

A TEI Project

Interview of Michael Gordon

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (December 12, 1988)

DESSERE:

My first question for you, Mr. Gordon, will be about your family. I have to find out where you come from and how you were as a little boy.

GORDON:

Well, I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, of a lower-middle-class family. I was very, very lucky in one respect, that my father [Paul Gordon], though he was an immigrant—had not come to this country until he was fifteen—was an avid reader and had an incredible library. You know, at first it was something that I didn't fully appreciate, but began to appreciate increasingly as time grew on. For example, my father had two encyclopedias in his library, the [Encyclopaedia] *Britannica*, of course, and also an enormous work called the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, as well as, you know, a children's encyclopedia, something that was called the *Book of Knowledge*. That was a very, very popular one at that time. I became an avid reader quite early. Of course, we didn't have the distractions, not only of television, but we didn't even have radio in those early days. So one read a great deal.

DESSERE:

You said your father came here when he was fifteen years old. So you would be second generation?

GORDON:

Oh, first generation, actually.

DESSERE:

First generation.

GORDON:

In this country, sure.

DESSERE:

Where did your family come from originally?

GORDON:

Russia. I don't know as much about where my mother's family came from. It was also Russia, but what part—surprisingly enough, my grandfather [Louis Gordon] was a resident of Moscow, which was very rare for Jews. He had a very small, little handicraft manufactory in Russia at the time, until the May Laws were promulgated, and that was I think around 1883. I think that was roughly the time that my grandfather left Russia. Interestingly enough—my grandfather had been widowed. He had a son by the first marriage and then the rest of the family, which consisted of about six or seven. Actually, with the half brother, there were seven, three sons and four daughters. The half brother was the eldest. And when they left Russia, the half brother was old enough to be of conscription age. What actually happened was he went out under my father's passport, and my father was left behind and stayed in Russia for an additional two years with friends or relatives, I'm not quite certain who. Then he came out illegally about two years later. In other words, the family left when he was thirteen, and he made his way out by himself when he was fifteen.

DESSERE:

So the family was quite big already when you were born.

GORDON:

When I was born, yes. It was a family of two uncles on that side and four aunts.

DESSERE:

Were they all in Baltimore?

GORDON:

Yes. Yes, they all were.

DESSERE:

I see. What was your father's attitude when he arrived in this country? Was it a very hard time for him to adjust? Did he speak Russian?

GORDON:

I don't think he spoke any English until he came here. He went to night school and he learned English here. Actually, even though he lived to the age of eighty-four and was a very cultured—I mean, not formally educated—he finished the gymnasium—and that's when he came out, at the age of fifteen—which is the equivalent of like high school or junior high school. As I said, he was an avid reader and interested in culture. My mother [Eva Kunen Gordon] was a musician. So there was that kind of background at home. But to the end of his days, he had a very, very heavy accent, a foreign accent.

DESSERE:

Did people criticize that accent? Did he feel that they considered him not a real American or something like that?

GORDON:

Well, I think in some respects that's true. I don't know that they criticized it, particularly. I wasn't very strongly aware of it until I began to grow up. I thought; everyone spoke that way, and it was only later that I discovered that my father spoke a little differently from other people.

DESSERE:

So, in fact, your family was a wonderful universe. It seems that you told us some anecdotes about somebody in your family learning the violin and having some problems in the beginning and bothering everybody.

GORDON:

No, that was hypothetical.

DESSERE:

Okay. [laughter]

GORDON:

That was just something that I cited to students in trying to reassure them that every genius, every star, every virtuoso was once a beginner. As I explained to

them, "Itzhak Perlman, at one time, was [makes scratching violin sound]. And his father said, 'Stop it, please, for God's sake. I'm trying to read the paper.'" [laughter]

DESSERE:

What did your mother play? She played an instrument?

GORDON:

Piano.

DESSERE:

Was she fairly advanced in that?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, she was quite. Although she was never a soloist, she was frequently used, until her whole preoccupation became raising a family of three sons, and so on. Later in life she resumed again as an accompanist principally for singers. Her brother [Charles Kunen], who was younger than she—I don't know whether a year or two older or younger—was quite an accomplished violinist. He was the person who was really responsible for my getting into the theater, in a way. I think I told you about that at one time.

DESSERE:

Yes. Yes.

GORDON:

They would play together, too.

DESSERE:

Tell me, how did your father speak about Russia, in general?

GORDON:

Not very much, actually. There was an annual reunion, when I was very young, of classmates of his from the gymnasium. They lived in several cities along the eastern seaboard, coming from as far as Boston to Baltimore, or my father going from Baltimore to—. [The reunions were held] at the homes. There were several in New York, in Philadelphia there was one, and so on. They

would get together once each year, until—I don't know, just as they grew older and some began to die off, that stopped.

DESSERE:

You didn't attend those meetings?

GORDON:

No, not really, although I do remember one that was at my home when they sort of gathered together there. But I don't recall that they spoke Russian or anything of that sort. I don't know what they reminisced about.

DESSERE:

But still, obviously your father wanted to get some links with his old friends from school who had come with him to the United States.

GORDON:

Yes, as I said, they had those reunions annually. I don't recall their happening after, let's say, I was seven or eight years old, at which time my father was in his early forties. Then they just seemed to stop. I think, as I said before, some died and they were just dispersed, as those things happen.

DESSERE:

Did you feel that your father had good memories from his time in Russia? You said he didn't speak about it, but did he impart to you, for instance, the idea that he was happy to have made that decision and come to the United States?

GORDON:

There was no question about it. My grandfather, as I understood it, was confronted with the choice either of leaving Moscow and going back to the area of the shtetl, the "pale of settlement" as it was called, or leaving the country. My grandfather made the decision, obviously, to leave the country, and they came to America. And that was that. Apparently, life was not easy. Life was hard there, although not as hard, perhaps, as it was for some people.

DESSERE:

But that never tempted you, for instance, to go back and maybe try to find roots there?

GORDON:

I wouldn't know where to begin. My younger brother [Leo Gordon] attempted simply to do an oral history of the older members of the family.

DESSERE:

Already. [laughter]

GORDON:

And there were many contradictions in what he heard among the younger aunts, who were the only ones who were still alive when he undertook that. So we never really got very much about it. My father never volunteered anything about it, but would answer questions to some degree if he were asked. I don't know. As I was growing up—the thing that you implied a little while ago—I was more interested in being American than being a Russian derivative.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. It seems to be a very, very typical attitude. That's what I thought had happened at that time. What about the Jewish traditions? Were they maintained in your family?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. My mother was more Orthodox in her observance than my father was. For example> I suppose out of economic necessity, my father worked on the Sabbath. He went to his business and so on.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

But we grew up in a completely kosher home with all of the rituals observed, all of the holidays observed, attendance at the synagogue, and that sort of thing.

DESSERE:

You had meetings with the rabbi there sometimes?

GORDON:

Yes, to some degree, but we went through—both I and my next brother and my next brother, we all were bar mitzvahed and went through that period of learning the thing. It was, as I say, an Orthodox home, not fanatically so, but definitely so. I remember the first time when I was aware of having violated the dietary laws. I was on a camping trip or something, and I discovered that what I had eaten was a ham sandwich. I vomited.

DESSERE:

Oh, really? That's very interesting.

GORDON:

It was that kind of thing. And yet, as I said before, I don't know why, but that was just the way we were brought up.

DESSERE:

Were you close to your brothers?

GORDON:

We were about five years apart. Actually, we became quite close as we grew older. In the earlier days there was sibling rivalry, of course, and resenting and so on. The fact that one seemed to be getting a better present than the other, you know, that sort of thing. My middle brother [Bertram Gordon] died, unfortunately, just a couple of years ago. My youngest brother, who is not quite ten years younger than I, we're still very close even though he lives back East. But we did live in the same neighborhood in the fifties. I was living in Connecticut, and I moved to that particular locale because my brother had been living there for a number of years.

DESSERE:

So you were the child in the middle in that family?

GORDON:

No, I was the eldest.

DESSERE:

Oh, the eldest. Oh, I see. So I would imagine—. Did you find any pressure from your family about getting serious or a serious profession, or something like that?

GORDON:

Yes, to some degree. What happened really was this: I was pushed ahead in school four half-years—two full years—in the early grades, and I graduated from high school when I was fifteen and from college when I was nineteen. During my college years I was involved in—not serious study, because in our curriculum there was no theater, but there was an extracurricular kind of activity called the Barnstormers, and I was involved with them and was very successful with them. My uncle, the violinist—I think I told you this—was always engaged in a kind of rivalry with another brother [Louis Kunen], another uncle, who was a lawyer. They were doing a tug-of-war over me. Uncle Louie wanted me to be a lawyer, and my other uncle was encouraging me and my "gypsy" activities. Before entering my senior year at college, trying to decide what to do next, I applied both to the law school and to the Yale [University] drama school at the suggestion of Uncle Charlie, who was the musician.

DESSERE:

So Uncle Charlie, obviously, had a very good influence on you in that sense.

GORDON:

Yes. Uncle Charlie was a bachelor most of the time that I knew him, and when I would visit—he lived in New York—both the uncles did. My mother's family had settled in New York. When I knew him, he was a pit musician in the theater. As a matter of fact, the first show I ever saw in New York, I was sitting in the orchestra pit alongside of him. He was the concertmaster, and he snuck me in and got a little chair. And I saw *Blossom Time*, I remember, which was an operetta about the life of Schubert, and the score was based on popularizing some of his music. So he was great fun to be with, and I enjoyed him very much as I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old.

DESSERE:

But when you were in high school, did you have any interest in the theater?

GORDON:

I didn't think of it in those terms, but I did participate. I belonged to a thing called the Literary Club in high school, and that involved debating and what was then called declamation—which I think is now more or less known as oral interpretation or something of that sort—in which one did dramatic recitations, sometimes poetry, sometimes narratives, and so on. I had a degree of success doing that, you know, winning a prize, winning a medal or something of that sort. That was my initiation into it in a kind of way. Then I went to a boys camp when I was growing up that had fairly extensive dramatic activities at the camp as well as the athletics, which was the principal emphasis, of course. When I first went I said, "Well, I'm not good enough for this," until I saw them. Then I said, "Yes, I'm good enough for this." So I became very active in dramatics at this boys camp in the summers when I was growing up, from the ages of about thirteen to sixteen or something like that. When I entered college I knew that they had this dramatics club, and I had the same feeling when I was a freshman. I said, "Oh, well, obviously I can't compete in this league," until I saw their first presentation. I said, "I'm just as good as they are." In my second year, from then on, I was very, very active in the college dramatics club.

DESSERE:

You said that your mother was already an artist. Obviously, she liked to play the piano.

GORDON:

Yes, very much.

DESSERE:

Did she influence you in that? Did you learn to play something?

GORDON:

One had to, of course. I'm sure that my mother meant to be very helpful, but it was very tough trying to practice with her alongside of me. She was very impatient with my mistakes and the fact that I used to cheat and set the clock ahead a little bit, because I was supposed to practice for an hour, or whatever it was, and I wanted to go out and play ball with the boys.

DESSERE:

So you liked sports, you liked athletics?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, very much. I was very much into that all my life.

DESSERE:

Was there some kind of influence? Was your father also interested?

GORDON:

No, not particularly, although later in his life he did become interested in golf. No, he had no athletic experience. But I grew up in a neighborhood where everybody did everything, except, really, winter sports. That we didn't do much in Baltimore, because we didn't have very long winters. Ice skating, for example, was an occasion. I mean, you didn't skate all winter long. There were no indoor rinks at the time, and it was rarely cold enough for a long enough period to get into it. So we didn't play ice hockey, we didn't ski or things of that sort. Practically all other sports that were played in more temperate climates we played. Everything: baseball, football, tennis—an awful lot of tennis—soccer, basketball, whatever it was. We played all those games.

DESSERE:

Did you have a good relationship with the other boys around? Did they like you? Did you feel a little remote from them?

GORDON:

The thing that I said, I was always in a group in which I was the youngest of my classmates, because I had been pushed ahead, you see. And also, regrettably, I didn't have the genes to get tall, so I was a little guy and I was younger and I became very combative. I was known as a hothead, and I was not exactly popular. Later on I tempered to some degree, but that was quite a few years later.

DESSERE:

But they liked you anyway.

GORDON:

Well, I was a pretty good fighter.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. You were matched to them obviously.

GORDON:

Only because I had a greater tolerance for pain than most of them. I would win fights not because I was very good, but because they couldn't stand being hit in the nose as well as I could stand being hit in the nose, [laughter]

DESSERE:

So you understood at a very early age that you would have to fight to settle your points somewhere.

GORDON:

It was not only the physical fighting. Of course, that was at a certain level, which lasted, perhaps, too long. But, you know, even argumentatively. That is why my Uncle Louie felt that I had potential talent as a lawyer, because I disputed, I would argue with you. Whatever side you took, I would take the other. A "let's argue" kind of thing. But it was that kind of competitiveness that seems to be very much a part of me as I was growing up.

DESSERE:

From what background were the other boys with whom you played?

GORDON:

Much the same. The neighborhood was preponderantly Jewish, and I would say that virtually all of my friends were first generation, of immigrant parents. Perhaps not all, but I would say 95 percent of them were.

DESSERE:

I didn't ask you if you were close to your father. Were you close to him as much as you were to your mother? It seems that your mother had more artistic influence. I mean, this is what I perceive.

GORDON:

Actually, my father was a very stern disciplinarian with me. He tempered with his succeeding sons. That is to say, he was much more permissive with my next brother and even more permissive with the youngest. But with me, it was very, very tough, and I grew up hating my father, having fantasies of his dying and all of that kind of thing, until I grew older. Then, when I grew older, I learned more about him and about my mother as well, because I wasn't that close to my mother. My mother was also a tough cookie. I mean, she would whip me with whatever was handy. A tennis racket, a lacrosse stick, whatever it was. [laughter] Well, I was a troublesome child. There's no question or doubt about that.

DESSERE:

If your father was a strong disciplinarian and so was your mother, because she was a pianist, it must have been difficult also for you.

GORDON:

It was. When I was a kid, I didn't feel very strong love for my parents. It was only later that I did, when I discovered that my mother, whom I tended to tolerate, was much more of a person than I ever dreamed she was. Shall I tell you of an incident that happened much later in my life?

DESSERE:

Certainly.

