crime filled the power vacuum. One of the things we promote in the museum upstairs [is] an understanding that we live in America, which is divided between two concepts that define us: moral certainty and liberty. Whoever comes to power, they outlaw what the other half does instead of having pluralism as the modality that hold a diverse community together. In many ways organized crime has always held the diverse communities together, because it’s facilitated everything from smoking marijuana to alcohol to prostitution to all those things which we, acting on our moral certainty, outlaw; wherein kinder, gentler cultures, you have pluralism that makes people, helps people live next to people with different moral codes.

What we’re now seeing is a total breakdown of the way New York does business. because the bottom line is neither pluralism or organized crime. It’s mass-market. We’re actually seeing that a political community that is this out of balance can’t exist. All the nationwide chains that Giuliani opened the doors for, we’re beginning to see nationwide chains pull out of the neighborhood, because of the fact that you cannot have a single-concept society.”

(Otway p. 16-17)

“I saw more violent crime here than I did in Belfast day-to-day. My dad was stabbed eleven times in the back and neck. I had bottles broken over my head on the street in front of the place. I was robbed at knife point.

It bred a certain fatalism. There was a young woman next door being robbed, and she came out onto the stoop screaming at a fellow with a large butcher knife, and I chased him for several blocks. You did things like that. It wasn’t that you were brave or foolhardy; it’s just that there’s a fatalistic attitude towards violence in the community, if you grew up with it. People just become used to that kind of life.”

(Otway p. 20-21)
Summary of Oral History Interview with Lorcan Otway

Lorcan Otway (1955-) is the second-generation owner of Theater 80, home to the Museum of the American Gangster. Otway also had careers in photography and law.

The son of a novelist, playwright, producer, and theater owner, Howard Otway, Otway speaks about Theater 80’s history as a speakeasy during Prohibition, at which time it was owned by Bavarian gangster and friend to Al Capone, Frank Hoffman. Otway’s father, Howard, purchased the building from Hoffman’s front man, Walter Scheib, around 1964 and began converting it into a theater. He recalls, during renovations, that his father and Walter Scheib opened two locked safes in the basement of the building, discovering some gold notes and Frank Hoffman and Ghia Ortega.

Otway describes the off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theater scene in Village during the 1960s, as well as ethnic communities, jazz clubs, social unrest, and the “health food craze.” Otway offers a legal context to the censorship of nudity and cabaret performance in New York theater production during that time, as well as political context, including the Actor’s Equity Association Showcase Code and the strike in 1969, that impacted theater facilities and management. Otway mentions theaters including the Negro Ensemble Company, the Anderson Theatre, the Jefferson Theatre, the Edison Theatre, the Orpheum Theatre, Public Theater, and the Renata Theatre; he mentions productions of You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown, The Life and Times of Tom Paine, and The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald. Friends and colleagues of Howard Otway are mentioned: Joan Mitchell, Nyla Lyons, Shelley Winters, Arthur Whitelaw, Eileen Heckart, Margaret Craske, Billy Crystal, and Godfrey Cambridge, Brian Murray, Arthur Marx, Gary Burghoff, Bob Balaban, Skip Hinnant, and Griff Evans, among others.

Otway offers his views on the role of organized crime in New York and the Village, including its role in connecting ethnic and business communities. He observes his father’s efforts to maintain distant, but neutral affiliations and goes on to describe the crime landscape of the Village during the ’70s and ‘80s, including robberies at Theater 80 and the presence of drugs in the neighborhood. Otway intervened in a number of incidents, including one which resulted in his wife being hit by a car.

Otway discusses his education and careers. In his twenties, Otway studied at the Pratt Institute before discontinuing his coursework to work as a photo assistant. Working as a freelance photojournalist, Otway spent time in Belfast covering conflict in Northern Ireland. After returning to the U.S. and getting married, Otway enrolled in law school at New York University. He began his legal career at Somerstein & Pike and worked closely with radical attorney, Bill Kunstler. He provided legal services in marginalized communities until he returned to Theater 80 to manage the building, which was being rented to the Pearl Theatre Company until 2008. He speaks to the importance of connecting Theater 80 to the community by training and employing neighbors, some of whom are homeless.

Today, Theater 80 houses several businesses that pull together different parts of its history. Otway has licensed the taproom and opened a ‘30s-style bar in the basement. He operates and plans to expand the Museum of the American Gangster, and he is continuing to
develop a not-for-profit in honor of his parents (the Howard Otway and Florence Otway Opportunity Project), which will subsidize theater productions for small and emerging companies.
General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. GVSHP began the East Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP East Village 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 East 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.
Zapol: OK, so this is Liza Zapol. It’s the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It’s April 15, 2015, and if I can ask you to introduce yourself and tell me where we are today, that would be great.

Otway: Sure, I’m Lorcan Otway, L-O-R-C-A-N O-T-W-A-Y, and we’re sitting in the auditorium at Theatre 80, which used to be the speakeasy Scheib’s Place back during Prohibition. Here we are.

Zapol: Thank you. So, if I can ask you to tell me where and when you were born, and where you think this story begins—your intersection with Greenwich Village society and your own history.

Otway: I was born in New Rochelle in 1955, and we had one of the last sandlot farms in the woods between Pelham and New Rochelle. Dad would say we were somewhere between light farming and heavy gardening. [Zapol laughs] Dad was a playwright and a novelist, and so by necessity, we grew most of the food that we used. At the time, Dad was writing a play called *This Here Nice Place* and looking for a place to buy to build a theater to stage it. He was looking for something unique, which was an off-Broadway theater with a huge stage, and back in the [19]60s, you could actually support what my dad used to refer to as ‘gloriously wasted space,’ a large lobby where you could have your entire audience inside before the show if it was raining or cold.

So he came down to Saint Mark’s Place in 1964 and walked into the Jazz Gallery, and Walter Scheib, the owner, met him. It had been up for sale, as I now know, since 1958. My father said the words that Scheib had been waiting to hear from 1968—1958—which is, “I would love to build a theater here, but I don’t have enough financing to even borrow the $65,000 it will take to buy the building.” Scheib immediately said, “Oh, no problem at all. Give me a small down payment, and I’ll hold the mortgage.”

We now know that the reason he did that was Scheib believed there to be $12 million dollars in two safes in the basement that were the property of his boss, who was the real owner of the speakeasy back during Prohibition. Scheib was the front man for a Bavarian gangster by the name of Frank Hoffman. Sometime after Prohibition and before 1945—probably right when Roosevelt passed an executive order not allowing for the stockpiling of gold certificates—
Hoffman left, probably back to Bavaria, with the bulk of his money. Being a friend of Al Capone’s, he left the tax money here, so that if he was ever caught Hoffman could pay the taxes on the tens of millions that he made in this place during Prohibition.

My father and I began to build Theatre 80. This auditorium was the dance floor. We tore up the floor, and back then, we didn’t have any apartments in the building that were vacant, so we were literally living in the dirt in tents. I thought I was the luckiest kid in New York because I got to camp out every night, rain or snow, and we would cook in the restaurant kitchen of the nightclub and wash up in the men’s room and go off to school. Joan Mitchell, the painter, had her studio upstairs and offered that she wanted to move to another place and allowed us to move into her studio, which became the basis for what later became our townhouses. We developed the building here. She left us a lovely painting in fact, that we had until 1994 when my mother sold it. After my dad died she sold a number of the important things that we had in the family: a painting that was given to dad by Joan Crawford—

We began to shift tons and tons of dirt in creating the auditorium here, and not having any money at all, Dad bought a very old truck. We began to truck the dirt out to the farm, which we had not yet sold. At first, Dad was thinking that he’d just spread the dirt over the fields, and then he got the idea that in the basement there was a bunker at what we now know to be the head of the smuggling tunnels that Scheib had filled with large-scale garbage—cook stoves, restaurant refrigerators. Anything heavy he could find, he crammed in there to hide the two safes that Hoffman had told him not to touch. [00:05:45]

Dad gets the idea, well, we might as well start the project by cleaning out the basement. What we’ll do is we’ll dig a big trench on the farm, throw all the large garbage in there, cover it over, and if anybody ever comes across it, it’ll be their problem. So we dug a huge, deep trench and began throwing all these things in there, the idea eventually to cover over with tons and tons of dirt. In the process, Dad comes across the two safes, and he calls up Walter Scheib and says, “I’m too curious to leave these safes closed, but I’m too cautious to open them without you,” which probably saved all of our lives.

Scheib showed up with a safecracker and, in the middle of the night, we spent hours opening the first safe. It was, as I say in the book I’m writing, a complete Geraldo Rivera moment—it was absolutely empty. Scheib presumed that Hoffman had been back and emptied the safes, and he was half right.
Just to make sure, he told us to turn the other safe over on its side, and he had the safecracker peel the bottom, where you cold chisel the thin underside of the safe, peel it back, and you chop through the concrete inner lining. As soon as we got into the inner safe, the smell knocked us all back. It was this horrific smell. Scheib reaches in, and he pulls out a blackened mildewed packet of newspaper, rips it open. It’s hundred dollar gold certificates. He finds $2 million. Didn’t give us a dime of it; used it to build the Promenade Hotel in Miami Beach.