GORDON:

I was already working in the theater in New York, and I came down for a weekend to visit my family. I'd come back to see my parents, but within an hour and a half, I'd seen my parents. Then I wanted to go out with the guys. One evening she said, "After dinner tonight would you come up to the library?" We had a library on the second floor of this three-story house we lived in. "Come up to the library. I want you to coach me in a speech I have to give." I said, "Well, of course, Mom, sure." Afterwards, after dinner, we went up to the library, and she shut the door. I said, "Well, tell me. What is it?" She started to rehearse her speech, which was the introduction of a guest speaker to a meeting. I was astonished. It was very well composed. Her delivery was fine. When I say "well composed," it was like a nominating speech at a

convention. "A man who—a man who—a man who—." Then you deliver the name as the final punch. When she came to the name I was astonished, because this was a very renowned author whom she was introducing to this luncheon—a ladies' luncheon that she was going to introduce him to. He was a man—the name I'm sure would not be familiar to you—who wrote about Jewish affairs and had several books published. He had an international renown. When she delivered the name, my mouth dropped open. I said, "My Lord, that's quite a heavyweight name." She said, "Yes, he is a very important man." I said, "What is the occasion?" "It's a ladies' luncheon." I envisioned forty, fifty women, and so on. I said, "How many people do you anticipate will be there at this luncheon?" She said, "We're hoping for a thousand, but I don't think we'll get quite that many." I said, "A thousand? What is this organization?" She said, "The Hadassah," which is a Jewish women's organization. I said, "The Hadassah, a thousand?" She said, "Well, this is the Baltimore chapter. I mean, it's citywide." I then said, "How is it that you're delivering this speech?" She said, "I happen to be president." [laughter] This was a woman all my life to whom I said, "Look, Mom, never mind going to a child study class. I need a button on this shirt." You know, that kind of thing. I felt so ashamed of the fact that I had never taken my mother sufficiently seriously. When I went to the Yale drama school, I discovered that she was taking an extension course at Johns Hopkins University in theater to "keep up with me."

DESSERE:

So she was interested in what you were doing.

GORDON:

Of course she was. I mean, she was much more of a person than I ever gave her credit for. She was just Mom, you know. She was really quite a person. I didn't realize it. Regrettably, she died quite young. Very strange. She had a morbid dread of hospitals. All her children were born at home. She felt that if she ever went to a hospital, she would never come out alive, and it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. She had a heart attack. She had had a heart condition, which she concealed, and when she finally did have a major belt in the chest it turned out to be fatal. As a matter of fact, a younger fellow who was a close friend to my next brother, who was a doctor, had gone to Hopkins medical

school, was a resident at the time. He had entered the residency or was an intern, I'm not sure. He said that he felt that her dread, her fear of being in the hospital contributed to her death. He said if he had been the doctor in charge, he would have sent her home, but he was just an intern or a young resident. He wouldn't open his mouth. I was not in Baltimore at the time. That happened when I was out at Hollywood, and I didn't know about it until I got a telephone [call]. I didn't even know she was ill until I got a telephone call from my brother saying, "We just buried her."

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (December 12, 1988)

DESSERE:

Why did your family choose Baltimore? Do you have any idea?

GORDON:

As far as I was able to discover, that's just where the boat stopped. You know, normally we think of New York as the port of entry—which it later became, the principal port of entry—but at the time that my grandfather came, the boat that they were on went to Baltimore, and that's where they settled.

DESSERE:

You said that your family maintained the Jewish traditions.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

Did you yourself maintain them, or did you try to get away from them in some ways?

GORDON:

No, I didn't really try. This is kind of interesting, I think. Actually, it's interesting to me, maybe not to you.

DESSERE:

Yes, it is.

GORDON:

When I was in college I encountered a professor [George Boas], in my second year, whom I found enormously stimulating. And as a matter of fact, it was on account of him that my major, to the degree that I had a major, was in philosophy, because that was his area. If he had been a professor of statistics, I would have been a statistics major. Because I said to myself after that first semester, "I will never be here for another semester without taking a course with him." That became my principal enthusiasm. He was a—what shall I say?—a highly disciplined rationalist. The first course I took with him was just the history of philosophy. The second course I took with him was a course called scientific method, which is another way of talking about logic. That sort of thing. In the course of the association with him, I became a rationalist and I lost my religious faith, to the degree that I had any. I became first sort of agnostic and then clearly atheist. I mean, in the normal concept of God, not as the prime mover, but God as we normally think of it: God who watches the fall of the sparrow, God who is propitiable by prayer, and that sort of thing. I didn't believe that. I simply didn't. But oddly enough, I continued to go to the synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue, every Saturday morning with other friends of mine, because I felt a strong kinship with the tradition. Without any religious faith, but I continued to go. My father or mother didn't. They only went on the higher holidays, but I went every Saturday. Then we would walk to the football game afterwards. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Was the Jewish community very strong in Baltimore at that time?

GORDON:

I would say never more than 10 percent of the total population. Never more than 10 percent.

DESSERE:

Were they very influential, would you say?

GORDON:

Well, there were really two waves of immigration. About one generation earlier, there was the immigration from Germany. By the time, let's say, my

grandparents came, some of them had established a pretty good economic position in the community, as merchants principally, not exclusively, some of them into the learned professions: medicine, law, and so on. And it was quite tightly segregated between the German Jews and the Russian Jews, the 1849 immigration wave and that which came some thirty, thirty-five years later. And of course, the later immigrants were not anywhere near their economic bracket, and there was that kind of discrimination between the German Jews and the Russian Jews. They didn't mix at all. So I would be inclined to answer your question by saying yes. Among the German Jews there were people who did have some prominence in the community, but not so, until far later, among the Russian Jews.

DESSERE:

But you said that your father had a good education. He was a very learned man.

GORDON:

Only autodidactic. He never pursued education beyond going to night school to learn English when he came to this country.

DESSERE:

But he was able to establish himself very well?

GORDON:

Well, my grandfather, who had come two years earlier, had this same kind of little manufactory, which is the cardboard boxes. They were in that business, and he had a little factory going. And by the time I was aware of it, it had machinery. A lot of it was handicraft, but a lot of it was mechanized, which became increasingly so as my next brother, who actually took over the business—that's what made it possible for me not to go into Papa's business.

DESSERE:

So, in fact, the Jewish community transported those differences within themselves to this country, in terms of, let's say, the Russian Jews were more poor.

GORDON:

Yes, until later, when some of them became enormously successful, very, very rich indeed. As a matter of fact, the man who died in a very strange accident who was the owner of the L. A. Rams, Carol Rosenbloom, grew up in my neighborhood, and his father and my father went to the same synagogue. Carol was a couple of years older than I, but, you know, we sort of grew up together out of the same kind of background. He became, of course, a big wheel. Several of the others did in various businesses become very, very rich.

DESSERE:

What about your mother? Was she coming from the same background as your father?

GORDON:

I didn't really know too much about them, because they lived in New York. Little bits and pieces that I picked up. It was rather different. I know that at one time my maternal grandfather [Elias Kunen] lived in a farming community in New Jersey before coming to New York. I don't really know too much about them. As I said before, I didn't have that much contact with them. And you know, contact with the grandparents was a little difficult, because they didn't speak English.

DESSERE:

Oh, they didn't?

GORDON:

No, hardly. I mean, my grandmother [Rachel Kunen] knew she couldn't speak English, but she always spoke in two languages simultaneously. I mean, she would say, "Set sich avek, sit down." [laughter] She was certainly illiterate in English, although she could read and write in Yiddish very well. As a matter of fact, she used to sit me down and read me Sholom Aleichem's stuff in Yiddish. She would be chuckling and laughing and so on, and I was getting part of it, but not much of it. I think that I grew up in a generation where we wanted to distance ourselves from that. We wanted to be Americans.

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

And it was only later that I began to cultivate my interest in the Yiddish language, for example—as distinct from Hebrew, which of course we were forced to learn, as it were.

DESSERE:

So you knew Hebrew very well at the time, because you were going to the synagogue.

GORDON:

Well, as a matter of fact, originally my familiarity with Hebrew was largely liturgical, religious. But I continued studying it. There was a Palestinian who was a medical student—I don't know how my father met him—who gave me private tutoring in secular Hebrew later on. So I was reading the poetry of Khayim Nakhman Bialik, you know, and things of that sort. But that was later. I was never very good, but I could make myself understood in Hebrew. That was when I first learned the so-called Sephardic pronunciation, because I originally grew up in what was called the Ashkenazic pronunciation.

DESSERE:

Since there's a lot of philosophy written in Hebrew, did you ever try to make that link later on?

GORDON:

Not really. I was more into Immanuel Kant.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. [laughter] You studied the more traditional rationalist. That's very nice. So how did your father welcome your orientation? Because you said to me that you were a rebellious kid. And you were going to high school and probably not doing exactly what was expected from you in the curriculum, although being a good student, I mean—

GORDON:

Well, it had its ups and downs. There were periods when "the age differential really had an impact. I remember being a great achiever—top grades all the

time—until roughly about the seventh grade, when I was just a pre-adolescent, or just beginning, and there were advanced adolescents, and I couldn't quite compete. Then there was another period in high school when there was that dip. But with respect to choosing a profession, my father proved to be very, very wise, in a way. He said to me, I recall, "Look, you've graduated two years ahead of your time. You've earned the right for a year of exploration." Because what happened was I applied to Yale drama school, Yale law school, and Harvard [University] law school. My grades were good enough so that I was admitted to all three. It wasn't perhaps that difficult to get in at the time. Now the heavy question: Which one shall I accept? He said, "Well, go to the drama school. I know that is what you want to do. Try it for a year, and at the end of the year you have to ask yourself two very important questions. One, at the end of the year, do you love it as much as you think you're going to now? And the second question, are you better than the other boys in your class? If you can answer both yes, then you continue." Well, as far as loving it, there was no question in my mind. Because I remember when I first saw the catalog, you know, the bulletin, I said, "All the stuff that I was doing for extracurricular fun, this is the curriculum." So what could be better? As far as the other was concerned—you didn't automatically go from year to year at Yale. You had to be invited back. It was a pyramid. You know, they had eighty first-year students, about forty second-year students, and about twenty third-year students. I was invited back each time, so that question was answered for me. I didn't have to answer it myself.

DESSERE:

That was going to graduate school.

GORDON:

Yes. I had already graduated.

DESSERE:

Before, you had to go to undergraduate school. So did you stay in Baltimore?

GORDON:

Yes, I went to Johns Hopkins, which is in Baltimore. That is where I did my undergraduate work.

DESSERE:

And you majored in philosophy.

GORDON:

Well, yeah. Hopkins was more sort of advanced. They were experimenting, and you didn't really have to declare a major. But for all practical purposes, I took more courses in philosophy than in any other individual subject area.

DESSERE:

Still because of the influence of this professor in high school would you say?

GORDON:

No, not in high school, in college.

DESSERE:

Oh, in college?

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

Oh. In high school, nobody—?

GORDON:

No. I mean, it was just nothing.

DESSERE:

You mean, high school didn't really—you didn't find any professor who particularly inspired you at the time?

GORDON:

No, not really. You hated them all. [laughter] They were the enemies.

DESSERE:

It seems that people will still hit the wall in high school nowadays, also. So you didn't leave the area, really. You just went to Johns Hopkins because it was there in Baltimore?

GORDON:

Of course, that's as much as one could afford. I lived at home. Who could go away to college?

DESSERE:

Was it expensive?

GORDON:

No. Then? Would you believe? It was true at Yale as well. You know what tuition for a year was? Four hundred dollars. That was the whole tuition.

DESSERE:

Those were the good old days.

GORDON:

Four hundred dollars for a year. Of course, when I went away to school I had to have living expenses as well. In summers I was working, at that time, at this camp where I had been a camper before. I became a dramatics counselor, and so on. So I made a little bit of money, and I was able to chip in. But I was getting an allowance from my father every month to cover my expenses, and it was not easy for him.

DESSERE:

But during this time you didn't have much exposure to the theater? You didn't go to see plays?

GORDON:

When I was at Johns Hopkins?

DESSERE:

Yes, when you were at Johns Hopkins.

GORDON:

No. As a matter of fact, again, the emphasis at home was on music. I went to a lot of concerts, but not very much in the theater, hardly at all. You know, I was "privileged" to go to concerts, because when I was taking music lessons at a

place that was called the Peabody Institute—it was a musical conservatory in what was called the preparatory department. Incidentally, that has now been taken over. It is part of the Johns Hopkins, the Peabody Institute now. If you were a student there, they had concerts every Friday afternoon that were free for the students. I went to a high school that was not too far from where the Peabody was, and I had to go to those concerts on Friday afternoons. If I didn't bring the program home, I got no dinner. I wasn't keen about going to them at that time, but I was forced to go.

DESSERE:

Your mother?

GORDON:

Yeah. I could get no dinner if I didn't bring the program home. So little by little I developed an interest and taste in music as a consequence of that exposure.

DESSERE:

When you were at Johns Hopkins, you didn't have to work? Your parents didn't require you to do any job so you could enjoy your education?

GORDON:

Yeah. Yeah. At Yale I used to get my meals by working in the cafeteria.

DESSERE:

I see. I see. Because that was more expensive or—?

GORDON:

Well, it was expensive because I had to live up there.

DESSERE:

You had to pay rent?

GORDON:

Exactly.

DESSERE:

So that was enough for you to work in the cafeteria.

GORDON:

That was enough. I got most of my meals, or partly—two meals, or something like that, a day there. There were several of us who did that sort of thing. I didn't work outside.

DESSERE:

So your parents really wanted you to have a very good education in the beginning?

GORDON:

Yes, that was something that I think was characteristic of that generation of immigrants. They all wanted their children to be educated. I know that in my particular neighborhood, when I was going to Johns Hopkins, which was about two and a half miles from where we lived—we walked always—there was always somebody to go with right from the immediate neighborhood. I think our classes were, what, eight thirty, nine thirty? There was always somebody that was going there at the same time that you were. So we would walk, because it took almost as long to go by trolley car, which was a very roundabout—we'd cut across the park most of the way to the campus. We walked always.

DESSERE:

It's very interesting also to see that your father, and of course your mother, were remarkably open to the arts and to the—

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

He was not at all narrow-minded about that?

GORDON:

Which was quite remarkable, because it was a very bizarre concept in that community. I mean, if I had said I wanted to join a Benedictine monastery, it wouldn't have been more strange. You know, because either you went into papa's business or into one of the learned professions. And if you couldn't

quite make it in medical school, you went to dental school; if you couldn't make it to law school, you became an accountant or whatever. To want to be in the theater— I remember the father of a girl that I was dating a lot saying, "Who the hell do you think you are, Clark Gable?" [laughter] I said, "No, I don't want to be an actor. I want to be a director." [laughter]

DESSERE:

Oh, so you were not even considering being an actor?

GORDON:

Well, let me say I considered. Well, you know, that's what you do first, always. But I soon realized that my stature, my looks, and so forth and so on, were not very promising. I actually, when I was at this boys camp, directed a one-act play before I even knew the term "directing." I coached the guys. I was in it, too, but I told everybody where to stand and what to do, and like that. I was fifteen years old then.

DESSERE:

You did it on instinct.

GORDON:

Well, I'd had more experience than they, and it was as simple as that. But it was more experience as an actor. I didn't know anything about staging then, except when this felt right or you couldn't put him there because he was covered or blocked, or whatever. So I did it. As a matter of fact, I won a competition against the dramatics counselor with that play.