That would have ended the story until 2008, when I discovered that the newspaper wrappings were still in that ruined safe with the contents of three people’s pockets. That’s when I discovered both Frank Hoffman and Ghia Ortega. Ghia was a young Brazilian nightclub singer, and she disappeared the night of November 7, 1945 with Frank Hoffman. Being that they never came back for the other $2 million, I’m positive that their bodyguard—There were three people there, because there were three six-packs of beer left in the safe, one of which was Trommer’s, which is an alcohol-free beer, lite beer, so Ghia’s drinking Trommer’s, one of the two men is drinking Anheuser Busch, the other is drinking Carling’s. The other evidence we find in the safe, we find two boutonnieres, so the men took off any kind of outward item that might draw attention to them, filled their pockets with these packets of newspapers, packet of newspaper-wrapped money, and left the place November 7th. If the bodyguard killed Ghia and Frank, the money was his, and he wouldn’t have come back for the other $2 million because he would have had to break into the safe. Hoffman obviously intended to come back, because he had hidden his garbage, the last meal they all had together, and the contents of their pockets, because they needed every inch of pocket space to hide the money to walk through a crowded nightclub without being spotted. In fact Ghia takes her audition photograph—there’s a photograph in the safe of Ghia. On the back it says, “Ghia Ortega, Brazilian singer, Brazilian Bombshell, Tropical Heat Wave.” She’s singing “Tropical Heat Wave” from the Carmen Miranda story, which had just opened on Broadway that year. We didn’t find the envelope, so presumably it was one more place to hide money, as they walked through the nightclub. Nobody would have noticed a woman with her pocketbook full of newspaper-wrapped money and a manila envelope, also with most likely the first bills¹. During Prohibition, the bootleggers kept their money in thousand and

¹ Lorcan Otway added, on 11/19/15 “The first bills which they removed from the safe.”
five hundred dollar bills, and so the hundreds we found were basically the small change that made up the difference\(^2\). [00:10:11]

We now know that my dad was sold the building with Scheib absolutely sure that he was going to get the building back. That way, if he opened the safe after my dad had not found it, and found the money and then Hoffman had shown up, he would have been able to say, “Ask the kid I sold the building to.” Interestingly enough, Scheib had pegged my dad perfectly. Dad had put so much into building the theater that by 1966, he was bankrupt. [He] went into hiding for six months, because he was sure that Scheib was going to come and break his legs for not making payments on the building after he found him $2 million.

He had always said that he had expected that Scheib always thought that he was selling the building to Dad for a few years and that he expected to get it back. He didn’t realize the second half of the story. We didn’t make the finds until twenty years after Dad died. I think Dad would have been really tough [phonetic] [00:11:21] to have gotten the entire story, as for now, I’m unraveling it.

I’m writing a book now, *The Girl in the Safe*, which is about all of this and also the deeper history of the building from 1922 until the present. It’s kind of a growing up in the Lower East Side as the Lower East Side became the East Village.

When we first moved here, there wasn’t a tree on Saint Mark’s Place. There might have been one in the middle of the block, but my memories [are] of the summers, playing in these stark, bright, shadowless streets, covered in ground glass, and that. After the Jazz Age, the neighborhood was left really impoverished. On the other hand, it was a neighborhood that was really a neighborhood. It was a multiethnic neighborhood. There was a large Jewish, Italian, Ukrainian, and Polish community. The kids kind of got along, although the Ukrainians and Poles, there was always a kind of ‘in-fun’ tension between the two kids, still arguing the politics of the early days of World War II. Actually, a lot of the Ukrainians had come here after World War II, because they had been in support of the Nazi government in the Ukraine during that period. They came not necessarily because they were anti-Communist as much as they were fleeing the fact they were pro-Nazi in their communities.

It was an interesting place to grow up, but Dad went door to door when John Lindsay came up with his tree-planting program and began to speak to the other landlords about how to

\(^2\) Lorcan Otway added, on 11/19/15 “the hundreds were what was left behind, in other words.”
improve the neighborhood first by improving the look—that when the place would look safe, that we could open businesses that would bring people from Midtown. That’s exactly what happened. We opened Theatre 80, and by 1967 You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown opened here. Dad was able to pay off the mortgage and get out of hiding. Shortly thereafter, the Orpheum [Theater] had been kind of on-and-off closed, but it began the off-off-Broadway theater, and off-Broadway theater revival in the neighborhood. The Negro Ensemble Company soon opened; the Anderson [Theatre], the [RKO] Jefferson [Theatre], the Edison [Theatre]. In the immediate neighborhood, there are about fourteen, sixteen theaters, that are gone now that had been part of the revival, but it was an extraordinary time. [00:14:33]

On 3rd Street and Second Avenue, I forget. I think that was the Anderson. There were two theaters south of the Orpheum, and in the mid-to-late ‘60s, we probably have the most exciting time of re-inventing theater in New York that we’ve ever had. Part of it was the theater of that period was still an apprenticeship theater. It wasn’t young people going to school and learning that the way you raise money is by getting grants and starting the not-for-profits that have to worry about content because of matching the intentions of the grant givers. You had The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald. You had The Life and Times of Tom Paine, where at the intermission the audience and the actors sat on the lip of the stage and talked about the implications of Tom Paine’s life in the present day during the Vietnam War and during the huge social upheavals of the late ‘60s. There was an absolutely groundbreaking Mahagonny [Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny by Kurt Weill] done on 3rd Street and Second Avenue.

Again, we were involved in creating modern theater out of a New York that still had a tremendous number of laws that for New Yorkers growing up today would have seemed really archaic. The moving nude law, where you couldn’t have a person on stage naked other than frozen in place from the old 1890’s tableaus, where they would recreate paintings and such. I guess it was the early [19]70s, which—It’s funny we tend to think of the decades as defining the period, but what we think of the ‘60s is really the mid-‘60s until the mid-‘70s. Over at the Truck and Warehouse, Steambath opened. The first scene, a young woman walks out on stage and takes a shower, which at the time was more revolutionary than shocking. It was one of those things where, of course this is what theater should be. Theater should echo the lives we’re living.

The other thing that was remarkable about those days, because all these were commercial theaters. Very often—Joe Papp must get great, great, great credit for the work he did, but Public
Theater was a not-for-profit. So, for example, when *Hair* opened up in the Public Theater, it was not anywhere near the show we think of as *Hair*. The moment that *Hair* became the groundbreaking play was the day that Tom O’Horgan took it to Studio 54 as a commercial show—brought in the nudity, brought in all the things that they could not have done in a not-for-profit setting.

The beginning of that whole free speech fight actually begins in this room, against the south wall here, what used to be floor level, where the stage used to be. In October of 1960, Richard Buckley, Lord Buckley, was performing here. Buckley had been a friend of Al Capone, was a Jazz Age musician. He was a Californian that invented a style of comedy, which was a reflection of his hyperactivity. Robin Williams always used to say that he could not have done what he did without the groundbreaking work of Lord Buckley. You never knew what his act was going to be, because he’d walk out on stage. At one point he cut his foot in half on stage for a joke. Whatever notion came into his head, he would do.

Well, October 1960, he was performing here, and he had an arrest for marijuana and an acquittal. The vice squad came in, and the police at that point had complete authority to decide whether or not you would get a cabaret card. In order to perform in a cabaret, you needed to be licensed by the NYPD. The vice squad came up on stage and took his cabaret card and pulled him off the stage. Several days later, he went down to demand his card back at the precinct, and the most likely story is that he was beaten to death. He wound up dead at Saint Vincent’s Hospital, and the hospital records have been altered. Somebody scratched out the original cause of death with a blue ballpoint and over it written, ‘hypertensive stroke.’ But his family, from the marks on his body and all, are convinced that he was beaten to death, which would have certainly been not unusual in the way the policing was done in the ‘60s. [00:20:12]

But it began a free speech fight. John Lindsay then removed the cabaret cards from the system, after a long fight that began with the death of Richard Buckley here.

The 1960s to the East Village—there was a diner on Saint Mark’s and Third Avenue called the Village East, which you might have heard about, run by a fellow named Tony. He thought that by using the term ‘Village East’ he could bring people into what was in many ways an extension of the Bowery. The Valencia Hotel, which is now the Saint Mark’s Hotel, was a house of ill repute; a lot of people were afraid to come down the block. The Five Spot was still going. It was one of the Termini clubs. The Jazz Gallery here was run by the Terminis as well.
As the jazz clubs started to die, and the neighborhood became more seedy, Tony was kind of a progressive thinker in realizing that by changing the name of the community, you’d be able to change the impression and very soon the East Village began to kind of emerge as a term for the place as the art revolution happened here.

One of the other great changes in the mid-'60s was another Tony from Japan, starting Dojo, which began as a little corner storefront ice cream parlor. Tony came up with the idea of putting honey instead of sugar in ice cream, and the timing was perfect because the health craze was just about to happen. Tony now is one of the most wealthy restaurant owners, possibly in the world. He owns restaurants and clubs all over the world., but it began with—

He had been a Japanese Olympic athlete. He was on their archery team, the Japanese archery team, and he used to hang out next-door. Next to Dojo was a barbershop run by two partners, Zach and Jerry [phonetic] [00:22:55]. They catered to—it was a hippie barber shop, and I used to sit in there. Growing up, my dad put a longbow in my hand as soon as I was born. It’s kind of an old Anglo-Irish tradition. Tony and I would discuss the similarities and differences between the Yumi longbows of Japan and the Anglo longbow. That was, part of the whole health food craze.

The other aspect of the health food craze which, timing-wise—When I was very, very young, a baby, I had been given antibiotics that nearly killed me, so the doctor proscribed unpasteurized un-homogenized milk—a company called Walker Gordon. When I came to the city at nine, we had my prescription for raw milk. There was a store on First Avenue called Greenberg’s, which was your typical deli with great big barrels of pickles and pickled herring and such. We gave them my prescription so they’d order the milk, and we’d get it there. They began selling the overage, and again, just like Tony with the honey and ice cream, as this became the Haight-Ashbury of the East Coast, a lot of the hippies were looking for natural things.

Greenberg’s went from being a deli to a health food shop. It became the first health food shop on the basis of the raw milk that they were selling that I had gotten the prescription for. I used to always joke with the son, who became the owner when his parents retired. I used to always say to him when they were—they later became Angelica’s under different management—but before Angelica’s was Angelica’s, it was Greenberg’s health food, and I used to always joke. I’d go in and order pickled herring and things, and he’d say, “Oh yeah, down to the basement, I think we got a barrel left. Let me see.” [Zapol laughs] [00:25:20]
The other interesting thing about Angelica’s-slash-Greenberg’s is one of the things that always stands out in my mind about going there was the uneven floors. The reason for that is our smuggling tunnels run out under the buildings there, and Hoffman, when he built the tunnels, didn’t put lintels in, so the buildings are sagging into the tunnels. In fact, if you stand in the middle of the block on First Avenue and you look east, all the buildings are completely plumb and unsupported. Then if you look at our side of the street, it’s like a rolling beach, because they’re all sagging into the tunnels. Where the shoe store is on the corner, that building fell down in the mid-[19]30s, early [19]40s, because it was so undermined by the tunnels there. We have a photograph of it from 1939, and it’s held up by massive wooden posts because of the undermining from Hoffman’s tunnels.

Hoffman wasn’t a very socially-minded fellow. He actually put a large bomb in the foundation of the building here so that if the place was raided he’d get out with his money, and if the Feds followed him, the building would land on them. The bomb triggers are still in existence, in our basement. [Zapol laughs]

This wonderful overlapping of history here is one of the things that we’re losing as we’re losing the small businesses and the people of the Lower East Side are being driven out in this cultural genocide we’re in. We’re losing the memory and knowledge of how these different layers of history, overlapping—what the meaning is. You know that wonderful old phrase of, ‘if only the walls can talk.’ Well, they can, as long as people remember what the implications and the history are. We have bullet holes in the basement from Prohibition. We have the door there at the back of the theater, which during Prohibition, was the only way into the nightclub here. We were sealed off from the street. Certainly growing up, Prohibition, I would say, seemed to me the way the Vietnam War would seem to children of today. It was just out of reach, just before they were—Their parents were young at the time, and so we kind of grew up in the reverberations of both the Second World War and Prohibition. It was the event that, in a lot of ways, created the community here.

Zapol: So talk to me about growing up a theater kid—what it was like being in this building. Did you see these plays that you mentioned in the neighborhood—

Otway: Oh yes, yeah.
Zapol:—and also how you started to absorb the history of this space and of the neighborhood itself. Certain people are neighborhood characters you might have met.

Otway: Yeah, that’s [laughs] the next half hour for questions. [laughs]

Growing up in theater, there’s a number of layers to that. First of all, growing up as a working child, quite literally, I had a very skewed understanding of what it was to be rich and poor. I quite literally thought that going home after school and working instead of doing your homework was because we were doing better than the other students. We had a business. What made this extraordinarily funny is my dad had an argument with the Quaker meeting we were part of, so he sent us to Grace Church School, which was a very, very affluent school. For example, my best friend at school, David Siesel. I thought, poor guy. Instead of having a townhouse the way we do—which was, we were building a townhouse out of a group of railway flats from the 1830’s, and I think, god, we have the whole building. We have all of this. Poor David only has one apartment. [00:29:47]

When he was sixteen, his parents gave him a chocolate brown brand new Mercedes, and we were driving around all night long around the island on the East Side Drive, then down the Hudson River Drive. Something struck me—wait a minute, having an apartment on Lexington Avenue in the 80s is actually not really the same as [laughs] having a townhouse on Saint Mark’s Place.—that in fact David was wealthy.

It was my mid-teens that I started to get kind of a rational understanding of wealth and poverty and child labor, but growing up backstage in the theater, you find yourself part of a very, very exclusive group of kids. The group we had the most in common [with] were children actors and the children who grew up backstage. Even more than that, because we were management—I went to the High School of Music and Art, and one of my dear friends, [pause] who died a few years ago, was Renata Zurer [phonetic] [00:31:09]. Her family owned the Renata Theatre, and in the entire school, Renata and I were the only two that understood each other’s stories of being child management in off-Broadway. It’s a very, very different environment. It’s completely theater, but it’s also—it’s that facilitating role. I wanted very much to do acting internships when I was a kid, but my dad would always have me involved in jobs and such that taught me management of the theater. It was a broad education of knowing that quality isn’t what determines what you’re going to put on the stage; it’s backing. Very good plays come and go,
but theaters have to be here forever—the idea of how to limit business risk to keep the theater going.

If you saw the film *The Night They Raided Minsky’s*—Minsky’s, on 12th Street and Second Avenue—it’s a movie theater. Minsky was kind of a hard-driven, mean-spirited businessman. In order to keep a theater alive, you have to make sometimes very tough decisions. Growing up backstage—my dad’s directions, for example, saying that, “If you ever produce a show yourself in this theater, I’ll come back from the grave and kill you [laughs] because,” he said, “the chances are you’ll have two bad nights in the same night.” So often people bring scripts to me and want me to read their scripts, and I say, “I’ll read it for interest, but I’d much rather see how you’re going to pay for the show. I want to see your backers’ list, or your mailing list, or your plans for selling the show.” At the end of the day, if we were going strictly for content alone, that’s where the not-for-profits theaters—Commercial theaters, it’s the strengths of your business dealings, and that’s why there’s so much diversity in commercial theater. We’ve had everything from the Anarchist Film Festival to films about Yulia Tymoshenko, which makes our Ukrainian neighbors very happy.

That’s the separateness of growing up, but also, seeing theater from the backstage out all the time. We had a classical ballet company here. The ballet mistress was Margaret Craske, who was the last teacher who danced with [Anna] Pavlova. Watching classical ballet from the wings as a stagehand is a very, very different experience from seeing it from the front of the house. *[You’re a Good Man,] Charlie Brown* opened, and I had worked my way up to house manager by that point. Our senior usher was Billy Crystal. That was a union show, equity show—literally the hottest ticket in New York. If it weren’t for the 1969 off-Broadway theater strike, it’d be still be running here, probably. But here I was, a very young teenager, and the stage manager had to go on for the fellow playing Linus. I guess it was flu season. So many of the understudies had go on that I got bumped up from house manager to stage manager, which is kind of the boatswain aboard ships’ equivalent. You’re literally the fellow running the show that day with a bunch of completely hyperactive twenty-year-olds on stage, who were out to enjoy the fact that nobody was minding the store, so they thought. It was a remarkable childhood to not only be born in a trunk, as it were, backstage, but to be management. [00:36:20]
So you know my dad went into Actors’ Equity and IATSE [International Alliance of Theater Stage Employees], and I became an IATSE member. It’s those trades that support the theater, rather than are the guys on stage getting all the applause and credits.

Some of the people that we met while we were building the theater: Tim Leary kind of drifted into the place very, very high, and my dad just kind of turned him around and walked him out the door. One of our great, great friends and lights of my early life was Godfrey Cambridge, the comedian, who should be really be remembered much more than he is. Some of his films are still available. Godfrey was an amazing cutting edge comedian of the ‘50s and ‘60s. He did a film called Watermelon Man about a white businessman. It starts off with him in whiteface. He wakes up one morning, and he’s become a black man. The radicalization of this former Republican Wall Streeter as he—suburbanite—His family leaves him, he’s fired from his job, and in the end of the film he becomes a Black Panther.