DESSERE:

Was he upset? Was there no competition really, or was he irritated?

GORDON:

Well, there was a competition, actually, because this camp was ferociously competitive.

DESSERE:

To get in already?

GORDON:

No, while you were there. I mean, ranging from how clean your bunk was to how successful you were in the tennis matches, everything was competitive.

DESSERE:

You must have liked that, because you said that you were a little fighter.

GORDON:

Kids who enjoyed competition did well there. For those who didn't, I don't know, I think it must have been a pretty traumatizing experience for a lot of them. It was all right for me.

DESSERE:

Yeah, because you liked—

GORDON:

The same was true in our neighborhood, too. We were always—

DESSERE:

Fighting.

GORDON:

Fighting, competing, you know, in everything.

DESSERE:

That's interesting. Let me ask you something, because you said at some point in the SMU [Southern Methodist University] interview that when you met Arthur Laurents much later—we will come back to that in more detail, but you mentioned something that struck me. You said something like that obviously Arthur Laurents growing up as a Jewish boy didn't have—you implied that he didn't suffer as much as you did on certain things.

GORDON:

Well, it's not a matter of suffering so much. I think the thing that characterized Arthur at that time, who grew up in New York, was he didn't have—what shall I say?—a more aggressive, militant spirit. I mean, we were picked on very,

very severely in an anti-Semitic neighborhood—not my immediate neighborhood, but where we went to school—when we were kids. And at first we were very, very frightened. I remember a turning point when we were kind of cornered by a gang and we had to fight our way out. We found out we could hold our own. I mean, we never thought we could. You know, we had as much cod-liver oil—

DESSERE:

Yes. [laughter]

GORDON:

Which was the thing before we knew about vitamins. You know, we were athletic, so we were—but we had been frightened. We felt like a minority. Then when we found out that we could hold our own, we became a little more militant. After a while, the gentile boys used to run away when they saw us coming. [laughter] Let me say, for example, the first club I belonged to was called the Young Maccabees. I don't know if you know the history.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, the Bible. Yes, yes.

GORDON:

The Maccabees were militants. It was the first underground. That was reflective of the spirit that developed in us. It seemed to me that Arthur and his play *Home of the Brave* were a little apologetic in their tone of—I'm speaking of—"Don't pick on us. We're no different than you are." I said, "To hell with that. I mean, let's not be cringing like that." By relating some of my experiences to Arthur, as well as my attitudes, he began to change, and the play ultimately had a somewhat different thematic thrust when it was done, finally, which was, "Yes, we're different, but the meaning of American democracy is it can absorb and be enriched by those differences."

DESSERE:

It seems that the times that you are describing were extremely positive times in terms of—you know, if we compare it with later times. It seems that it was a very positive period in which everybody was enthusiastic about—

GORDON:

Well, not exactly. It all depends at what stage you're talking. For instance, I was born in 1909. World War I broke out in 1913 and lasted until 1918. I was a nine-year-old boy when the war was over. I remember the celebrations when the armistice was signed and that sort of thing. Now, then came a good period. But the year I graduated from college was the year of the great stock market crash [laughter] and the start of the Depression that followed, 1929. I'm going back to my sixtieth reunion next spring.

DESSERE:

Oh, you're going?

GORDON:

I'm going to go back, yeah.

DESSERE:

Oh, that's wonderful.

GORDON:

I've only attended two. The first time was my fortieth. I went back for my fortieth, because I had to go back and shoot a film at Miami at that time, just around that time, and I looked up this old professor. He was still alive, although he was retired at that time. Then I went back to my fiftieth, because how many times in a lifetime do you have your fiftieth anniversary, you know? Then I didn't go back for the fifty-fifth. I said, "I'll see the guys at the sixtieth." That's why I wanted to be recalled again this year. I wanted to have the boasting rights, "I'm still on the job!" [laughter] Next year, to hell with it.

DESSERE:

Yeah, yeah. I mean, because you've been recalled. Have you had a chance to go back to Yale or to Johns Hopkins besides these reunions?

GORDON:

No, only for anniversaries, for the reunions. I dropped into Yale a few times. I had plays that—you know, before [opening in] New York—opened in New Haven, and I visited then. Then when I was living back East in the fifties, I was

invited to participate in an alumni lecture series, which I did, because I lived only a forty-minute drive from New Haven. So there was, but very few, very few returns there.

DESSERE:

But they consider you an important alumnus.

GORDON:

Well, not an important [one], but an alumnus who was working in the profession.

DESSERE:

Before we go back to Yale—I'm going to ask you about the curriculum and everything—I want to ask you a question about—how did you feel towards the other children when you went out among the Jewish community? Let's say you came out and you interacted with the white, Anglo-Saxon establishment.

GORDON:

Well, that, of course, was not—that was an ongoing thing from grade school on. We were always a very small minority wherever I was. So the business of interacting with the general community never was confined to any particular period. That was the experience throughout.

DESSERE:

But did you have any friends at the time when you were in high school?

GORDON:

In high school, I did. I had a couple of quite close friends who were not Jews. In college, it was, again—

DESSERE:

Same thing.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

They never approached you in a sort of—you know, putting you in some kind of category. Except this little anecdote of fighting, which seems to be more—

GORDON:

Well, you were made to feel that you were a member of a minority, and a rather inferior minority.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, in a kind of way. Whether or not that was a sincere feeling, that's the way we reacted to it. We were very aware, for example, that there were quotas in many medical schools, in engineering schools. Only such a percentage of Jews would be admitted.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. That was very much a part. There were areas in Baltimore in which you could not live, where they would not—you know, so-called gentlemen's agreements. Houses would not be sold to Jews. Gradually, of course, all of those things eroded. In college, for example, there were some Jewish fraternities, but they were not members of the Panhellenic council kind of thing. There were those and many, many things of that kind that always existed.

DESSERE:

What about your family? If you brought a friend home who was not Jewish, would they like that? Or would they say—?

GORDON:

There was no problem, until one time I brought a girl home from school.

DESSERE:

That's what I was going to ask. [laughter]

GORDON:

My mother said, "If you marry out of the faith, I'll die." I remember telling her that, "With modern advances in medicine, the mortality rate is very low."
[laughter]

DESSERE:

So that didn't really hurt you in some way. You were able to take it?

GORDON:

It didn't happen, you know, for a lot of reasons. Number one was that it was a college romance. I went to New York after school, and she went to Kansas City where she came from. I think we saw one another twice after that. That was all.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (December 12, 1988)

DESSERE:

So you said that you had applied to law school and drama school. How was drama school at the time? Was it common to study drama in general? Did you know anything about that at the time?

GORDON:

No. As a matter of fact, it wasn't common at all. What happened was a man by the name of George Pierce Baker, who had been a professor at Harvard [University] in the English department, taught some classes in creative writing, particularly in the area of drama. And he had some success? there were a few people who became successful playwrights who were students of Baker's. At a certain point—I think it was four years before I went to Yale [University]—Baker was seduced away from Harvard by Yale, which gave him both a department of his own, not in the English department, and a facility, a theater.

DESSERE:

That was relatively new?

GORDON:

Yes. It was only about four years old when I got there.

DESSERE:

How had you heard about it?

GORDON:

I heard about it through my uncle. He was the one who told me about this. He said, "Why don't you consider going there?" I said, "I don't know." I didn't even know what he was talking about.

DESSERE:

Well, of course, Yale was a very good university.

GORDON:

Well, Yale I knew was a university, but he called it the "Baker school." I said, "What's the Baker school?" He took the initiative to have a catalog sent to me. He wrote to them, and that is how I received the catalog and I began to find out. That's when I read it and got so enormously excited by what was in that catalog.

DESSERE:

So your uncle knew that you wanted to go into the theater.

GORDON:

He knew that I was active in that sort of thing in college on an amateur level and so on. As part of his end of the tug-of-war, he took the initiative, you see.

DESSERE:

You found also that this type of choice gave you some kind of status and importance to other people? I mean, to your friends, your school?

GORDON:

You mean in Baltimore? They thought I was crazy.

DESSERE:

That's what I want to know. [laughter]

GORDON:

As I say, it was grotesque, and I was always apologizing: "Well, I'm just experimenting for a year to see." Then later on it took on a sort of a little more glamorous aspect. But at first, "He's a nut. He'll never make it." You know, that kind of thing.

DESSERE:

What is interesting is that a lot of people just the generation before you—I'm thinking about some directors like George Cukor. He never studied theater. He just went in and made his way up, becoming a stage manager—

GORDON:

That was the general feeling. As a matter of fact, when I got to New York, I never told anybody that I had an M. F. A. degree. It meant nothing. It was in my back pocket, secreted away, until I decided some forty odd years later that, "I wonder whether or not UCLA might be interested." In which case, having the advanced degree from Yale gave me a kind of status that I would not have had simply on the basis of my professional career.

DESSERE:

Yes. I would imagine that at that time very few people had degrees in theater.

GORDON:

At that time, it was very, very small. The enrollment at the school was limited, I think, to about 125 a year, and they had only had four years of alumni at that time. So it wasn't very much. Later on, of course, it became something else again, as more and more became successful that were Yale alumni. Some of the great distinguished successes like [Elia] Kazan and actors like Paul Newman, Meryl Streep, and a number of others, as well as a number of other directors in regional theaters, and so on. So the status was enormously elevated, but that was a considerable time afterwards.

DESSERE:

Did a lot of people apply, to your knowledge, at the time?

GORDON:

I have no idea. We were given to understand that it was highly selective, but whether or not that was just public relations or whatever, I don't know.

DESSERE:

Had you heard of any other drama schools at the time?

GORDON:

I never knew such things existed. Never knew it up until that time. Later on, I began to hear places like Northwestern [University] had a drama curriculum and a few other places. Actually, at that particular time, if one wanted to go into the academic field, it was very easy to do, because there were a number of colleges who wanted to initiate programs of that kind and very, very few people who had the qualifications to do it. As a matter of fact, I can think of three people who were either a year ahead or my classmates who became heads of departments at Dartmouth [College], at Temple University in Philadelphia, and Ohio State [University]. They were classmates of mine and not particularly brilliant ones [laughter] who went into the academic field. I remember having had a couple of offers. The best one was the University of Montana, [laughter] I didn't want to go there.

DESSERE:

I can imagine that the University of Montana would scare somebody who grew up in a city in Maryland.

GORDON:

I had never been west of Pittsburgh. I remember looking up in an almanac what the extremes of temperature were from summer to winter. They got to be fifty below. "I'll never survive."

DESSERE:

But before you entered Yale, did this episode you told me before about going into the orchestra pit with your uncle [Charles Kunen]—? All this happened before?

GORDON:

Oh, that was before. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I had that experience a number of times of seeing shows from the orchestra pit and so forth. So my relationship with Uncle Charlie was a very warm one, you know. He was also the music editor of a very avant-garde little magazine that was published in

Greenwich Village. I think it was called *The Pagan*. [laughter] The editor of it had a bookstore on Eighth Street down in Greenwich Village. I would sometimes hang around there. They were on the make with the girls, and I was a wide-eyed, fourteen-year-old boy. It was very exciting.

DESSERE:

So your Uncle Charlie was the rebel of the family? Was he the artist?

GORDON:

In a kind of way, yes.

DESSERE:

And your father said, "Well, my brother is not a really serious person."

GORDON:

It was his brother-in-law. It was my mother [Eva Kunen Gordon]'s brother.

DESSERE:

Yes, brother-in-law. I see. So this is the only part—you seem to have known more of your father's part of the family than your mother's part.

GORDON:

Yes, because my mother's family was in New York originally. She had four brothers. Only the two younger ones I really knew very well. The two older ones, I had met, but I really didn't know them. Or my cousins from those families I never knew particularly well.

DESSERE:

Your Uncle Charlie came to visit you sometimes?

GORDON:

Once in a while, but more often I would see him in New York.

DESSERE:

Oh, so you would go and see him.

GORDON:

We went to New York quite frequently because my mother would go to visit her parents. So I visited New York as a kid. I was taken along very often.

DESSERE:

Yeah, at an early age.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

I see. So what was your Uncle Charlie exactly doing? You said he wrote for this magazine.

GORDON:

No, he was a violinist.

DESSERE:

He was a violinist. Oh, I see. So he was a musician.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

He was playing in the orchestra pit, so he would bring you along.

GORDON:

Exactly. And he was the concertmaster in a number—until later on his life, when he was what was called a contractor. It is almost like a talent scout. In other words, a conductor would come to him and say, "Who is a good this and who is a good that?" You know, almost like an agent. He was still playing, but not in the first chair.

DESSERE:

I see. Those were musical plays mostly?

GORDON:

Yes, all.

DESSERE:

All of them. Didn't you at that time dissociate that—of course, now you do—
from the legitimate theater, in which people don't sing?

GORDON:

Well, yeah, but not in any serious way.

DESSERE:

It didn't bother you, because it was the theater and you had a chance to see
live people acting?

GORDON:

As a matter of fact, my first professional job in New York was in a musical.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yeah. I mean, I was hired as a chorus boy. Why? Because I could also speak
lines.

DESSERE:

I see. Yes, that's right. Yes, I have written down that you were in *Boris
Godunov*, among other things.

GORDON:

Oh, that was when I was still in college, just as a super, just holding a spear.
[laughter]

DESSERE:

That's all you were doing?

GORDON:

Sure. The Metropolitan Opera [Company] would play a week in Baltimore each
year, and they would need extras. So they sent out to the college for people
who were in the dramatics club, and that's how I got the job.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting.

GORDON:

I made a dollar and a half.

DESSERE:

You still remember the salary. [laughter] So Yale—let's go back to Yale. When was that? When did you enter?

GORDON:

The fall of 1929.

DESSERE:

So here you are at Yale. What did you do at Yale? You said that the program seemed to be very articulated—because of this man, George Pierce Baker—around writing.

GORDON:

Well, yes. That was the—what shall I say?—apex of the program in a kind of way, although there was a full production program.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

The most prestigious major was the writing major, because I think the requirements to get in were tougher. You had to submit a manuscript, and on the basis of the manuscript you were accepted or not.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

It was during the course of my first year there, when I was not in the writing program, that I looked around. It was the same experience that I said before. I

said, "Gee, these guys don't seem so bright. I'll try to write a play myself." I had done a lot of writing in college but never in dramatic form. I was on the college newspaper. I was on the college humor magazine. So I did a lot of writing, and I was comfortable with that aspect of it. I really hadn't even read very many plays in my life at that time. So during the course of that first year, I decided that I would try my hand at a couple of one-acts. One of them seemed promising, and I developed it and submitted it and applied for the writing program for the following year. Much to my astonishment, it was accepted—I was accepted. That's where I got my degree, not indirectly. I got my degree in play writing.

DESSERE:

The first year you spent working on productions?