Godfrey Cambridge was a great part of my childhood. Shelley Winters, my dad produced a play by Shelley Winters at the Actors’ Studio called—Actor’s Playhouse—called One Night Stands of a Noisy Passenger, and the cast was a young Robert De Niro, who hadn’t begun his film career yet; Sally Kirkland; Diane Ladd; Elizabeth Franz; Richard Lynch—oh this is terrible—the two, I’ll have to look at the poster as we go out. What happened was it opened in 1974 and got tremendous reviews. The reviews certainly helped launch Robert De Niro’s career, but it was closed after seven days by an Actors’ Equity strike. My father was very hurt by it, because when the strike was first announced, Dad revised the contracts to meet the demands of the strike. Equity decided that it had to be a complete industry-wide shutdown, and so the play closed and the poster disappeared for thirty years. It’s now in our lobby. While doing repairs I opened a wall and found that Dad had walled it up, that he couldn’t bring himself to throw it away, but he couldn’t stand to look at it, so he just sealed it up into the walls of the building for history one day to find.

Zapol: You also mentioned a theater strike in 1969 here.

Otway: Right.

Zapol: What was the story of that?

3 Lorcan Otway added, on 11/19/15 “also, the actor Sam Schacht.”
Otway: Equity wanted to—and again, it’s very hard to talk about, because I’m very, very pro-trade unions, as my dad was up to the day he died. Equity has always had a problem with small theater because of the fact that it’s very hard to support, like any small business. Very hard to pay a living wage to actors, as Equity defines it and also have the kind of—They wanted showers backstage and things. In a small theater, there’s just not a lot of space. You look at all this space, and so much is dedicated to the play. It’s the old idea, “The play is the thing.”

When they created their Equity showcase laws [Actors’ Equity Association Showcase Code], it’s for ninety-nine seats and smaller, so you can only have an Equity showcase in an off-off-Broadway theater. For example, if we do Equity showcases, we have to rope off almost a hundred seats. Back then, it was impossible to have the kind of contracts we have today. We don’t do that many Equity showcases. We actually have full Equity productions. Generally, we’ve done four show and eight show-week contracts. [00:41:35]

They were impossible to do in [19]69. What happened was we had an interim production. There were a tremendous number of disaffected union theater people, who were suddenly in a position of not being able to work because of the Equity contract. My dad got together with a director named Nyla Lyons, who’s an amazing director—and I think Nyla is still working here or there. I’ve spoken to her every once in a while. They all produced a play called *Life In Bed*, which, my brother picked up the script one day, and my dad told him, “When you’re done looking at that, go wash your hands, so you don’t get hepatitis.” [laughs] It was written by a fellow who made his living writing porno books, which I guess it’s something you don’t really have anymore. They were little short novelettes, which were nothing but sex, page after page after page. It was very little plot. It was all kind of, “and then she, and then he—and then she, and then he—“

The idea of the play was a pornographer was trying to fulfill his contract to get his book finished in time, but he was constantly distracted by his sexual fantasies. Meanwhile, the third member of the cast—there was the girl and the fellow who’s the writer. The third member of the cast was an urban guerilla who was going to blow up the Empire State Building to avenge the death of the father of guerilla warfare, King Kong. I guess today, if they filmed it, it would have been R-rated, somewhere between R- and X-rated. Everybody was doing it under assumed names except the pornographer who wrote it. The end of the show, my dad had ringed the proscenium of the theater here with the big old fashioned one-use photo bulbs that were about,
oh, six, seven inches across—very, very bright blue light. The play ends with the guerilla offstage, saying, “Terry, you got a match? I want to test this bomb,” and he looks up surprised and says, “Oh, no, nevermind. I got one.” Then there’s this huge flash from these photoflashes. The Moog synthesizer had just been invented, so the next thing that happens is there’s a sound of an explosion, which started below the human ear’s range, so that you feel an impact in your stomach and then the explosion, while you’re still blinded from this flash of light. Then the chorus from *Old Laughing Lady* by Neil Young comes up out of the—It was this absolutely spectacular ending to this play. Dad kind of kept the poster from it turned around the other way behind his desk, not only [for] the content but because of the fact that all these union zealots had to do this to survive or we would have lost the theater. [00:45:18]

Finally, we brought it out and put it with the other posters in the box office. It takes another generation sometimes to come to terms with things that your parents had to do to survive.

Right after that his friend Arthur Whitelaw, who had produced *You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, and Dad came up with the idea of doing a film series called ‘Movie Musical.’ The third part of the equation, John Springer had just written the book, *All Singing! All Talking! All Dancing!* which was a retrospective of MGM musicals, which was made into a film. They put the program together, kind of in conjunction with the launch of John Springer’s book. John and Dad came up with the idea of having a big Hollywood opening with the stars signing the sidewalk. Gloria Swanson had gotten him his first big role on Broadway. Gloria was being handled by John Springer at the time. He was her press agent, so she was the host for the party that opened the Movie Musical. All the ushers were wearing powder blue tailcoats with white trousers with gold stripe. I think they were the old uniforms from the Roxy [Theatre], if I remember right.4 The opening night party, Jane Russell, Yvonne De Carlo, Maureen Stapleton, Alexis Smith—oh, it was huge list of people. I’ll email you the list of others, but Eileen Heckart—Hecky and Dad were in each other’s first show, and she thanked my father for her Oscar for *Butterflies [Are Free]*. He’d gotten her that role.

It was kind of a tragic event. My dad would talk to Shelley Winters at least a few times a month, and she was up for an Oscar for *Poseidon Adventure*. Actually, you can find this on

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4 Lorcan Otway corrected this on 11/19/15 “These uniforms were costumes from the Musical Minnie’s Boys.”
YouTube. It’s a terrible moment. When the announcer is announcing the candidates for the Oscar for leading actress in a film—when he reads Shelley’s name—someone is mugging him offstage, and he cracks up. Shelley, they flash to her, and she’s looking extraordinarily angry because the impression the audience got was that he was laughing at her nomination for Poseidon Adventure. Then Hecky wins and goes up, and thanks my father only—virtually nobody else. She just says, “I owe this Oscar to Howard Otway getting me this part.” At one point, his autobiography, his working title is Howard Who? so then all over America, people are looking at their televisions, saying, “Howard who?” [Zapol laughs] Not that she held it against him, but it’s just one of those things where my dad’s name became so associated with one of the worst moments in her life that Shelley never called Dad again after that.

But they had a really lovely friendship. When she was doing Poseidon Adventure, Dad said he called her to see how she was doing, and he goes, “Shelley, how are you doing these days?” and she says, “I’m fat! I’m wet, and I’m fat!” [laughs] She had to gain weight for that part, actually.

We were talking about people we knew here—

Zapol: Did --

Otway: Joan Crawford, yeah.

Zapol: Did these personalities come to your house? Did you see them? Were you at this—

Otway: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Zapol:—party? This opening party, what was your role in that sort of—

Otway: Oh, my role in all these things was far in the background. I was always staff. My dad really believed that. He was a complicated guy. The work ethic he grew up with in the apprenticeship theater, where it was very hierarchical. The best way to become a good boss in management was—My dad literally dug ditches for a living. At thirteen, he ran away and dug coal for a while. So you weren’t there as the boss’ son. You were there as the house manager, or senior usher, or concessioner, and box office attendant. That was always tough, and a lot had to do—My dad was kind of a force-of-nature kind of fellow. Growing up dad’s son, you knew to not get in his way when he was on. [00:50:46]
When Dad died, and I kind of found myself more and more in the role I’m playing now. I began to understand a lot of why Dad did the things he did. There’s no job in the theater; there’s nothing that happens that—we have systems here that go back to the 1920s. We were getting an award from the Greenwich Village Historic Society for [Historic] Preservation, and while I’m on the stage, my cell phone goes off because the curtain, during a performance, had stuck three quarters of the way open, and there was absolutely nobody in the building that knew what to do. I had to thank people very quickly, say, “I have to jump in a cab [laughs] and go and get things going.” I knew where the Allen screw was because in fifty-one years, there’s very little that goes wrong that we haven’t seen go wrong in the past.

You notice, for example, we have modern Japanese air-cooled air conditioners, but every now and then, in midsummer, we turn on the old swamp system from the 1920s, which was designed to be hidden during Prohibition. That’s why they used the swamp system. We use a refinement. There’s a steam radiator in a box in the middle of the system, and they would fire up the boiler and only have this one radiator on in the building. Then they’d pour cold water that they stole from the city over the radiator to create the heat transference. Now what we do is almost exactly the same thing, except we pack the water-cooled condenser with ice, and then run city water, which we pay for now [laughs]—which is why we don’t use it all the time. Knowing how to do an emergency patch job on a 1920s air conditioning system, it’s a dying art. There’s not a lot of us. I think I’m probably the youngest person who knows how to do it. [laughs]

A lot of the kind of the big actors of the past were kind of more like uncles than buddies growing up. Brian Murray, who starred in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and was with Royal Shakespeare Company and is one of the great living actors of all time—was always at our Thanksgiving and Christmas parties. Brian was a very, very good friend of my dad’s. Even today when I see Brian, it’s much more like seeing an old uncle. Gloria Swanson used to come quite a lot. She and my mother had a great friendship. She wore the size shoe that shoe models wear, and my mother designed luxury high-end shoes, so Gloria would always go to her office and get the samples right after [New York] Fashion Week. Shelley Winters once called my headmaster and yelled at him for telling me to shave my mustache when—I guess I was between twelve and thirteen. She called him up and yelled at him. [00:54:54]

When the play *Minnie’s Boys* was being produced with Shelley Winters and Arthur Marx—Members of the Marx family had written it. Portions of the play were literally written
around my dining room table, where Shelley and Arthur Whitelaw and Arthur Marx would be sitting having dinner and reminiscing about the Marx brothers’ family stories.

It was an extraordinary childhood. Some of the people that we’ve had perform here—When I was a kid we used to play catch with the cast of *Charlie Brown*, who were in their early twenties. We’re talking about Gary Burghoff and Bob Balaban and Skip Hinnant—who now is very big in union politics in theater. His brother, Bill Hinnant lovely guy who drowned off Fire Island during the run of the show. It was an amazing bunch of people. Recently, Patrick Stewart has performed here, and James Earl Jones came to visit. He was here for *Silence! The Musical* As he came in, I said, “Mr. Jones, you made me cry when I was nine.” He says, “Oh, oh,” I said, “I saw you in a production of the Scottish play in a high school play when my dad was casting *This Here Nice Place*.” We reminisced about this extraordinary performance early in his career before *Great White Hope*, before anyone knew who he was. He was cast in our play, and then he got *Great White Hope* and moved on. His father then was cast in the role. Then his father got another role, so Griff Evans wound up opening the play here. [coughs]

As far as some of the other people who’ve been part of growing up here—The family house seats over there, there used to be four of them. There are now three, but Richard Nixon and his family sat there—came to *You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown*—as did Indira Gandhi, the Johnsons—President Johnson’s family. Mayor Lindsay used to quite often come to the theater here.

It’s one of the changes that I think has happened in New York politics, the difference between the ‘60s and today. In the ‘60s, you couldn’t get elected to office in New York City without, to some degree, being in bed with or having a cooperative relationship with organized crime. From Wagner to Mayor Dinkins, every mayor either came to the theater here, or if we had an issue, it would take about two weeks, and we’d find ourselves in the mayor’s office, discussing the problem with him. Giuliani came along with the program to, quote, “clean up” New York because organized crime stood in the way of the developers. Now you can’t get elected unless you’re in bed with the developers, and the result has been this cultural genocide, this war on small business. It’s these small businesses which define the communities. Just in the past few years, we’ve lost De Robertis [Patisserie & Caffé]. Dojo—Tony is starting to pull out of this neighborhood—Kim’s Video, Yaffa down the block—In many, many ways, New York worked when organized crime filled the power vacuum. One of the things we promote in the
museum upstairs [is] an understanding that we live in America, which is divided between two concepts that define us: moral certainty and liberty. Whoever comes to power, they outlaw what the other half does instead of having pluralism as the modality that holds a diverse community together. In many ways organized crime has always held the diverse communities together, because it’s facilitated everything from smoking marijuana to alcohol to prostitution to all those things which we, acting on our moral certainty, outlaw; wherein kinder, gentler cultures, you have pluralism that makes people, helps people live next to people with different moral codes.

[01:00:07]

What we’re now seeing is a total breakdown of the way New York does business. Because the bottom line is neither pluralism or organized crime. It’s mass-market. We’re actually seeing that a political community that is this out of balance can’t exist. All the nationwide chains that Giuliani opened the doors for, we’re beginning to see nationwide chains pull out of the neighborhood, because of the fact that you cannot have a single-concept society.

Zapol: What’s happening to you right now as a small business?

Otway: Mayor Bloomberg raised our taxes from $52,000 to $136,000 dollars a year in three jumps. We had a letter hand-delivered to Mr. de Blasio by a mutual friend. He informed us that he had lost it. Could we resend it to him? The only response we’ve had is from the city raising our taxes again, and I think when you look at his promises of small business, being a small business mayor—Under Bloomberg—I’ll get you the exact figure—I think in ten years, the taxes were raised 67 percent across the board. Mr. de Blasio now has said that he projects a 19 percent raise above that.

When you’re talking about a city like ours, raising the rents eighty—what is it, 86 percent, you’re talking about—


Otway:—the absolute definition that is it Chief Justice [Joseph] Story, I think it was, that said that “power to tax has within it the power to destroy.” That’s exactly what we’re seeing. We’re seeing the destruction of those things that make New York different from a Midwestern shopping mall.
Chris Hitchens had that wonderful quote, that when every place in the world looks like every other place, we’ll have lost something irreplaceable, but worse, we’ll have lost the knowledge to know why we are so unhappy. I think that’s exactly—we are seeing that happen all around us.

Zapol: You were talking about how organized crime sort of helped—the idea of organized crime in the 1930s—

Otway: Mmhmm.

Zapol: What was the organized crime in this area when you were growing up here? What was happening? Was this the drug dealers? What was the sort of organized crime of the neighborhood then?

Otway: Drug dealing has always been a different—Where to begin, the story of drug dealing and organized crime? The early ‘60s: my dad, for example, wouldn’t have a cigarette machine in the place. My dad was very adept at avoiding those parts of business that would bring you into close partnership with organized crime. Yet, the two bars across the street were certainly, in the ‘60s, very much hangouts for low-echelon made guys and ‘goodfellas,’ as they’ve come to be called. Dad would always go across and buy all the organized crime figures a drink every night and be on good terms with them. It’s a matter of showing the necessary respect. We really had no problems with organized crime, as far as getting in the way. But there again, there were things you just didn’t do.

The drug dealing, my take on it—you see it in the film Goodfellas, which is an extraordinarily accurate document—the opening salvos, the two films I think that really give you a sense—or the two stories. Up in Hell’s Kitchen, the group of Irish American kids who the police called ‘the Westies.’ I forget what they called themselves. Jimmy Coonan and Mickey Featherstone were involved in drug-inspired horrifically violent crime. In many ways it was the outcome of the generational ethnic gang warfare that was common in New York, but completely out of control because of their drug use. The Gambino crime family, I believe, under the direction of the Genovese crime family, sent Roy DeMeo to civilize the Westies—to teach them how to do business in a way that would not endanger other criminal activities, because they were killing trade union men, people who expected some degree of protection from organized crime.
DeMeo began taking drugs with Coonan and Featherstone, and so he was then killed in a sanctioned killing. What we’re seeing by the Lufthansa robbery, so many young people in the Five Families are involved in using drugs and—because they’re using drugs, they’re buying and selling drugs—that it became a very handy excuse. When somebody had something you want, you could get a sanctioned killing because of the fact that they were endangering the family by being involved with drugs. You began getting a breakdown of the *omerta* code. There was so much bloodshed. Whereas the idea of sanctioned killings after the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre had really civilized the way organized criminal families dealt with each other. It now became a way of getting rid of anyone you wanted, because everybody was using drugs.

[00:05:20]

It’s very hard to talk about this without sounding like an out-of-control conspiracy theorist, [Zapol laughs] but at the head of the industrial organized drug selling, you have to see a nexus between the CIA and ‘no such agency’ [laughs]—the NSA. Wherever the undercover work is most focused, that becomes the drug of choice in America. When I was working in law, when I was a young law clerk, [I] worked on one of the tangential cases to Ike Atkinson’s case, ‘Sergeant Smack,’ who was the fellow bringing tons of heroin in from Vietnam in the body bags. The way that that case was prosecuted—what was dropped by the federal government in that case—gives rise to at least a strong supposition that it was not the Five Families at the root of the drug wars and drug culture of the ‘70s, but in fact it was a way of raising money for black ops by the American military. It’s very sad to [sighs]—I try to avoid that kind of analysis of things, because I think that at the end of the day, it’s more important to look at what’s happening in the neighborhood and try and get community involvement in preserving the neighborhood. I don’t think that it, at the end of the day, makes things better to spend your entire life trying to prove that the government is doing x, y, and z, when in fact the results are right in front of your face. It’s much more important to work on community-based results oriented projects.

At the same time, I think what has happened in America in losing control of our government is that there isn’t a way of looking at—I should preface this by saying that I used to work with Bill Kunstler, and I am convinced that the JFK [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] assassination—that what smacks of conspiracy—was bad policing and that it would be more than unlikely that [Lee Harvey] Oswald was directly involved in a government conspiracy, but that there was
without a doubt a conspiracy to cover up the bad policing in the aftermath. And coincidences happen.

**Zapol:** In talking about how drug use might affect this community, I mean, you’re down the street from Tompkins Square Park. Talk to me about what that space was like when you were growing up.

**Otway:** Oh, goodness. Yeah, in the ‘60s, there wasn’t a blade of grass. There was just yellow rock hard soil. The [coughs] by the beginnings of the drug wars—There’s that wonderful analysis that the drug culture sort of began as, like Prohibition, people feeling freed from the law. Then you began getting the industrial drug dealing and the drugs that were not only expensive and addictive, but really destroyed lives. Every morning, the ambulances would pick up the dead bodies under all the stoops in the neighborhood. We began getting a lot of violent crime in the neighborhood, often by people who are so out of control—Back in my teen years, a number of times, I would take guns away from people who were robbing my mother at the box office.