GORDON:

Yes, and also continued to do that throughout. Everybody did. I think the crew requirements for the writers were a little less than for the others.

DESSERE:

So the first year, what did you do exactly? Did you just crew and help with the lighting?

GORDON:

I, of course, took classes. Actually, I took a beginning directing class comparable to [Theater Arts] 160, but it went on for two semesters, it wasn't just one quarter. I can't remember. There was a survey course in the history of dramatic literature. You know, that sort of thing. It was a full curriculum, not too dissimilar from what you would expect. Even including, I remember, a class in freehand drawing. You know, that kind of thing. And voice and speech. No acting. They didn't have any acting per se, no instruction. Later on, of course, they did, but at that time they didn't have any acting program, although we all acted all the time. The closest that we came to it was in the speech class. As a matter of fact, the woman [Constance Welch] who taught it came and started at Yale the same time I did. It was, I guess, her first job. She was maybe three or four years older than I, no more than that. Oh, we also

had movement, a class. We had that as well as a sort of cross between dance and just a general physical education kind of thing.

DESSERE:

Would you say that the department at that time followed the trend of the time in terms of choice of plays? Were they concerned about particular topics? Would they do particularly Shakespeare as opposed to nineteenth-century or beginning of twentieth-century plays?

GORDON:

During the time that I was there, in the three years that I was there, I can remember only one Shakespeare play, in which I played a kind of an extra part, a chorus. They did *The Winter's Tale*. No, Baker was more into late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century material. Ibsen was done and Strindberg and like that—and English writers. Shaw was done—things like that. Little that was avant-garde at all.

DESSERE:

No?

GORDON:

Not very much. There was one play that Baker did that was quite an avant-garde play [*The Searcher* by Velona Pilcher]. That was an antiwar play.

DESSERE:

He directed it.

GORDON:

He directed it, yes. He would direct about once a year.

DESSERE:

I see. Was his background also in directing? Had he any produced plays that he had written.

GORDON:

No, I don't know of any plays that he has written. He was more a dramaturge. He wrote about play writing.

DESSERE:

A critic.

GORDON:

Yes. The two books that I know of that he wrote—the first one was called *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist*, which is an analysis of Shakespeare's plays, and then his famous book, which is called *Dramatic Techniques*, which is a textbook about play writing.

DESSERE:

Which you consider still a very important book?

GORDON:

Not really. I think that some subsequent books are better. But it was a pioneering book. In that respect—there had been a couple of other books. There was a Brander Matthews book and one by William Archer that perhaps were contemporary—I don't know whether they preceded it. It was not the only book, but it was a very influential book. As a matter of fact, I still have it myself. Here. Here it is.

DESSERE:

This is the original copy?

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

How nice.

GORDON:

And that was written—let's see, what's the date of it? Nineteen nineteen. It was ten years before I got there. That's when this book was written.

DESSERE:

And you were using this book in the classes? He asked you to study this?

GORDON:

Yes. His examples we felt were very old-fashioned, even at the time we were students.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

So everybody was laughing a little bit in the corners about the types of relationships. [laughter]

GORDON:

Yes, as a matter of fact. I remember, for me, a kind of a jolting experience with him. What happened at Yale at the time was this: They had about six or seven public performances a year to which there was no admission fee charged. But to be on the list, you had to agree to write a critique of the play that you saw. If you didn't, you were struck off the list. There was a waiting list as long as your arm. After the show, because we were all involved in one way or another in every show, everyone was—we had a wonderful green room with huge library tables and so on. One table would be occupied with all of these critiques that had come in, some very short, some more extensive, and so on. We would read them and see what the public response was. And that was very useful to see, compare our experience and our relationship to the show to what the audience's responses were. But Baker would generally look over them first before putting them out for public consumption. Two guys who collaborated on a play that was done—and, incidentally, was also done in New York professionally almost at the same time, a little after it—named George Sklar and Albert Maltz were the two authors. They wrote a play called *Merry-Go-Round*. That was done, and it was very cinematic, very short scenes all over the place. There was a huge kind of scaffold setting, and flash here and then black out, here and there, and so on. It was a very effective melodrama which had as a theme municipal corruption. There was a frame-up and that sort of thing. We were all very excited about the play. I remember I had a conference with Baker about some project that I was writing after the play had opened.

The critiques had not yet been put on public display. I asked him whether he had read the responses. He said yes, he had. I said, "How were they?" He said, "They were preponderantly very favorable." I said, "Gee, that's wonderful." "Well, I'm not so sure." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I don't think that that play is written in accord with the best principles of play writing." And like a dumb kid, I said, "Maybe you ought to reexamine your principles." He said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Gordon." That was the end of the interview. He kicked me out of his office. But I was right. I was rude, but I was right.

DESSERE:

So he was very conventional.

GORDON:

Exactly. Exactly. And all of his examples in this book and the things he referred to had to do with [Arthur Wing] Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones and plays that were plays around the turn of the century. Here it was almost thirty years later, or roughly thirty years later. He also included [Eugene] O'Neill and things like that, but many of his examples in this particular book, especially so, the references are always to those old—maybe [John] Galsworthy, people like that of a generation or more ahead of us. We didn't consider that as relevant as it might have been.

DESSERE:

What was his idea about directing? How was he with actors, in particular?

GORDON:

No one at Yale, with the possible exception of the speech teacher—and I didn't realize that at the time, but later I did—had any sense of acting. It was performance, delivery. It was reciting the text. Even the man who taught directing didn't really have a grasp of anything that I subsequently came to understand as principles of real acting. We were drilled in stage deportment. We knew how to cross gracefully and where to put the noses in the kissing scene, what knee to kneel on. [laughter].

DESSERE:

So little tips?

GORDON:

That kind of thing we knew. And how to deliver lines. It was a recital of a play you see, it was not acting.

DESSERE:

So they delivered lines in a sort of—just trying to project it instead of getting the feel?

GORDON:

Partially. A little more than that, too. I mean, there were things about characterization, but it was all external, totally external. Just the antithesis of what Delia [N. Salvi] is teaching.

DESSERE:

I can imagine that, but it seems that theater as a whole was very conventional. Because if I think of what Ruth Gordon said about this period, it seems that the theater already was very stilted in some ways.

GORDON:

Well, let me say, it was just the beginning of an inroad. At the time that I was at school, Lee Strasberg was starting.

DESSERE:

I see. You didn't know about him at all?

GORDON:

No, not at first, but then we began to hear more and more. You see, I got out in '32. The Group [Theatre]'s first production was probably in 1930 or '31. But we knew about it, and we were excited about it. When I first came to New York, I tried to get connected with him, because Kazan did. Kazan was taken into the Group right away, and another fellow named Alan Baxter. Two of my classmates from school got into the Group. You know, I hung around and so on, but it was not until about three years later that I was accepted into the Group.

DESSERE:

So your first year at Yale was spent, basically, working on chores. [laughter]

GORDON:

What it was basically really related to was being able to have a social life. I didn't know anything about the theater. I didn't know the names of producers. I didn't know the names of many actors. I knew no plays. The principal thing that I did my first year was to absorb as much as I could. I spent days in the library reading the compilations of old plays and so forth. I began to read plays for the first time. I never read plays before that.

DESSERE:

So you had time to do that despite your work at school?

GORDON:

But I did it. That was more important than the work at school. The reason was that I was very young and very healthy. Actually, there was one point—I guess it was in my second year—when I was consciously reducing my sleeping hours. I purposely did it gradually until I was functioning on four hours of sleep a night. One time I said, "I don't need sleep at all."

DESSERE:

Oh, boy.

GORDON:

I really tried never to sleep anymore. [laughter] I went for about thirty-six hours, or something like that. In the middle of a conversation, I fell on the floor. [laughter].

DESSERE:

It was not with George Pierce Baker?

GORDON:

No, it was in the green room there. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So you wanted to make the switch from really the nitty-gritty of the theater to play writing?

GORDON:

Only for wrong reasons, only for prestige reasons.

DESSERE:

Yes, I was going to ask you.

GORDON:

I had no burning passion to be a writer. I enjoyed directing very much. I was pretty good at it and so on. But because those people were sort of regarded as the cream of the crop, I said, "I want to be one, too."

DESSERE:

Yes. So the director hadn't emerged in that tradition as an important person, as important at least as it became later.

GORDON:

Not in the Yale drama school.

DESSERE:

Yes, not in the Yale drama school. Okay, so you wrote a play, but how did you find yourself writing as a fiction writer after writing papers in philosophy—about La Rochefoucauld, as you told me once? [laughter]

GORDON:

Well, I didn't find it too difficult, because, as I said before, I had enough experience in writing that I didn't get paralyzed when I sat in front of a typewriter or with a pencil in my hand. It was a new thing, but as I say, I had written stuff that was not essays. I was a writer of jokes and of little sketches.

DESSERE:

And also, you worked in journalism.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

So the second year was spent basically writing?

GORDON:

Yes, largely, but I was still very much involved in production. Everybody was involved. I did a lot of acting too, because the directors always needed to recruit people to be in their exercises on varied levels.

DESSERE:

Yes. Okay, I have a few titles here that I have written down that apparently you did. *The Dictator*, does that ring any bell?

GORDON:

That was just a college dramatic thing, you know, the dramatics club. It was just a melodrama by a very sort of popular writer.

DESSERE:

Richard Harding Davis.

GORDON:

Davis, yes.

DESSERE:

He is forgotten nowadays.

GORDON:

Oh, yeah, he was unimportant but reasonably successful.

DESSERE:

He was in fashion at the time?

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

You would never consider directing Richard Harding Davis anymore?

GORDON:

No, not bloody likely. [laughter]

DESSERE:

I have a play here called *Springtime for Henry*.

GORDON:

It was a frivolous little comedy that I did in that first professional summer theater thing that I did. We just whipped up in a week one of those things. Also in that summer—and it wasn't very well received—I did *The Adding Machine*. Do you know that one?

DESSERE:

No.

GORDON:

The Adding Machine was by Elmer Rice, and really, it was one of the early expressionist American plays. Even more extreme than things like *R.U.R.* [*Rossum's Universal Robots* by Karel Capek]. So we did all kinds of things in this, and we put on a play a week.

DESSERE:

A play a week?

GORDON:

Oh, sure. At the summer place, yes.

DESSERE:

Oh, boy.

GORDON:

And, you know, [we would] play one performance, and bang, the next day we were working on the next one—building the scenery, rehearsing it, and so forth and so on.

DESSERE:

It was wonderful training,

GORDON:

Of course.

DESSERE:

What about Yale? How many plays did they put on?

GORDON:

They only did about—for the public—only about six or seven at the most. Maybe six, I would say.

DESSERE:

A year?

GORDON:

A year. But there was all kinds of activity going on—student-directed stuff which was not shown to the public and done at a little basement kind of theater, like [Macgowan Hall room] 1330, about that size.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (December 12, 1988)

DESSERE:

Okay, so now let's go back to Yale. It seems that Yale didn't put on a lot of comedies.

GORDON:

No, that's not so. We did comedies, and as a matter of fact, I was, among the students, one who did more comedies than most. I suppose it was part of—just the way I grew up was very much involved with comedy. That's the way I got a kind of social acceptance that I didn't get by virtue of my personality or my good looks, that I was the guy who knew all the jokes. Which is what got me into writing for the humor magazine, you see.

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

And I was always very interested in that. I know the first important directing that I myself did—. What happened was in the first couple of weeks of school at Yale, the more advanced students directed the incoming students, so that the more advanced—you know, students who were the directors, second- or third-year people—could see who was around. The thing that I chose to do was the first act of a Noel Coward play, *Hay Fever*. That was really the first important directing that I did at Yale.

DESSERE:

How did they react to that? It seems that comedy wouldn't be in keeping with such an official institution. It seems that they would like, let's say, something like drama or tragedy.

GORDON:

There wasn't really any prejudice against comedy there. It was regarded as something which we all enjoy. And let's face it—some of the comedies would be comedies of Shaw, for example. But students wrote comedies as well. [George Pierce] Baker was quite receptive to comedies. The only thing is they'd better be funny. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, of course. Otherwise, he would criticize you.

GORDON:

Right, if it didn't work. He would be very critical of us. He was not exactly supportive.

DESSERE:

But it seems that comedy sometimes could bring out some maybe controversial themes. Would that be of any offense to the community or to Yale in general?

GORDON:

I don't recall any such incidents occurring. The thing that you said about comedy—almost by implication, in terms of what you said, is something that I felt very conscious of and strongly about later on after my first experience in Hollywood, where I never had the opportunity to do a comedy. I couldn't even

buy a ticket to a comedy at first, until I did *Pillow Talk*, which happened because Ross Hunter, the producer, had seen a comedy I had directed on Broadway. I did a lot of comedies on Broadway. People were saying, "How did a nice, serious, socially conscious intellectual like you wind up in a whorehouse?" [laughter] I said, "Wait a minute. What are you talking about? You don't understand what the significance of comedy is: that comedy is always critical, and that to the degree that comedy is exposing human folly, social folly, to ridicule, that's a very meritorious undertaking." I remember this thing coming to a kind of a head one time. We are way ahead of ourselves now. We're talking in the late fifties. I had a press interview that the studio had set up, in conjunction with publicizing *Pillow Talk*, with a man who was then the head of the entertainment section of the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*, a fellow named Philip [K.] Scheuer—sort of combining what [Charles] Champlin and [Dan] Sullivan now do at the *Times*. I had been hearing that kind of comment. And he [said it], and I began to say what I just said. He was very interested. He was taking notes and kept saying, "Wait, wait, wait." I said, "Look, fella. I can't talk to you this way. If you're interested, I'll write you a letter, and then you can use it as an interview or whatever you want of what I think about comedy." Whether or not—I'm not sure—I was the originator of a phrase that became a cliché, the title of it was "Comedy Is No Laughing Matter," in which I wrote a lengthy letter to him. I probably still have a copy of it somewhere. It started off by saying that I remembered a phrase I had come across in the writing of a very respectable British litterateur and critic a little before the middle point of the nineteenth century, a man named William Hazlitt, who once wrote—I think it was in some correspondence that I came across. He said that, "Shakespeare's tragedies are better than Shakespeare's comedies, because tragedy is better than comedy." I said that that line was memorable to me, not because it was particularly true, but because it was funny. It is a great comic line. Why is it comic? Because it makes fun of a certain kind of intellectual complacency, and it's an argument in a circle. I mean, "It's right because I think it's right." You know, "It's right because I believe it." Or "I believe it because it's right." It's that kind of thing. That's what it is making fun of. That was the starting point of the essay. Then I went on about a whole number of things, you know, comparing the historical value of comedy, that we know much more about, shall we say, the France of Louis

XIV from Moliere than we do from Corneille or Racine. We know more about Periclean Athens from Aristophanes than we do from Aristotle or Sophocles.

DESSERE:

As historians, yeah.