**Zapol:** Tell me about one of those stories. [00:10:06]

**Otway:** Oh! Being robbed here was kind of a, it’s just a matter of course. There was a fellow who was specializing in robbing theaters. We had a box office attendant named Archie Gresham [phonetic] [00:10:26] and someone kicked in the box office door and robbed him, and so we put in one of those bar police locks. The next week, the same fellow came back, and Archie is laughing at the guy because he’s behind the box office window and the door’s very, very locked. The guy punches through the glass window and shatters it, and Archie just goes completely simple and throws all the money at him [laughs].

It was one of those things where it was just kind of part of life growing up. I covered the war in Belfast in the ‘70s and photographed a lot of the children there and looked up some of them a few years ago. They were saying it was a horrific time growing up in Belfast in the mid-‘70s, yet [they] wouldn’t change it for any other life on earth. That’s kind of like living here during the drug wars. I saw more violent crime here than I did in Belfast day-to-day. My dad was stabbed eleven times in the back and neck. I had bottles broken over my head on the street in front of the place. I was robbed at knife point.
It bred a certain fatalism. There was a young woman next door being robbed, and she came out onto the stoop screaming at a fellow with a large butcher knife, and I chased him for several blocks. You did things like that. It wasn’t that you were brave or foolhardy; it’s just that there’s a fatalistic attitude towards violence in the community, if you grew up with it. People just become used to that kind of life.

We had a very violent robbery here two Julys ago. My wife was hit by the getaway car in the robbery, and I tore the metatarsal in my knee. Got back everything they took in the process, but we’re in the hospital that night and the sociologist comes up and says, “You know, the reason that you’re both so calm is that you’re in shock.” I said, “No, that’s not it. We’re not in shock,” I said, “We grew up on the Lower East Side. It hasn’t happened in a while in our neighborhood, but certainly, we’re not in shock. We’re just children of the ’70s.”

**Zapol:** Tell me the story about what happened that night.

**Otway:** Oh, it’s complicated. One of our staff had was a public school teacher in Greenpoint. Had his cell phone stolen. Because my number was in the phone, the fellow called me, thinking that he was talking to the employee. I told him that being that the phone is traceable, the best thing you could do is take it to the police and turn it in. He said, “No, no, that’s not going to happen.” He says, “I can bring it to you, and you’ve got to give me money for it.” I said, “Bring it to me,” but so he arranges to come to the theater. I called the precinct, and they said, “Call us when he gets there.” [laughs] Your tax money at work.

So he shows up with two of his friends and holds out the phone. I take it and I put it in my pocket. He says, “No, no, it’s not going to happen like that.” I said, “Well, it just happened like that. You just walked past a security camera, and you returned an item that you told me you know was stolen.” I said, “I’m not going to call the police. It’s over. It’s over. Thanks for coming out.” He raises his fists and runs at me, and as he does, my wife takes his photograph with her cell phone. He grabs her cell phone, and it’s a smart phone. She’s a lawyer, so she’s got a lot of, you know. It’s like stealing somebody’s computer today.

I thought for what seemed to be about two or three minutes. It was probably about a half second, and I thought, well, he’s not that big, and I can’t have him take Jeannie’s phone,” so I ran at him, and I pushed him and the other two into the corner by the door. I had my arms around all three of them, but as a result they didn’t have a free hand to grab the other phone back. I turn
around, and two of my male employees are watching like they’re watching TV. I said, “A little help here, guys.” Jeannie comes barreling at them. One of them realizes that the door opens outward, so as he opens the door, we all tumble out the door, but I have a free hand. I grab back the phone. I now have both phones in my pocket, and I chase him across the street.

While I’m doing that, Jeannie doesn’t know that they haven’t gotten her phone, and so she’s running at them as their car takes off, and they hit with the car and shattered her shoulder. She has a plate now in her shoulder, and shattered her ankle on the opposite side, so she couldn’t use crutches. She was bedridden for two months. She was in a wheelchair for two months and then crutches for two months. [00:16:06]

What was interesting about that is the medical ethicist who argued for Obamacare that it was not unethical to let people die in the hospital if they don’t have insurance—At this point my wife even told me that, because we are struggling here, she had cancelled her insurance. I get my insurance through my union. He had used the example of the grasshopper and the ant, as far as the old Aesop’s fable. At the time I had written to him. He teaches at NYU. When he had first been on PBS [Public Broadcasting System] talking about ‘That’s not unethical,’ I used the example of the rise and epidemic of TB [tuberculosis] among homeless people—winding up with people on Wall Street getting TB. The problem isn’t whether it’s unethical or not—and I believe it’s completely unethical to deny somebody healthcare. What is certainly the case, it is impractical, because the effects of poverty surge upwards rather than wealth trickling down.

When you talk about people choosing not to have healthcare, it strikes me that very likely you have spent your life in academia, where healthcare is part of your job package, and the world isn’t necessarily always like that.

I wrote to him about my wife’s extraordinary experiences in being denied aspects of healthcare when so horrifically injured. For example, the first thirty hours or so she was at the hospital being stabilized, but it was several weeks before they would put the plates in. If you can imagine having about six or seven breaks in your shoulder, and the only way we could get her up and into the apartment was an ambulance crew to carry her up. The sociologist at the hospital was called because the doctors and such had told me—or I guess the administrators—told me that I had to put her in a cab to take her home. I just said, “You can’t do that. There’s no way. She can’t walk to the cab. She can’t use crutches. What you’re telling me is that I have to gather her up in my arms, carry her out to a cab, where she will be tortured bumping over,” so I said,
“I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Let me rent a wheelchair from you, and I’ll push her home,” with my torn knee and all. They said, “No, we don’t rent wheelchairs,” so I said, “Well, I’ve got the debit card from my business that has quite a lot of money in the account. I’ll buy a wheelchair.” They said, “No, we can’t sell you one, either.” I said, “All right then.” I stole a wheelchair [laughs], took her home, and a couple of the neighbors and I carried her up to the apartment. The next day I brought the wheelchair back.

You look at the idea that we pay so much in taxes, and yet everything that we need to survive as humans in an organized society is either denied to us or charged to us. This is something, again, that I think that younger Americans think of as being just part of the way the world works. The idea of rationing healthcare when it was first projected, not even proposed, was so antithetical to the way Americans thought of themselves. [unclear] [00:20:04] as to be thought of as something out of George Orwell. Now it is in fact the case that even with insurance your healthcare is rationed. Year to year, living in this country, in this life, it’s getting harder and harder to see the America that I—Again, I grew up in the ‘50s in McCarthy America. My dad was blacklisted on one of the blacklists. I look back at those times as being more humanist and more involved in the general welfare than the life we’re living today. [laughs] [00:20:41]

Zapol: We were talking about the sort of the crime in this neighborhood, which brought us to this recent horrific experience. Talk to me about then what you chose to do. You went to high school in music and theater.

Otway: Yeah, I went to Music and Art [High School], and then got into Pratt [Institute]. While at Pratt, one of my professors, who’s an adjunct, was Dave Langley [phonetic] [00:21:19]. [He] had, Langley Stan [phonetic] [00:21:21], one of the largest photo and film studios in advertising and told me that I was wasting my time in college, that if I dropped out of college he’d hire me at Langley Stan. I dropped out and became a photo assistant [laughs] until he fired me. At that point [I] became a fashion journalist and went to Belfast as a photojournalist, freelancing on my own. If you see the work I do in the Villager and the Voice before that, kind of something between sociology and journalism, which is kind of also what I did in law.

When I married Genie and she told me, “No more wars.” I had been very involved in the early days of South Street Seaport [District], so I became a boat builder in the west of Ireland, building Irish currachs and racing them. Through that, the Boston and Annapolis crews, I
brought the sport of *currach* racing back to America, and two of the cities that we raced in that had crews tried to racially segregate the league. That woke me up in my, I guess. I was in my late-thirties at that point. My family had been very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and like most Americans in the 1980s, we thought that we had made really profound progress, but what had begun was the privatization of the private sphere for the purpose of segregation.

I decided to go back to law school, which meant starting my college grad eleven years later. [I had] lost all my credits. I got into NYU and with a mind to go to law school and began working at Somerstein & Pike, the law firm that was defending Joseph Patrick Doherty, who was the IRA [Irish Republican Army] volunteer who was held for, I believe, ten years or so on a British extradition warrant. In many ways, in fact, that’s the case that begins the line of cases that made the Patriot Act and the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] possible, the idea that the executive branch has the power to declare someone a terrorist in spite of findings by the court.