GORDON:

You know, a whole lot of things. I wound up by saying at the very end, "Mr. Hazlitt notwithstanding, comedy is better than tragedy." It was just kind of a mischievous article, but it did contain a number of things that I felt about the importance, the validity, of comedy. I pointed out that everybody likes comedy, but nobody respects it enough. But now I don't think that that is true, as true as it was at one time, where, you know, you say, "Comedy is frivolous." We have a Puritan background, and anything that we enjoy can't be very good for us. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes, it's like Pascal. Pascal used to say that about entertainment. All right. So during the second year in Yale you wrote, basically, and you were involved in productions.

GORDON:

Yes. I was a very busy fellow.

DESSERE:

Very busy, yes. That was what I was going to say—plus working in the cafeteria.

GORDON:

And having a fairly extensive love life too.

DESSERE:

Oh, you had time for that. You still had time for that. Because it seems that most people who work in the film or in the theater have no time for their personal endeavors. They are married to the film they are making. Anyway, your third year—so you passed, I suppose.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I got the degree.

DESSERE:

I mean, you passed into the third year?

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

Was there anything expected from you in that third year, which would be the graduation year?

GORDON:

Yeah, I wrote a thesis play, which is gathering dust in the Library of Congress, I suppose, because it was copyrighted.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yes, but it is terrible. [laughter]

DESSERE:

You didn't like it.

GORDON:

Oh, God.

DESSERE:

But you never produced it?

GORDON:

No.

DESSERE:

Nobody produced it?

GORDON:

No, nobody produced it. I never showed it to anyone.

DESSERE:

Except George Pierce Baker?

GORDON:

Well, of course. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Did they produce any plays by students at Yale?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. I would say there were several student plays that were done when I was there. I can only remember one that was written by someone who was currently there, but they did do plays of recent alumni. So there must have been quite a few originals that were done—at least one a year and perhaps more than that. There were more than that. I seem to remember at least three—four. I remember four that were student-written plays. Some of them by people who had been out of school for four or five years.

DESSERE:

I see. And were they working in play performances?

GORDON:

To some degree, yes.

DESSERE:

How many people were in the department?

GORDON:

It was limited when I went there to 125.

DESSERE:

How many did they admit per year?

GORDON:

They admitted around 75 to 80, and then it thinned out. Whether people dropped out or whether they were dropped is hard to know. In many instances they were not invited back in the second year or third year.

DESSERE:

So when you were invited in the third year—

GORDON:

So in the third year, for example, there were about 15, maybe.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see.

GORDON:

That's all. Well, no, there were more than that. There were 12 playwrights, then a few in design, and a few in production. There probably were about 20 third-year students—something like that.

DESSERE:

What type of facilities did they have?

GORDON:

They had a fine theater.

DESSERE:

Big? Like what would you say?

GORDON:

It was not as huge as Ralph Freud [Playhouse, UCLA]. It was actually a much better theater than that in many respects. They had great shops, and then they had a few rehearsal rooms—the costume shop, construction shop, and all of that.

DESSERE:

Did you have competition with other people to reserve rooms and things like this?

GORDON:

Not formally. I mean, we were always struggling for space to rehearse in. We would rehearse in the dressing rooms, we would rehearse in the basement, and so forth and so on.

DESSERE:

So I suppose when you were directing or writing a play and doing some production in the third year, you used the people from the first year to help you in the crew position. It was the sort of hierarchy.

GORDON:

But even third-year people. I worked on crews in my third year. It got so that you had a little more selectivity to say if you were—I remember once being assigned to a costume crew, and I didn't want to work on a costume crew. I did once. I always was interested in lighting. So that I would swap with somebody.

DESSERE:

And it was possible to get away with that. I see.

GORDON:

It was not quite as rigidly organized as it is here.

DESSERE:

I see. I see. But what I want to ask you also about this third year— So the people who were specializing, let's say, in designing, they were working in a totally separate unit from you? Or were you supposed to provide some material for them to work on?

GORDON:

They had assignments that were appropriate to their specialization, but they were not separate, really. I took a class in the history of design, for example, with the students who were the design specialists, except I didn't do the projects. In other words, the lecture aspect of it I was in on. So there was a degree of blending. Let me say, I think that there were closer relationships among all the students in a smaller school than there are here. I mean, here

we have—what?—350 undergraduates. But even among the graduate students here—because we only have, in the M.F.A. program, about 70, perhaps. They don't all know each other, I don't think.

DESSERE:

With George Pierce Baker, what was your relationship? Was he very distant? You already told me an anecdote—

GORDON:

He was very distant. He was very, very elegant, very New England. I remember in my very first interview when I first came, he listened to my terrible diction from Baltimore and said, "You will take speech." That was the first thing he said to me.

DESSERE:

Were you scared when you met him?

GORDON:

Not really. I guess I was in awe of him. He was a very dignified, portly gentleman with a pince-nez and a ribbon. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Quite a character.

GORDON:

Very old school, you know.

DESSERE:

So he was intimidating.

GORDON:

Yes, he was a bit.

DESSERE:

You were intimidated when you arrived at Yale?

GORDON:

Oh, God, yes. I was scared to death. I had never been away to go to school. Luckily, I had a roommate from my neighborhood and my college who was a law student. We roomed together the first year in a dormitory.

DESSERE:

Did you stay in the dorms the whole time?

GORDON:

No, no, just that first year.

DESSERE:

I see. After that you were able to find an apartment.

GORDON:

I just took a room. I didn't have an apartment. I just had a room in a rooming house.

DESSERE:

Did your parents come to help you settle down or anything? Give you support?

GORDON:

No, I didn't need that.

DESSERE:

No?

GORDON:

I don't know that my parents ever came to Yale. I can't recall that they did. I never invited them.

DESSERE:

But they trusted you, obviously. Were you supporting yourself totally?

GORDON:

No, I was getting money from home all the time.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Some, you know, not enough to get by on.

DESSERE:

Of course. To pay tuition.

GORDON:

Yeah, right. As I say, I was earning money during the summers then by being a counselor at this camp.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. So you worked also as a counselor. I had understood that you were at the camp also as a participant.

GORDON:

I first was a camper. Then I graduated up.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see, and you became a counselor.

GORDON:

I became a counselor.

DESSERE:

And that was enough to help you to make it through?

GORDON:

Well, it was not enough, but it helped a little.

DESSERE:

Were you able to get through the year with that?

GORDON:

Well, also with help from home. I was getting a monthly allowance.

DESSERE:

The university wouldn't give any scholarships?

GORDON:

Not at that time. Now they do. Now I would say that 80 percent—I remember reading a letter from the president to the alumni that roughly 80 percent of the students at Yale get some kind of financial aid, as much as that. At the time that I was a student, I would say that some partial scholarships, or whatever—maybe 10 percent of the student body received them, not more.

DESSERE:

At the school did you notice any politics among the department of the school?

GORDON:

In the faculty?

DESSERE:

Yes, in the faculty,

GORDON:

I was not aware of it then. I mean, I have since read about it. But I discovered a great deal when I came here. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes. Did you go on with writing for newspapers?

GORDON:

No, no. That I didn't have time to do, believe me. We were working seven days a week and pretty much twenty-hour days. It was really very tough.

DESSERE:

I want to ask you, anyway, about when—was it at the university, or was it before that—? Were you interested in politics at the time in terms of—?

GORDON:

No, not really. It was not until I got to New York later. I came out in the midst of the Depression, and suddenly I became aware. As a matter of fact, the only

person that I knew of who was really politically oriented at that time was the late George Sklar.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, yes. Obviously, he wrote plays with a certain social content.

GORDON:

He was one who had come from more of a working-class background than I did. You know, we listened to him, but we didn't take it very seriously. We were into the arts. It was only later that the new awareness, insights, and whatever developed.

DESSERE:

I've never been to Baltimore, but I get the feeling that it is a city with a strong industrial type of background.

GORDON:

Yes, it was a large industrial as well as—it was superseded later, but it started as a maritime seaport, too. You see, it is on the head of the Chesapeake Bay. Shipping was a very, very important part. Later on, that was passed far beyond by New York, which became the major seaport on the eastern coast of the United States.

DESSERE:

Did you think the whole town at the time was a sort of harmonious whole, or was there a big difference between, let's say, poor people—?

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

There was a discrepancy?

GORDON:

Sure there was. It was fragmented in a lot of ways. Of course, the discrimination against blacks was total.

DESSERE:

I see. There were a lot of them?

GORDON:

Yes, but very, very segregated. I mean, racial discrimination—I never went to school with a black student—not until I was at Yale. Not even at Johns Hopkins [University]. I never saw a black student there. When I was at Yale, I think there was one black in all the time that I was there. Theaters were segregated.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Oh, sure. Blacks couldn't go to a white movie house.

DESSERE:

You mean in Baltimore?

GORDON:

In Baltimore.

DESSERE:

Oh, my.

GORDON:

New York was relatively more integrated way in advance of a place like Baltimore or Washington. One of the things that I think the Actors Equity should take the greatest pride in is the fact that in Washington blacks were only allowed in the second balcony in legitimate theaters and Equity said that Equity members cannot play in Washington until that is changed. Equity—I guess it was in the forties—elected a black president. Equity had been such a stiff, hidebound kind of association of ladies and gentlemen. There were books that had been written about—*The Revolt of the Actors* [by Alfred Harding], which had to do with the formation of Equity. They were terribly exploited, actors were, and the union was nothing. It was a cream puff. We didn't get paid for rehearsals at all. We only got a two-week guarantee. There were no

established minimums. That began with the beginning of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's first administration. Ultimately, Equity became, with great struggle, a militant union and did finally take this position with respect to discrimination, which did not exist in New York, but which did in Washington—in the capital of this country.

DESSERE:

Well into the forties.

GORDON:

Well into the forties, yes. Yes. They finally broke that down. But there was a period of about three years where no Equity show ever played in Washington, D. C. Would you believe that? Two years, something like that. They were absolutely boycotted.

DESSERE:

Because of that discrimination. I was reading recently about Carson McCullers. Well, we'll talk about her later, but she was interested in—she was attracted to black people because of that feeling of discrimination. Did you feel the same way? Were you shocked by that even as a little boy?

GORDON:

No, not as a little boy at all. It only came later.

DESSERE:

You noticed them suddenly. It hit your face.

GORDON:

That was the way things were. You were superior to them. They were not to be trusted. You had them as servants and that was all.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Really. As far as my awareness is concerned, it actually happened when I came to New York. About the third play that I was involved in, a play

called *Stevedore*, which is a militant black play with a cast that was 85 percent black, I really got to know blacks for the first time.

DESSERE:

You didn't know them at all?

GORDON:

Not really, no.

DESSERE:

And you had never had any curiosity before you actually worked on that particular play?

GORDON:

Well, I was beginning. When I first came to New York and saw the breadlines in New York—you know, this was in 1932. It was the depths of the Depression. And that's when a social awareness began to develop.

DESSERE:

Stevedore was written by George Sklar, whom you knew.

GORDON:

Sklar and a man named Paul Peters, both of whom were whites. But the cast was preponderantly black. And I was the stage manager, at first, and the assistant director on that show. I got to know them. I remember astonishing—as we think back on it—examples of discrimination. I remember one particular case. There were about four members of that cast who were also members of an internationally famous choir, a black choir [the Hall Johnson Negro Choir]. Hall Johnson was the name of the conductor. There was a situation in which we were playing, and they had to sing a concert in Washington, D. C. They were on a very tight schedule, so they were going to fly. A reservation was made for them. When they went to pick up their tickets, they were told, "No, you have no reservations." They wouldn't even allow blacks on airplanes in those days. This was, like, in 1934. I remember I was up all night making phone calls. We finally got them on, but only by raising a hell of a stink. I got a lawyer, and single-handedly—well, with the lawyer, we were able to arrange it so that

they could get there and come back and still be on time to do their performance on Monday night.

DESSERE:

What about a play like *Porgy* [and *Bess*], for instance, which was before that?

GORDON:

Porgy, yes, was before that, but it was totally apolitical. I mean, what was—

DESSERE:

Du Bose Heyward.

GORDON:

Yes, I'm trying to remember the name of it. You know, *Catfish Heaven* or whatever. What was the name of that play?

DESSERE:

Oh, you mean—not *Green Pastures*?

GORDON:

Green Pastures, yes. Politically conscious blacks detest that. That was the old Uncle Tom tradition. There were very, very few militant struggles for the civil rights of blacks. I think that *Stevadore* was a real trailblazer in that respect.

DESSERE:

Yes. We are going to talk about it when we talk about your stay in New York.

GORDON:

As a matter of fact, Beverly [J.] Robinson, who teaches history of black theater, has frequently made references to that play. You know, I think once I was a guest speaker in her class about that experience.

DESSERE:

Yes. It is a very interesting subject, definitely. So let's talk about the last year at Yale. What did you do? You wrote this play that you're not so proud of.

GORDON:

That was one of several of them.

DESSERE:

Oh, you wrote several?

GORDON:

Yeah. I wrote at least two full-length at that time.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

One each semester, yeah.

DESSERE:

I asked you about George Baker. What about the other teachers? They were not permanent faculty? They came from outside?

GORDON:

No. Most of them were permanent faculty. The one who taught scene design was a working designer in New York who would come up one day a week.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

Then there was one course in criticism that we had that was conducted by John Mason Brown, who was a critic on one of the New York dailies, the Metropolitan dailies [*New York Evening Post*], as well as for one of the magazines [*Theatre Arts Monthly*]. He came up for one semester. He was terrible. He was a very successful ladies-club lecturer, but we were too serious for him. I mean, he didn't prepare. He gave us chitchat lectures. We gave him a very bad time, and he never came back again.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yes. We were very tough on him. [laughter]

DESSERE:

How did they react to you, those people? Because it seems the school was so new still. Was there some kind of prestige for them to come and lecture at Yale?

GORDON:

Yale had prestige, regardless of the fact that the department itself was relatively young. Just the imprimatur of Yale itself was enough to make it a respectable engagement.

DESSERE:

Because I can imagine that there was some kind of, maybe, discrepancy between the "real world" and the world of the university.

GORDON:

Well, there was. This is one of the reasons why you didn't proclaim the fact that you came from the drama school, that you had an M. F. A., which was a very new degree at that time. I think it had just begun at Yale with my graduating class. Up until that time, you simply went and you got a certificate or something of that sort, but there was no academic diploma that went with it.

DESSERE:

During that year were you ever worried about your future?

GORDON:

Always.

DESSERE:

Always. [laughter]

GORDON:

Always, of course.

DESSERE:

Because it seems that it would be difficult for, you know—I mean, I can imagine—for your parents. Your father and mother probably wanted some kind of security for you.

GORDON:

Of course they did. But so did I. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

No, it was very scary, and I seriously contemplated going into the university situation right away. But then I said, "I want to take a crack at Broadway, " because I felt I would always reproach myself if I hadn't made a try. I figured that a university position would be possible in a couple of years if the other didn't work out.