While in law school, the extension of this idea, of the creation of a private space within public accommodations for the purpose—It’s the absolute opposite of the idea that everything was into state commerce. Back in the old Civil Rights days, everything could be privatized, including Fifth Avenue, for the purpose of excluding gay marchers from the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade. Bill Kunstler had been an old friend of mine at this point. [At] Somerstein & Pike we were co-counsel on several cases, so Bill was looking for a straight Irish American to be one of the plaintiffs to sue New York City to stop the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade. The case was *Otway v. the City of New York*, and he and I disagreed on what the main thrust should be. I was saying that, being that the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade was the only parade allowed to use Fifth Avenue on a weekday, that if it was in fact a religious parade, it was giving the Catholic Church an advantage that other religions did not share. Either they had to give up marching during the week and only hold it on the weekend, like all the other parades, or they could be a ‘civil parade,’ in which case they can’t discriminate against gay marchers. Bill on the other hand, being Bill, felt that, “No, no, it’s the fact that police and firemen march in uniform is the city connection.” Said, “You know, Bill, it’s kind of tenuous, because it’s not unique to this parade.” Didn’t matter anyway, because the case was heard by Michael Thomas Patrick Duffy [phonetic] [00:26:00], and no matter what the argument was made, he was going to—He actually threatened me with
sanctions, but luckily we had brought the case under the state constitution, not the federal constitution, so he couldn’t sanction me. [00:26:14]

That’s kind of the long circuitous route that got me into law. I then began working with marginalized cultural isolate communities, which is just an outgrowth again of growing up on the Lower East Side. The American Indian Community House was in the neighborhood, and growing up Quaker I had always been raised never to casually give money to someone on the street, but treat them like a neighbor and friend. I knew the names of our homeless neighbors and such, and a lot of the fellows living on the street were American Indian. I began learning bits and pieces of tribal languages, so when I was in law school, I got involved with the longest armed stand-off between an American state and an American Indian tribe in the twentieth century.—kind of set the pattern for what I did. I then began working with the Romani community, and the Bangladeshi Hindu community and a number of other marginalized cultural isolate communities.

It’s funny. People say, “Oh, you’re a boat builder, lawyer—You’ve done all these things,” and it seems kind of a scattered life, but a lot has to do with the diversity of experience growing up on the Lower East Side. I guess that’s somewhere towards an answer. [laughs]

Zapol: How did you transition from your work in law back into the theater?

Otway: A number of things: Primarily, my mother was getting much too old to work the building alone. Even while working as a lawyer, one reason why I was involved in working in legal entrepreneurialism and freelance journalism is that any time of day or night the phone would ring, and my mother would be saying, “I’ve got to go to market!” Say, “Well, Mom, I’m working. I’ve got a case.” “No, I’ve got to go to market now!” I’d go in as the dutiful son, and it got to the point that more and more of my day was spent because Mom, who had been really a little powerhouse, was finding it difficult to [do] the marketing—physically difficult to do the work that it took to run a building like this. More and more of my day was taken up with that.

My brother and I are in litigation. I have to be careful about this part of the story—suffice it to say, my brother attempted to have his mom’s accountant take over running the building, and my mother said she didn’t want that to happen. I told her I would more or less retire from what I was doing—I still [was] working a little bit in law—and take care of the business full-time. It’s almost impossible to retire from civil rights law, because there are always cases that you must involve yourself in.
At the same time, we had a long-term tenant, the Pearl Theatre Company, and they left the first week of the recession, so we suddenly found ourselves without a tenant in the theater. They did wonderful plays, but they really were not careful about the maintenance of the place. I, by accident left one piece of molding that is still in the state—They would paint the inside of the theater. Everything was white in the lobby. They would use very thick exterior latex, and it would just run down the walls in drips and globs.

My neighbors who were in various degrees of homelessness or needed jobs and I stripped the walls down to the plaster and redid the moldings, painted the place. A lot of the guys had never had a full-time job. I bought them suits, trained them in ushering and other theater businesses, and so we reopened with an experiment to try and do exactly what my dad did—you know, getting the neighborhood behind the project. [00:31:01]

A couple of the guys still work with me; a number could not. We had a couple—a nice couple that were heroin-addicted. They were off the heroin at the time, but you know, they began using again. We’ve had some success stories. One of our staff at that point had been, he was from Saint Lucia and had been a major ganja dealer in the neighborhood for years and years and years. He’s kind of a well-known Village character. There had been a literal war between Jamaican dealers and some others who were not Jamaican, who were from Saint Lucia and such, and he had a number of bullet holes from the event that convinced him that it was no longer the time in his life that he wanted to sell ganja. He spent a lot of time picking up small jobs and being really down and out, and I always knew him as a very trustworthy neighbor. I would loan him money, and he’d pay it back over time, five dollars here, ten dollars there. As we did this, he showed up and asked if he could work with us, and he did for a number of years—part of him changing direction in his life.

The band, the Troggs, he wrote a wonderful book called—oh, I forget the name of his book. He does a walking tour of Lower East Side crime from the ‘70s, but he would always send one of the people on the tour into the theater to ask our friend to come up and roll up his shirt as [laughs] one of the stops on the tour. [Zapol laughs]

Zapol: Talk to me about returning to the theater, to working in the theater again.

Otway: It was really kind of coming home again. What was funny about it is you spend your whole life trying to establish your own identity separate from your parents, and then there comes
a point when—I had been invited to join the Players, one of the three theatrical clubs in New York, and began kind of doing the things that my father did. You suddenly realize that great amounts of your parents become incorporated into who you are. It’s something, not quite turning into your dad, but you suddenly realize how much of your parents are in you day to day. In a lot of ways—Mom also was really thrilled because we went back to doing the kind of theater that we did in the ‘60s, being a rental house rather than the movie—which we loved, doing thirty years as the classical movie theater, a small handful of classical movie theaters in New York.

**Zapol:** When was that?

**Otway:** Nineteen, seventy to 1994. We closed the movie program when Dad died. But [coughs] the family was a live theater family, so the idea of having that kind of life where there’s always a completely—It’s fairly hard to describe the feelings about having a rental house, because one week you’ll have Simon Amstell, great English comedian, and television personality. The next week we had Edgar Oliver, who is always a joy to be around and have in the place. Then *Silence! The Musical,* and then a serial Shakespearean production, and then improvised Shakespeare with Sir Patrick Stewart showing up unexpectedly to perform—[00:35:52]

It’s very funny. Often when you have young theater companies, they get very, very involved in the play they’re in and are very—It’s hard for them to lay the project to bed. It’s kind of difficult not to seem callous, because it’s always kind of a bittersweet day, the last day in the run of a show. But it’s something you’ve grown up with, and that’s just—it’s like being in the circus. You break down in that town; you go on to the next. Mom was really, really thrilled, because she was saying about how it so reminded her of how the theater was run in the ‘60s, and it was kind of—for all of us—it was kind of like going home.

**Zapol:** You said she was a designer, and then—

**Otway:** She was a chief designer for Calvin Klein for all these very, very large major shoe companies. Throughout her career, she was often on the list of top ten shoe designers in the country, and yet every night, she’d come and work the box office. She’d cook for the casts when we’d have cast parties upstairs. One of my favorite stories: Twice shoe buyers came to the box office window, and then Mom heard them talking, just saying, one saying, “I told you she looked like Florence Otway.” Then the other asked Mom, “Florence, you work here?” Mom says, “Oh
yeah, yeah. No. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I work the box office at night,” forgetting, of course, that they wouldn’t know that her husband owned the place. She heard them [laughs] as they were leaving, like, “God, times must really be tough in the shoe industry.” [Zapol laughs]

Three of the family members, whatever we were doing, we were also running the place. My brother, who is one of the leading theoretical mathematicians on earth, never kind of felt a part of the operation in that way.

Zapol: You also mentioned that many generations before this had also been in the theater. What’s that story?

Otway: We, the Otways, kind of our burden is we’re a performing family, and I think it has a lot to do with our hyperactivity disorder. It’s also a definite family culture of an outsider view. Thomas Otway is the first of us that we know of in theater. If you’ve seen the film the—oh, it’s hysterical. I keep blanking on the name of this film—*The Libertine*. They’re on their way to see *The Orphan*, by Thomas Otway. In the 1650s, he was both a poet and playwright, and he was certainly an iconoclast. You see in the careers and the writing of a lot of our family members this kind of outsider view of the world. *Venice Preserv’d*, which the Pearl Theater Company performed here one season—It’s a very modern play. It’s about a revolutionary cell which is seeking to overthrow a corrupt elderly government in Venice, and the doge and all the senators sell out their ideals through the course of the play. The central character is a young fellow who has become engaged to the girl he loves, who has joined a revolutionary cell. They want him to assassinate the doge, and so to ensure that he does, they make him leave his girlfriend as a hostage, which he does. He sells out the head of the revolutionary cell, then rapes her, so he sells out his ideals. The only one who makes moral decisions and sticks by them is a prostitute.