DESSERE:

At Yale did they regard Broadway very seriously?

GORDON:

Oh, sure. Sure. Just as we regard Hollywood very seriously. You know, how can you not?

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. You know, as opposed to the English theater, you would say that they would still consider Broadway really very important?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, because there was enough that was important on Broadway, even though a lot of it was fluff.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (December 12, 1988)

DESSERE:

So the last year you wrote those plays. Did you produce something? Did you direct anything?

GORDON:

At school?

DESSERE:

Your last year.

GORDON:

Yes, yes, I did some directing. As a matter of fact, I directed a Strindberg play.

DESSERE:

Which one?

GORDON:

The Father. The more surrealist plays I didn't do. You know, little things, little bits and pieces. I was taking directing classes all the time. I did not do a directing thesis. And doing a lot of acting. I remember one student did a production of—what he did was a cut-down version of the Beaumarchais play of *The Marriage [of Figaro]* and incorporated some of Mozart's music. So it was like a mini opera, sort of. I played Figaro. [laughter]

DESSERE:

How nice. So you did that your last year, too? You had time to study that?

GORDON:

Yes, I think that was in my last—yes, it was, because that was a thesis project of a classmate of mine.

DESSERE:

How did you learn that you were done and you had successfully completed all the curriculum? How did you learn about that? Did they say that officially to you?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I knew that I got my—I didn't stay for the commencement, because I had this job that I had started before. I never went to my Yale [University] commencement.

DESSERE:

Oh really?

GORDON:

No. I got the diploma, finally, in the mail.

DESSERE:

But did you get together with some of your teachers? Did you get, from George [Pierce] Baker, words of wisdom or something like that?

GORDON:

Not particularly. Not in any formal sense. I took off, actually, before school was really over. I remember, on Memorial Day was [when] that job started. So I had to leave at the end of May, and the commencement and all of that stuff was not until early June.

DESSERE:

Did you regret that?

GORDON:

No, no, of course not.

DESSERE:

What about your family? Were they happy that you had completed that?

GORDON:

I dare say. [laughter] They invested a good deal of money in me.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course. So, you got a job before you actually left Yale?

GORDON:

Yes. Some people would come to Yale, and I remember being interviewed there by someone. Several of us were interviewed, and I got the job from someone who came from New York to New Haven. He interviewed some of the students, and I got the job.

DESSERE:

Oh, somebody interviewed already at the school.

GORDON:

Yeah, they came to the school. There were two of us who were in charge of that program. The other fellow was doing the musicals, and I was doing the straight plays. I was acting in his musicals, and he was acting in my straight plays.

DESSERE:

What kind of job was that, the job that you were going to get?

GORDON:

Oh, this was a—what shall I say? It was not in the Catskills—it was not in the borscht circuit. It was way up in the Adirondacks, but it was connected with a resort hotel.

DESSERE:

I see. I see. So that is where you started producing plays. Or were you working in another capacity?

GORDON:

No, no. I was just there doing that.

DESSERE:

Producing?

GORDON:

I wasn't producing. I was directing. Together we produced it, he and I—the co-whatever we were.

DESSERE:

He was a friend from school.

GORDON:

No, no, he was not. He was from New York. And he had had some experience in this kind of place before. I had not. He was a little older.

DESSERE:

I see. So he is the one who told you about that.

GORDON:

No. I don't know how it happened. Somebody came, and a notice was posted, "This guy is interviewing." The producer—or the man who was the proprietor of the hotel, for all I know—I met with him. I only subsequently met this other man who was my collaborator.

DESSERE:

What was the principle of this particular work you were supposed to do? It was attached to a hotel. You were supposed to entertain?

GORDON:

Exactly. I did one play a week, and he did one musical a week. In other words, I guess they both were performed on the weekend.

DESSERE:

Did you see anybody from your old school after that? Were you close to some of your friends? Did you see them and run into them later?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. When I came back to New York. Yes, [but] not immediately. We saw one another. Then later on I shared an apartment with two guys I had gone to school with. But not immediately. As a matter of fact, I had a roommate, who was Vernon Duke. That was during my first job in New York. We got to be friends during the course of rehearsals, and we took a place together.

DESSERE:

So you worried about your future. So you had this job that was this summer job.

GORDON:

When I was down to my last hundred dollars, I got the next job—that kind of thing.

DESSERE:

But you moved to New York when exactly?

GORDON:

Right after Labor Day.

DESSERE:

I see. So you went and you took an apartment.

GORDON:

No, I just—I think the first place I lived was just a tiny, little room in a hotel where my uncle [Charles Kunen] lived.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. Your uncle lived in a hotel?

GORDON:

Yes. He was a bachelor. He lived in a hotel for years.

DESSERE:

That's very nice.

GORDON:

Well, that was not that unusual in New York at that time. I mean, people who were single often did.

DESSERE:

The same thing happened in France. You know, there is a very famous comedian who used to live in hotels all the time like this. So I find the idea very interesting.

GORDON:

As a matter of fact, there was a composer—and I'm going to forget his name—he did the score for *See the Jaguar*, a play that I did later on. I can't think of his name. It will come to me when I'm not thinking about it at all. He has been dead for a number of years. [Alec Wilder] He was a very respected composer among musicians.

DESSERE:

Did he write for films, also?

GORDON:

No, never did.

DESSERE:

Only theater?

GORDON:

Not even theater very much. It was just music music. The story is told that he lived in the Algonquin Hotel for twenty-eight years and never got off a daily rate, because he wasn't sure he was going to stay. [laughter]

DESSERE:

That's a wonderful story. So you were in New York. So your uncle understood your situation very well, I suppose, because he had been through that himself. Was he notifying your parents with reassuring—?

GORDON:

I don't know.

DESSERE:

You don't know about that, okay. So there you started looking for jobs. How did you go around?

GORDON:

That's one of the nice things about New York, as opposed to Hollywood, where you look for jobs by sitting on the phone. In New York you walked up and down the streets, and you met somebody and they'd say, "Oh, they're casting over here." And you go up to the office, and you knock on the door.

DESSERE:

Oh, that is the way.

GORDON:

You could work at looking for work in New York. That was one of the things I saw that appalled me when I first came to Hollywood, that the actors couldn't do that here. There was no way. You can't just go to the studios, they won't let you in. More often than not in New York, you were turned down, of course, but once in a while—and sometimes they have open calls, and you go to the theater and try out for things in some way. You'd get the news from people you saw on Forty-fifth Street.

DESSERE:

Yes, So sometimes the jobs were posted outside?

GORDON:

No. You just had to know on the inside. Then a fellow named Leo Shull started a kind of a newspaper which told who was casting.

DESSERE:

Like *Drama-logue* here?

GORDON:

Yes. It started many years ago on a very small basis. I think at first it was just mimeographed.

DESSERE:

So it wasn't really common practice at that time. You had to spend time a little bit socializing with many people?

GORDON:

Well, not socializing exactly, but yes. You found where other people whom you knew from school were.

DESSERE:

Because they all went to New York?

GORDON:

Actually, my first important job came because a company [Theatre Union] was being formed to do—the first play was going to be written by [George] Sklar and [Albert] Maltz. They were looking for a stage manager. They said, "We know a great guy from school," and I got the job.

DESSERE:

So that was your very first job?

GORDON:

Not the very first. It was about the second. The first one was the musical that I just lucked into.

DESSERE:

Yes, *Walk a Little Faster*. At Yale, you hadn't had a chance to do any musicals?

GORDON:

No.

DESSERE:

Did they banish that genre more or less?

GORDON:

Let me say, we did a little bit, like the thing I told you about, my friend who did *The Marriage of Figaro*.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes.

GORDON:

He was interested in musicals and opera very much. Another project that he did that I played in was a short Gilbert and Sullivan piece called *Trial by Jury*. That was done there at Yale. We did musicals, we did Gilbert and Sullivan—and at that camp, too. So I was not wholly unfamiliar with it. I knew how to do a time step. I could dance a little. I remember coming to New York with the

M.F.A. hidden in my inside pocket, and the first question was, "Can you hoof?"
[laughter] I said, "Yeah."

DESSERE:

Musicals seem to be in a different category than straight plays.

GORDON:

Yes. Yes. Well, particularly at that time. Less so today, of course, both in terms of quantity and importance. It's interesting, for example, what we used to call "musical comedy" is a term we don't use anymore. It is "musical theater" now. Because it has become a very important genre now. If you look at what is on in New York now, you will find it is preponderantly musicals. Many of them are revivals. Starting really with Rodgers and Hammerstein—I think that *Oklahoma* was a very important turning point. So that it wasn't just a play and then you had a number, but the music and the songs were incorporated into the dramatic development of the play. And that got another sort of acceleration with Frank Loesser, and then, of course, with Stephen Sondheim. So it became more important in contemporary theater in America today than the straight play.

DESSERE:

Yes, it is a very important genre. But at Yale, you didn't have anybody who would be trained in that field.

GORDON:

Not particularly, no.

DESSERE:

I was wondering about that, because the actors that you used were yourselves and the other people in the class who were not doing lighting that day and happened to be the actors.

GORDON:

You know the Group Theatre subsequently did one musical.

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

Johnny Johnson.

DESSERE:

Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

GORDON:

And there, we did not have professional singers. We were actors who sang. We were coached during a whole summer by Kurt Weill.

DESSERE:

It was the *Sprechgesang* technique.

GORDON:

A lot of that, yes.

DESSERE:

So you got this job. You were in New York. Your friend George Sklar gave you a job as a—

GORDON:

And I was with them for two full years, four productions.

DESSERE:

Of the same play?

GORDON:

No, no. Four different plays, the last two of which I directed. I was very young at the time. I was about twenty-five, and I directed my first professional plays.

DESSERE:

Which were?

GORDON:

The first one that I did—well, I was billed as assistant director of *Stevedore*—the one I told you about—which closed at the end of the season and then reopened the following fall with cast replacements. And it played shortly in

New York and then went on tour. I directed the second production of that, just refurbishing it and recasting it and so on. The next production I did was a play written by an Austrian dramatist named Friedrich Wolf called *Sailors of Cattaro* (which is Kotor in Yugoslavia), which was based on a mutiny on a warship at the end of World War I. Then I did another play by Albert Maltz called *Black Pit*, which was a labor struggle play. Then I joined the Group Theatre after that.

DESSERE:

What was the year when you did all those plays you just mentioned?

GORDON:

Starting in the fall of '33, through 1935.

DESSERE:

I see. So those plays were produced at that time. So it was already the Depression.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

When you arrived in New York, was the Depression already at a strong point?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. It was the depths of the Depression. I came to New York in the fall of 1932. As a matter of fact, the first job that I had closed immediately after [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's first inauguration, which at that time was in March, not in January. One of the first things that he did was close the banks for a moratorium of about ten days, I think it was. And there was a moratorium on all debts, but you couldn't get any money. You couldn't draw any money from the banks. The show folded as a consequence of that, so I was out of work again, looking for work.

DESSERE:

What was the atmosphere in New York at the time you arrived? Was it something scary for you at the same time, because you were new in that type of environment? It was the "real world."

GORDON:

You know, there was a certain anxiety, of course, as to whether one would make it. But I was more conscious of the consequences, the impact, of the Depression then than I had been in school. We were pretty hothoused up there. As I said, seeing breadlines and seeing people selling apples on the street corners for a nickel, and so on, that really began to awaken something that had not been something I was particularly conscious of up until that time. So that you began to become aware of the fact that there was a serious dislocation in American society. And it was that that gravitated me towards this first theater, where *Peace on Earth*, that play of Sklar and Maltz's, which was an antiwar play—and, in conjunction with that—as a matter of fact, in the summer of '33, before we went into rehearsal with the play, everybody associated with the starting of that theater was away, and I manned the office by myself all summer long. I took care of correspondence, soliciting funding, sponsorships, and stuff like that. I began to become acquainted with people who were left-oriented through that association. It was a left-wing theater, there was no question. I mean, that was its objective. They were doing propaganda plays.

DESSERE:

You mean, they would be pro-Soviet, would you say?

GORDON:

To some degree.

DESSERE:

To some degree?

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, it was more oriented to here, but it was revolutionary in its spirit. The spirit of protest was very much—

DESSERE:

The subject of those plays. You know, *Peace on Earth, Sailors of Cattaro*—

GORDON:

Stevedore.

DESSERE:

Stevedore. What about *Exiles*? Was it also—?

GORDON:

Exiles was just a little off-Broadway thing that was done. That was a play of James Joyce, the only play he did.

DESSERE:

Yes, I was going to ask you if that was the James Joyce play. Because I found another *Exiles* by Richard Harding Davis. I was wondering if it was the same or James Joyce.

GORDON:

No, this was the James Joyce play. It was the only play he wrote. It was a four-character play. We did it first, just a few performances, at the New School for Social Research, which had a little theater auditorium. That was where [Erwin] Piscator worked later, shortly after that, when he came to this country.

DESSERE:

Yes, Piscator was in this little school. But you never had a chance to meet him?

GORDON:

No, that was later. I mean, Piscator took over later, and I wasn't there then.

DESSERE:

You weren't there. Yes, I've heard of that event. Harold Clurman— You said you manned this little office and you were trying to get funds, and that was when you got acquainted with—

GORDON:

Not with Harold.

DESSERE:

Oh, no, no. I know. But I was going to tell you something that he said, before you entered the Group Theatre, you know, that I've read in *The Fervent Years*. He said that it was very difficult to have a play with a social content made at the time when they started the Group Theatre.

GORDON:

That's true with regard to Broadway.

DESSERE:

It seems that you said that you had the same problems when you were manning this little office, trying to raise funds. Harold Clurman has a long passage in which he says that he was going to see people to get some money, and people would say, "Oh, that is a very interesting play. I wish you good luck, and I like the theme and everything, " but nobody gave him any money.

GORDON:

That's true.

DESSERE:

So was it the same problem?

GORDON:

In a way. I'll tell you, there was something else involved. The first play that this new company produced was an antiwar play. There were pacifist organizations that were interested, and various kinds of organizations supported that initial production of the Theatre Union, you see. I forget what the names [were]. The Socialist Party was involved and the Communist Party was interested and labor unions were interested, because there was that antiwar spirit, and that was what the play was really about.

DESSERE:

It was an antiwar play.

GORDON:

It is an antiwar play, yes. It was a very broad spectrum, all left of center, that were in support of that theater. And that's where I saw names on the letterhead. I corresponded with a lot of these people. I didn't meet too many of them at first, but it was a very, very wide spectrum of left-wing individuals and left-wing organizations that supported that theater.

DESSERE:

So you got acquainted with those people, really. Did you go to see them after that and attend some meetings which would be more of a political nature than just trying to get money?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Well, not at that particular time, but later, you know. That theater existed on organizational support to a great degree. Unions would buy blocs of tickets, and various other organizations would use it for fund-raisers and that sort of thing. So there was that kind of contact in some measure. I was not directly involved in the organizational aspect of it very much, except when I was performing that pro tem function over the summer. Then after that I was involved in production.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. So at that time, you were interested in doing something with a social content?

GORDON:

That generated at that particular time.

DESSERE:

Yes, because it was also something of the time, because of what you saw: the long lines, people selling apples. But who were the people who would attend those plays, as a matter of fact?

GORDON:

It was actually geared to be a working-class audience. The prices were very low—lower than Broadway, generally speaking—and very often, as I said, many unions supported the theater and would have benefits. They would

charge a little surcharge on the ticket as fund-raisers for themselves, and like that.

DESSERE:

So those plays were well received.

GORDON:

Very well received, very well received. They were all, in terms of runs and so on, quite successful—some more than others. I would say that of that group of the first four plays, Stevedore was the one that had the greatest audience success.

DESSERE:

For that play, you were able to get a black cast?

GORDON:

Negro organizations, of course, gave it tremendous support. The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], the Urban League, and more militant black organizations—competing organizations within the black community. So, I mean, that is where the support came from. It wasn't a carriage trade.

DESSERE:

Since Stevedore was a black play but written by two white men and directed by you, the second half—who directed it originally?

DESSERE:

Michael Blankfort.

DESSERE:

Michael Blankfort. Did they accept that fact?

GORDON:

Who?

DESSERE:

The black community. Did they like that? Did they mind?

GORDON:

Oh, sure, but it was the play that they were very supportive of. There were blacks, of course, very much in the audience. As a matter of fact, in the course of the talk with Beverly [J. Robinson]—in one of the books, I guess, something was reported. It was reported that such and such happened, which I know actually did happen, because I was there. And that is, near the end of the play, the blacks were barricaded within their little ghetto against the lynch mob that was coming. It was a pitched battle, meaning rocks were being thrown. They built the barricade—that was part of the action of the third act. Ultimately, somebody was killed, but they fended off the attackers. In the middle of the battle, somebody leaped across the footlights and came and joined the action from the audience.

DESSERE:

Oh, that is extraordinary.

GORDON:

Right near the end of the play. And during the curtain calls he took a bow with the cast. It was "Bojangles" Bill Robinson, the famous dancer. Now, what he as an extrovert, as an actor, did, everybody in the audience wanted to do, empathetically. But he did it. There was a question in the book as to whether the story that such and such happened—as though maybe it didn't. But it did.

DESSERE:

Besides the cast changes from Michael Blankfort, did you change other things?

GORDON:

Oh, a few things in the staging, but mostly it was simply reinterpretation that needed to be done to accommodate the cast changes.

DESSERE:

About reinterpretation, I forgot to ask you, when you were at Yale did you do manuscripts evaluation with Geroge Baker?

GORDON:

No.

DESSERE:

No, there was no such thing?

GORDON:

Not as such. My manuscript analysis class came about in a lecture that I gave at Yale, in a way. I remember getting this call from a man named Curtis Canfield, who was then chairman of the department.

DESSERE:

So we are in what year?

GORDON:

This was in the fifties.

DESSERE:

So we are jumping ahead, then.

GORDON:

This was like 1955, I guess, or something. He asked me whether I would participate in this alumni lecture program. I said, "Sure." I said, "What should it be about? What should this lecture be about?" He said, "Well, we're getting toward the end of the year, and the graduating students are very concerned—most of them—about how you get a job as a director." I remember telling him on the phone, "Look, Dr. Canfield, I'll spare you the expense of taking me to lunch, because this is going to be the shortest lecture on record. I have nothing to tell them." He said a very sensible thing, "Well, think back on your own experience and that would be the basis, " and so on. I said, "Why, sure. That's reasonable." The moment I hung up, I remember, I almost broke into a cold sweat when I suddenly realized how large a role the factor of luck had played in my own experience. In any case, what I ultimately told them grew out of an experience that I had had many years before when trying to get a job as a director. This was in a very good summer stock company, and having been rejected in the way—you know, the usual question, "So tell me, what have you done?" I said to this producer, "No." [laughter] He looked at me in astonishment. I said, "Anything that I'm going to tell you is not going to get me the job. But give me a script that you're interested in, let me take it home and

study it, analyze it, make production suggestions, and I think maybe I can convince you that I know what I'm talking about." "Fair enough." He pulled a script out of a bookshelf, or whatever. I remember he ripped the title page off of it and gave it to me. I went home and for about four or five days worked hours over it, drew ground plans, script revisions, suggestions, etc., and brought it back to him on Friday. He said, "Well, I'll have to read it over the weekend. Come back on Monday and I'll talk to you." I came back the following Monday, and he said, "Well, I didn't want to tell you this: this was a play I had written which had been produced and which flopped." He had also written—by himself, I think—a very successful play a few years before called *Sailor Beware*. It was a very successful play. It had historical significance in the whole [Actors] Equity situation, which is another whole story. That was back in the thirties. This one failed, and he was gracious enough to say, "Had I redone it as you suggested, I think it would have made it. It would have had a good chance." Well, it would make a great story if I said I got the job. I didn't. [laughter]

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (December 12, 1988)

GORDON:

No, I didn't get the job, because his co-producer, who was really the principal producer who had run this Bucks County Playhouse—a very, very good stock company near Philadelphia—was out of town at the first meeting. I hadn't met him. In the meantime, he had engaged someone else for the job. But that became the theme for my lecture at Yale, which was, "Study how to analyze scripts." In a sense, it became the whole pattern of what I've been teaching in that manuscript analysis class—that used to be called "manuscript evaluation," a title which I hated. I changed it to "manuscript analysis." Because I don't want to evaluate it. I want to make the orientation in that class technical, not thematic. Not that that's not important, but it's subjective, you see. As a matter of fact, in my closing remarks for the cast, I said, "I don't regard it as either my responsibility or my prerogative to impose my viewpoints on you, whether they be aesthetic or thematic or whatever." I said, "I hope I haven't transgressed too much." I'm sure I did to some degree—how could it be otherwise, you know? That's why it took me several years to get the change from "manuscript evaluation" to "manuscript analysis."

DESSERE:

But at Yale, for instance, I would imagine then, before you were producing, they would teach you how to analyze and interpret a play.

GORDON:

There was some emphasis from a directorial point of view, yes. You certainly were relating to that, but not in any depth. It was almost in terms of style and mood and so on, rather than dramatic substance, you see. I mean, not totally ignoring that, but it was not systematic and it was not really organized in that direction very much.

DESSERE:

When you were directing those plays like *Stevedore*, *Exiles*, and *Peace on Earth*, did you start yourself studying—?

GORDON:

I didn't direct *Exiles*. I acted in *Exiles*.

DESSERE:

Oh, you didn't direct that.

GORDON:

Clifford Odets directed.

DESSERE:

Oh, boy. That's nice.

GORDON:

Sandy [Sanford] Meisner was the other man that played the lead.

DESSERE:

Oh. But when you worked on *Stevedore* or *Peace on Earth* you directed?

GORDON:

No. *Peace on Earth*, I was stage manager.

DESSERE:

Oh, you were stage manager.

GORDON:

Stevedore, I was stage manager, I acted in it, and was assistant director. Then I directed the second production. The *Sailors of Cattaro* and *Black Pit* I directed.

DESSERE:

So on those last two plays, did you go into depth about each motivation, each analysis?

GORDON:

Oh, of course.

DESSERE:

What type of research did you do for those?

GORDON:

First of all, the research is essentially the study of the play. I knew something of the background. I read. I mean, the *Sailors of Cattaro*, I did a great deal of reading, because it was in the Austro-Hungarian navy, and it was what later became Yugoslavia. I learned something about the pecking order of the Serbs, the Croats, the Slovenes, and so on. You know, you do what research you can do. As far as *Black Pit* was concerned, that was somewhat easier, because it was really about American life and not too remote in time. It was set a few years before the play was done, but it was in that matrix. I knew a good deal by that time about the history of labor struggles in America.

DESSERE:

Had *Black Pit* already been presented before you, actually?

GORDON:

No. It was an original play.

DESSERE:

Oh, very good.

GORDON:

I think that *Sailors of Cattaro* had been done in Europe, but it had never been done here. They were all original plays. I mean, I did virtually no revivals—I did two revivals later on in the fifties in my life. The rest of the time, they were always originals.

DESSERE:

That's really nice. Because I can imagine that *Sailors of Cattaro* would be a very difficult play to direct, in terms of context, and it's always more work to do something which takes place—

GORDON:

Oh, yes. It was a very exciting thing to do, too, because it's set on the battleship. And we made a composite set of what was really written in individual scenes and so on. I had a very good designer, Mordecai Gorelik.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes. Yes.

GORDON:

We did a rather interesting thing, because as I said, there were about six different locations on the battleship, and each was described as a self-contained thing. In trying to figure out how to mount the play, I suggested to him that we design each set and then make a kind of collage of these various locations on the battleship, in the crew's quarters and the deck and the bridge and so forth and so on. It was very important for a particular reason that we do this, because one of the things that was wrong with the play was the thing built to a mutiny and then the disintegration of the mutiny. But the mutiny took place offstage as it was written. I said, "No, this is the obligatory material. We have to find a way of showing it." Plus the fact that certain psychological things in the characters didn't quite jibe. Where this captain—the Germanics, the Austrians, were at the top of the pecking order, you see, and were the officers in the navy. [The captain] bamboozled this delegation, a grievance delegation, wrapped them around his finger and so on. Within five minutes a mutiny is occurring. You see, it didn't seem right, you know. What I did, and what the set enabled me to do—smd this became almost the initiating, starting point of the design. During the scene when this captain was bamboozling the

delegation, the grievance committee, all over the battleship you saw sailors watching—I mean, it was a non-representational set, only semi-rep, you know; you might say an impressionist kind of set-up above, down below. At the end, when they stepped out of the captain's quarters there on the little ramp, at the foot of this ramp—it went down three, four steps to the deck—the leader looked around and nodded to the watching sailors. Now, there followed a scene between the captain, this very urbane captain, and a subaltern who was a very stern disciplinarian. And he [the captain] was saying, "You see, dear boy, how easy it is if you only use your advantages of education and culture and so forth." Meanwhile, during that scene, all over the ship there's activity. Men are moving, giving out guns and so forth all over the ship, about twenty sailors. Then when the mutiny took place, it had been built to, and it became a wonderful thing that was triggered by the one thing that was in the script, where a noncom officer refused to obey orders—which was all there was in the script. So the dramatic needs of the script determined the whole setting, and to make a unit set out of what were individual sets grew out of that. I don't think I ever did as creative a job directing in my life as I did in that first job that I directed professionally in New York.

DESSERE:

How did you get that job? Somebody you knew because of what you had done with *Stevedore*? It was the same crew.

GORDON:

Well, I had been working with them. It was the same company.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

It was the same producer, and they knew me for two years, almost, and through three productions.

DESSERE:

And they trusted you.

GORDON:

Of course.

DESSERE:

And they liked you.

GORDON:

And I was a good buy. The best buy in town. I was cheap.

DESSERE:

Yes, because at the time—

GORDON:

I would have done it for nothing. I think I did it for \$1,500 or something, which to me was a lot of money at that time.

DESSERE:

So at that time, did it change something in your life? Did you leave your little room? [laughter]

GORDON:

No, by that time—yes, I had been living with a couple of friends and so on. But then I took a backwards step when I joined the Group Theatre. I didn't direct at the Group. I went back to being a stage manager, because that's where I wanted to be. Plus the fact that the next play the Theater Union was doing I didn't like. I didn't think they should do it. I didn't like the author, whose name was Bertolt Brecht. [laughter] SECOND PART (December 14, 1988)

DESSERE:

So last time you discussed your direction of *Sailors of Cattaro* and this time I would like you to say something about *Black Pit*, the play, and how you handled it.

GORDON:

Black Pit, which was written by Albert Maltz, was a play about labor struggles that were current during the twenties and into the thirties and which were at that time very violent. The history of labor—management-labor ownership conflicts and strikes, unionization, and so forth and so on—in that period was

astonishingly violent, much more than we remember. There were a lot of hired mercenaries, almost private armies, for example. The Iron and Coal Police I think one was called, which were armed forces. They were not legally sanctioned. Pinkerton [National Detective Agency] was a very famous name, and there were others of that kind. The struggle for union organization was, as I said before, fiercely resisted by management and resisted with armed force as well as propaganda. Blacklisting was a very current phenomenon, but much more than that—I mean, beatings and actual killings in many instances. *Black Pit* is really set in that period. The play was done, I think, around 1934, if I'm not mistaken. It was not that remote historically, so it was played as though it were virtually contemporary. The basic conflict had to do with the situation of someone who by virtue of family pressures became a stool pigeon. And the internal conflicts that he suffered, as well as the ostracization by his former friends, really is what the play was essentially about. Other than that, I can simply tell you that the cast consisted of a number of different nationalities, people of various national origins. There was an Italian, there were a couple of people from Poland, from Romania, from what now we call Czechoslovakia, Bohemia, and so on. One of the interesting things about the production, just from a chitchat point of view, was the way we worked on the accents. In a way, it almost started as a joke, as a kind of a gag. We would all break for lunch and go out to lunch together. And very often, in the course of an ordinary conversation you would find a line from the play, a line from the script, that seemed appropriate, and it was delivered in the accent of the character that was being played. We began doing that first for laughs. Then I said, "This is a very good idea, " and it became a law that when we were in the rehearsal situation, we had to speak in the accent of the character no matter whether the topic of conversation was something as casual as, "Where are you going to dinner tonight?" or "Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom." We spoke only in accent. I picked one too, because there were also Americans in the play. The setting was southern, so an American southern accent was used by several of the characters in the play. But we made it a point not to talk in our normal speech, including me as the director, and we spoke—all of us—in accents, which I think actually served a useful purpose, because we got very comfortable with them. I employed that here some years later when one of our students was doing an English play, [Joe] Orton's play *Loot*, in which there were a variety of English accents including cockney, more or less upper-class,

middle-class, and so on. The student director was pretty good. He had a pretty good ear for accents himself. He too did all of his direction in a British cockney kind of accent. Everyone, from the time they came into [Macgowan Hall] 1340, which is where rehearsals were, until the time they left, they had to speak in accents. If someone spoke without the accent, he was hauled up short and was obliged to repeat it, or whatever, and to continue in the accents. It helped enormously in making all of the cast quite comfortable, so that the work for the appropriate accent didn't preclude working for what the scene was about.

DESSERE:

Usually accents are a problem, I believe, in a performance. I remember that you mentioned that to me once. You said that because somebody is from a foreign country, he or she would emphasize some words as opposed to other words, so it is a problem. I suppose you had to solve that also.