[00:40:27]

The other strain of my family is we’ve been involved in various utopian churches. My grandfather, for example, was a divisional commander for the Salvation Army, but he was also a composer. [He] composed tremendous amounts of the Salvation Army hymnal, but was also a classical conductor. Whatever else we’re doing, we’re always involved in, but we’re odd that way. [Zapol laughs]

Zapol: So talk to me about this space as it exists now. What’s here and what are your hopes for the future of it?
**Otway:** Yes. Well, the theater, it’s a funny time, because we’re actually, we’ve been able to bring together all the elements of the businesses that have been here since the twentieth. For example, the tavern is half of the original taproom, so that’s the bar that Al Capone used to drink at when he would come to meet the City Council. The City Council used to drink here during Prohibition. We licensed the bar, and by putting in that large mirror, you could see what the room looked like before we cut it in half to put the backstage in. We have live theater, but we also do film on occasion. We also run public domain film from the ‘30s in the bar, which kind of hearkens back to the classical films we did here.

We have the Museum of the American Gangster, which as I said, contextualizes the history of organized crime in America, including the Underground Railroad, which I think is—Quakers and organized crime are a wonderful model, because as a community, we swing back and forth between moral certainty and liberty in every generation and virtually everything we do. We never quite strike that middle balance of pluralism and liberalism, though we think of ourselves as a very pluralist, liberal community. Any community, you take a step back from and look at what we really do, and you see the contradictions.

We also have a bed and breakfast because the zoning here, in order to have the public assembly for the theater, we have two tenants—There are two buildings over the theater. We have two tenants there, but the building we live in is zoned as a single family residence, and with just the two of us, we bed and breakfast the third floor of our house, which also helps to pay the extraordinary bills. Like what’s happening in America, in New York there’s this pushback against AirBnB because landlords are actually using it in what should be apartments, whereas if you look us up on AirBnB you see it very much is people in our home, and it’s part of the experience of being here. I think growing up in theater, it really puts you in a very good position for being in the hospitality trade. Half of what you do in theater is hospitality.

Economically, we’ve grown 670 percent from the first week of the recession until today, and yet, with what the city has been. Really, we’re like the carriage horse industry. We’re in the gun sights, and we still haven’t grown enough, so we’ve just formed a not-for-profit, which will give subsidies to theatrical programs that can’t afford off-Broadway, so that we could have workshops during the day here. We can have plays on our dark nights that are, in part, subsidized through the Howard Otway and Florence Otway Opportunity Project. Dad and Mom had a corporation for a time in the ‘60s called ‘HOFO,’ [phonetic] [00:44:59] which I think they
formed for a couple of months. I think it had something to do with building a theater, I forget. But I remember the corporate name, so their corporation today is HOFOPRO to remember those days. I’ll have to look up what their old corporation did. [00:45:21]

Then we are also in the next stage of development in the museum. We’ve gotten really good reviews from the New York Times, from the Wall Street Journal, and yet it’s the least productive of all the businesses here, so we’ve taken on a new curator. One of the hardest things—to let go of [is] the personal control. But she comes to us from the New York City Historical Society, so she’s really a world-class curator. She teaches at I think at the New School and NYU, museum management.

We are starting a not-for-profit for the museum, which again is a difficult concession for me. New York is the only state in the union that you are not allowed to have a for-profit museum calling itself a museum without being overseen by the Board of Regents. I let them know early on that should they enforce that, we are going to take them to court, because it is a clear violation of the First Amendment. I have every right to—as much as you have a right to have a newspaper and not have the state oversee what you do. If the state feels we are not a scholarly institution in spite of our reviews, then let them publish their reasons, not restrict our speech.

I actually had a great little talk with somebody on the Board of Regents about this, one of their directors. “Well, we just don’t want there to be tourist traps.” I said, “Have you been to South Street Seaport recently?” I said, “When we built South Street, it was clearly a museum, because we had a strong leader in Peter Stanford, who had a clear vision, and the Rouse Corporation came out and bought the museum out from under him,” so I said, “If you think that having something be not-for-profit, the fact that it was so easy to take over was the fact that it was a not-for-profit. People buy their way onto the boards of not-for-profit, where private museums that are owned by families tend to be pretty true to their ideals.”

That’s all the businesses we have here, and then the two tenants. We have two floor-through apartments, because, although it would have been very much in our economic interest to subdivide, Dad said he would be claustrophobic renting to people living in boxes. I just kind of share that view as well, so we’ve had two very long term tenants.

Zapol: So I think we’re close to concluding this—

Otway: Mmhm.
Zapol: We have talked a bit about where you see things going in the neighborhood, sort of wary about this, but what are your hopes about the way things might go, even the kinds of community that exist here?

Otway: Well, I think our hopes are very much expressed with what happened last Sunday and the week before with our community meeting. The explosion on Second Avenue literally rocked this building, we thought it’d been hit by a truck. I called an old friend, Penny Arcade, and some of the other community activists, and I said, “You know, we really should see this as a beginning rather than an end, and even though the laws are in place to ensure that the building that’s built there will be in the same style, and the tenants get back in—“ One thing that I’ve learned in community activism, and I learned it from Inez McCormack, who just recently died. She was a labor leader in Belfast, the Hospital Workers’ Union. Inez used to say, “The most important word is not ‘solidarity’ in organizing; it’s ‘implementation’”—That when things happen, it’s sometimes easy to get people together and pulling and get the laws changed. But getting laws changed is only the beginning; it takes real activist work to make sure the laws are implemented.

[00:50:04] That’s where we are today, I think. With the concert to raise the money, we raised tens of thousands of dollars for the victims of the fire, but the next step is to be involved in the community board meetings, make sure that the laws are carried out and implemented the way they’re written, and then also begin to form—you know, I’m probably one of the few landlords in New York that’s backing this new tenants’ rights bill, the Save NYC. We’re seeing immediately the city floating two other bills to try and diffuse and confuse the action towards that bill. Even when it’s passed, then there will have to be real activist implementation. I’m hoping that we would then go on also to realize that not all landlords are the same. that we need laws protecting the single-building landlord, the small business landlord. I think the only way we’re going to get that is by the kind of community organization that we had in the ‘60s and also a lot of young people in their twenties, I think Occupy Wall Street is a perfect example of a lot of well-meaning young people that have no idea how activism works. You know, I think that a lot has to do with the canonization of Martin Luther King. The most dangerous thing that could happen to an activist is for the state to make a civil saint out of him, and as a result, every schoolchild could quote the “I Have a Dream” speech, but if you go through the world asking how many Americans have ever read the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” you’ll find it’s a scant
few. That’s the recipe for social change, and that’s the intellectual ground works on how you organize a community to get what they need from the government and take back control of their government and their community.

What are my hopes? My hopes are that we begin to build this community back one building at a time the way we did in the ‘60, and that we start to fight the understandable apathy. You look at the great sellout of the Obama presidency, and the de Blasio candidacy, where both had promised to be the kind of candidate that the disenfranchised youth and the angry old men like me were looking for. The first thing that de Blasio does is he goes after small business with hammer and tongs. The first thing that Mr. Obama does is he opposes release of detainees at Guantanamo [Bay] in the face of court decisions that individuals were no threat, should not have been there. You’re talking about people who’ve been in a hopeless state of imprisonment for over ten years. That’s the kind of thing—that and the bombing of countries we’re not at war with—that creates apathy, because people feel that there’s no chance of success in fighting. Yet we also have to get people realizing that if you don’t fight—I hate to quote the SAS [Special Air Services]—but you know the motto of the SAS is “Those who dare, win.” We need to get back to that thinking in this community. [sighs]

Zapol: So I think we are winding down, but I wondered if there was something when you were thinking about doing this oral history for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, if there was anything that you wanted to make sure that you shared that you haven’t yet—a thought or a memory that had come to mind about the neighborhood.

Otway: There’s so many, but I suppose especially for the history project, one thing we haven’t mentioned: Down in the basement we have the stone foundations of two buildings that you can see in an etching of Peter Stuyvesant’s manor house in the middle of the block. They’re built with round river rock, because when they were built, this was wilderness. They hadn’t broken ground to get the fieldstone yet. The loss when you have the great industrial developers, like Jacobson and Ben Shaoul and NYU, who come in with the steamrollers and dig down and root out every last piece of history and build something stark—I guess the way to talk about the folly of that—

When I was at the law school the Professor Richard—it starts with an S [S. Andrew Schaffer]. He was the counsel for NYU who taught criminal law at the law school, and he once
said during a lecture that the proof that communism is a soulless system is when you go to Moscow, and it’s a gray and featureless town. I said, “Professor,” I said, “the problem with that observation—have you ever walked down 14th Street? Seen what NYU has done to what was once a vibrant theater community? Every other building on 14th Street was a beautiful little old Victorian theater and turn-of-the-century theater, and now you walk down it—It is a gray and featureless slab.” I said, “If that is in fact the indication of a soulless society, then you have to also apply it to what NYU is doing to this community, and what unrestrained capitalism is doing to this community.” So I guess that’s—[laughs]. That’s it in a nutshell. That’s the hour-and-a-half version. [laughs] [00:56:38]

Zapol: Well thank you, thank you for your time today.

Otway: Oh, my pleasure. Anytime.

Zapol: I look forward to sharing this with you.

Otway: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]
Lorcan Otway onstage in the mid 1960s, with the Manhattan Ballet Festival, Robert Ossorio to the far right. From Otway’s personal archives, photographer unknown.