GORDON:

Yes. Actually, there was a certain amount of help given by the dramatist in the way he wrote the dialogue. Not as extreme, for example, as the way Eugene O'Neill in his early plays—the sea plays—did it. You had silly spellings which don't vary at all from pronunciation, in attempting to convey the quality of a foreigner in some of the sea plays. For example, the word "you" is spelled "yew" in the script, or something of that sort, which means nothing. But presumably, for O'Neill, that gave him a feeling of the fact that he was writing in character. But the locutions and sometimes the order of sentences, the syntax and so on, were pretty well conveyed by the way Maltz had written the dialogue.

DESSERE:

Did you know Albert Maltz before?

GORDON:

Yes, we had gone to school together.

DESSERE:

Yes, that's what I wanted you to say.

GORDON:

Yes, of course. And Albert Maltz had been one of the board of directors, if you like, of the Theatre Union. This was the fourth play that I did there, so I knew him, of course, very well.

DESSERE:

Now, you were already an established director at this point, I would imagine.

GORDON:

Yes. This was my second, straight-out directing play. So I was a director en route.

DESSERE:

Do you remember anything about the direction? Something in particular that you designed for that play?

GORDON:

No, not exactly. The play was more or less realistic in its setting and its mounting. And because there were a couple of settings in the play, they were done on what we used to call wagon stages—that is to say, platforms which were on casters. I remember one time during the course of our first technical rehearsal when the shifts were being made with the curtain up, and I was sitting in the auditorium. These two side platforms kind of swung out, they pivoted out, so that they became a flat, straight wall across the distance. I was astonished at the way that spread the space. It made the proscenium wider. It never occurred to me that you don't necessarily need to confine your action within the proscenium. That is to say, side walls don't have to come right down to the proscenium. They can break out beyond it—much, as I thought of later, like when we're shooting a film. We always do that. That is to say, we frame it, but the environment extends beyond the frame on either side. And it is possible in the theater if one is working in somewhat constricted space. Let us say it is only a thirty-two-foot proscenium and you need a wider space. It is possible to create the sense of much, much wider space by breaking what we used to call a return—those flats that come down to the proscenium—outside of the proscenium rather than to it.

DESSERE:

That was really instrumental. You discovered that as you were rehearsing.

GORDON:

Well, it was an accident. I was actually doing the shifts. You see what I mean? Actually, we weren't really able to do it in that production because the scenery wasn't built that way. But it gave me an idea which I used later at different times in life. Do you see what I mean? I wasn't able to use it at that particular production, but just seeing it that time, I said, "Wow, that thing is as large as Grand Central Station, " or something.

DESSERE:

So would that imply that different types of theaters would allow different things that can be done?

GORDON:

This really applies to working within the proscenium configuration. As a matter of fact, I did a rather very large play some years later in a small summer-stock theater on Cape Cod, in Provincetown. The old Wharf Theatre was a famous, famous old theater. It had a history—where some of Eugene O'Neill's first plays were done. That was a relatively small space. I would be inclined to say that the proscenium width couldn't have been more than twenty-four feet, or something of that sort. I employed that principle in that production particularly, and it worked extremely well. It helped, because it was a play with a large cast and several sets. Several of them— Well, most of them had a feeling of being out-of-doors too, so we needed to spread space as much as possible. Just utilizing the principle that I discovered quite by accident during this technical rehearsal of *Black Pit* was something that I applied in this instance. It worked very effectively.

DESSERE:

Was this play offered to you spontaneously by its author, since you knew him from Yale?

GORDON:

Well, not so much because we knew one another from Yale, although that was a contributing factor that started my getting the job as a stage manager in the first place. But by that time, I had been working with him for nearly two years.

It was on the basis of the work that I had done in *Sailors* that gave him a sense of reassurance that I knew what I was doing. I don't know. I couldn't get into somebody's head—I was simply grateful that I was offered the job.

DESSERE:

But George Sklar was also very concerned about the social situation?

GORDON:

Yes, George was a member of that board of directors, or whatever it was called, of that theater too. But George Sklar and Albert Maltz were members of the producing organization as such, which I was not. I was just someone who worked there.

DESSERE:

But you found that you had a very good understanding of the political situation by that time?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, by that time, surely.

DESSERE:

To allow you to produce.

GORDON:

Right. As a matter of fact, it was a certain amount of research that was done. I talked with people who had done some organizing in that area and had gotten firsthand stories—as Maltz had too, of course, in writing the play.

DESSERE:

What do you think would be the reaction to such a play nowadays? Is it produced from time to time?

GORDON:

I don't know that it is. It was published, I believe. I'm quite sure it was.

DESSERE:

There is a copy in the library?

GORDON:

Yes. It would be a period play now, of course, because the play was both done and was set in the thirties. So we are talking of a half a century ago. It isn't quite as pertinent today. This was before, for example, the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] was formed. The AFL [American Federation of Labor] existed, but was more—what should I say?—an aristocratic union. That is to say, the unskilled workers were not organized by the AF of L at that time. That was the significance of the CIO when it came into existence, you see. The problems of labor organization were not sanctioned. For example, the right [to organize] was not sanctioned by law. There was no whatever the name of the—I can't remember the name of the legislation which gave more legal sanction to union organization and so on at that time. So it was a more bitter struggle. So it would not have a direct pertinence today, but as an historical piece it still is a pretty good play.

DESSERE:

I would imagine that a play like the *Sailors of Cattaro*, which was situated really in history, would still be playable today—wouldn't you say that?—as opposed to this one.

GORDON:

Yes. Of course, that dated from another twenty-five years before that, you see, because the setting of that play was in 1917, or something of that sort. So now we are talking about seventy years ago. It would have some degree of historical interest, I believe, even though much of the historical background would be unfamiliar to most people. For instance, Yugoslavia did not exist yet. That was simply part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But still, it was rather an interesting story, although it doesn't read quite as well. I looked over it not too long ago. It doesn't read quite as well as I remembered. As a matter of fact, I've discovered over the years that I tend to edit my memories, and very often things that I remember as being extremely interesting, when I go back and look at them again, they're perhaps not quite as interesting as I remember their being.

DESSERE:

Because we evolve, of course.

GORDON:

Well, that is part of it. But still, you know, I zero in on the best parts.

DESSERE:

Yes. [laughter] So I imagine that those plays put you in a certain category, because you were directing already in the Theatre Union and you were concerned with social issues. Because even *Sailors of Cattaro* has a very heavy social content. I was wondering, at the time were you organized professionally? Did you have an agent?

GORDON:

Well, the situation of agents in New York was never quite the same as we know it in the movie business. That is to say, there were very few people who had an exclusive agent. You weren't signed with someone. Whoever got you a job, he was your agent for that particular job.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

So it was nothing like that. I was just an individual looking for work and utilizing whatever contacts one had and so on. Other than, for example, the Theatre Union at that time, where I think that my career could have continued with them, I really didn't have any important contacts at all, other than that.

DESSERE:

So basically it was people who knew you who would give you a job.

GORDON:

That's right. I had a very good press on *Sailors* and a pretty good press—not quite [as good], as I recall—on *Black Pit* because it was a far less spectacular play than *Sailors of Cattarowas*.

DESSERE:

Spectacular?

GORDON:

Just in terms of spectacle. Just in terms of physical production. It was a more routine kind of thing. Not really routine, because there weren't many plays written about that kind of subject matter at that time. But with respect, as I said before, to physical spectacle, theatrics and so forth and so on. Having a battleship on stage—

DESSERE:

Yes, was challenging.

GORDON:

—was much more striking.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. So this is when you try to enter the Group Theatre. Were you already pulling strings to get in?

GORDON:

Well, the Group Theatre had a lot of activity beyond their productions. Many of the members of the Group Theatre would have informal workshops when they had a play that was in a run in that theater. During the days when there were no matinees, there would be all kinds of workshops that were conducted by members of the theater. Not the directors, not [Lee] Strasberg or Clurman, but by Bobby [Robert] Lewis, Morris Carnovsky, Sandy Meisner, and so on. They would have little workshops. Those were more open. Those were not confined simply to those who were official members of the Group, which only consisted of about maybe sixteen or seventeen people at the time. There was an outer circle, a fringe, of people who were interested in the Group and in whom the Group had a certain interest. So I was in contact with them in that way. For example, the production that we talked of the other day of the James Joyce play. I mean, it consisted of people who were largely—it was directed by Clifford Odets. Sandy Meisner played the lead. I was in it. Then there was a woman named Elaina Karam who also played in it.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes. She was in *America, America*, the film by Elia Kazan.

GORDON:

Right. She was in the play, too. The whole association with—

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DESSERE:

We were talking about this production.

GORDON:

What I was saying was that the Group Theatre had a lot of activity going on all the time beyond their formal productions. For example, *Waiting for Lefty* was generated that way. As a matter of fact, the first performance of *Waiting for Lefty* was done at the Theatre Union's theater, not at the theater that was occupied by the Group. As a matter of fact, I participated in that first production as a voice from the audience—a heckler from the audience, you see. Other people did as well. They also had a production—I think the play was called *Dimitroff*. It was about the Reichstag fire. That was done unofficially by members of the Group, written by and directed by— The Group was not officially connected with it. That was done in other places. I think the productions of that were done in what had been originally a theater, then became a movie house, off Broadway. It was about around Twenty-Eighth Street on Broadway, way down. I was in that.

DESSERE:

As an actor? So you got to act sometimes.

GORDON:

As an actor, yes. So I knew them. I had a pretty good acquaintance— I was not an intimate friend, but a pretty good acquaintance with a lot of the people in the Group beyond [Elia] Kazan, with whom I had gone to school.

DESSERE:

Yes. Yes.

GORDON:

Who was a member of the Group.

DESSERE:

Did you look, at the time, at the Group Theatre as a sort of big brother? Was that a reputation would you say? You wanted to be influenced by them?

GORDON:

Very, very much, because they were working in a way that no one else in New York was, as far as professional theater. There were, for example, teachers who were involved with a couple of schools in town. [Richard] Boleslavsky was in New York at the time; [Maria] Ouspenskaya was. They were teaching method work as well. But there were no theaters and no productions that were done in that way. So it was a great pioneering effort if you believed in it. I, for the first time, began to have a sense of what the art of acting was, which I never really had when I was at Yale. In other words, the distinction in my vocabulary between acting and performing.

DESSERE:

What was the Broadway community's attitude, for instance, towards the Group Theatre? Were they really a little condescending because it was a totally different style of acting? What was the attitude?

GORDON:

It was antagonistic—and justifiably so. So were we. We were saying, in effect, "You're a bunch of liars. You're a bunch of fakes." The great stars and so on, "What you are doing is *Kinderspiel*. It's just child's play. We're really doing the real work in the art of acting," and so on. So because we ourselves were very critical of the prevailing mode of work, understandably enough that generated a counterreaction. So I would be inclined to say that we were the butt of all kinds of jokes about the things that we did. That there was a sand pile or a dirt pile down in the basement of the theater in one play that the Group was doing which had a rural farm setting, so that the people could get in the mood. All of that was nonsense, of course, but there were all kinds of stories circulating at the time. As a matter of fact, Bobby [Robert] Lewis conducted a series of lectures—I never attended them, because I think it was before I was yet in New York—about what the method was. Those were later compiled in a book of about a dozen lectures that he gave at eleven thirty at night on Friday nights—to which [Actors] Equity members were invited—in which he was explaining what the Group was attempting to do. Those were later assembled,

as I said, in a book called *Method—or Madness?* It was quite an interesting book to read back at that time. Again, it was something that was regarded as very exotic, very strange, crazy, etc., by the prevailing community. It was a very, very bizarre approach to acting which was very different from what was the prevailing mode of work.

DESSERE:

So I suppose people who were outside the Group Theatre saw them as strange animals. Did the Group Theatre attract major actors who were more conventionally trained that you can remember?

GORDON:

There were several at the very start. A few, not very many. Morris Carnovsky, for example, was a well-established actor. He had been in a number of the Theatre Guild productions. The Adlers [Stella and Luther] had a kind of an established reputation. And one or two others were not, in any sense of the word, stars, but were good, working actors. The rest of them were people who were aspiring more than arrive.

DESSERE:

I see. The background of those actors, according to [Harold] Clurman's book *The Fervent Years*, seems to have been quite varied. Because not all of them were from poor backgrounds.

GORDON:

Oh, no, by no means. By no means. Let me say, the economic backgrounds of the people were enormously varied. No one had any criteria in those terms. Several of the people had more or less aristocratic backgrounds. It was a very, very mixed bag as far as ethnic origins were concerned. Kazan was a Greek. Somebody else, Russell Collins, was an Irishman. Somebody else was just a WASP, etc.

DESSERE:

It seems also that there were some people from traditional theater background. You mentioned the Adlers. I'm sorry, was Luther Adler—?

GORDON:

Luther and Stella both.

DESSERE:

They were brother and sister?

GORDON:

Brother and sister, yes.

DESSERE:

That was not too clear to me. They came from a theatrical family?

GORDON:

Yes. Jacob Adler, their father, was a great star in the Yiddish theater and had been for a number of years. They both started, I think, in the Yiddish—I know Stella did. I'm not quite certain how much work Luther had done in the Yiddish theater. But they were—we were all conventional actors before then. In other words, what Lee Strasberg was starting to do at that particular point was a break with our past experience for everyone.

DESSERE:

Did he have a very good knowledge of how a conventional actor was going to behave in such and such a situation?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Of course. Lee had been working in the theater. He had had some experience with the Theater Guild, as Harold had, in a very subordinate capacity, because they were quite young at the time. Lee really began to, I think, develop his work at a settlement house called the Henry Street Settlement, or something of that sort, which was on the Lower East Side of New York. It was kind of an amateur group, and he had done some experimentation there and had begun, I think, to formulate a number of his ideas. I don't know exactly what the chronology of that was, but that would have been—I would be inclined to say—in the middle twenties. His ideas took form, took shape, and he began to develop a system. Of course, the influence was primarily what had been written by Stanislavsky in his autobiography [*My Life in Art*]. That was the only book. *An Actor Prepares* didn't appear in this country until around—late 1936 is when it was published, so it was quite some

time after. Boleslavsky's book, [*Acting:*] *The First Six Lessons*, had been written by that time. I'm sure that had an influence on Strasberg as well. There it is.

DESSERE:

Of course, you have read all those books yourself.

GORDON:

I hadn't read them in the past, but I was reading them at the time.

DESSERE:

Yes, that's what I meant. The Group Theatre started with very, I would say, politically committed subjects. They seem to me to have put aside, let's say, comedies or subjects which wouldn't have this sort of very strong realistic type of environment. Things that wouldn't allow a realistic environment they obviously seem to have discarded. Would you agree?

GORDON:

No, I don't think that would be the way I would describe it. I was not in New York yet—I was still in school when it was first beginning—so I don't have any firsthand information on that. But of the original plays that were done—let's say the first three plays—one was written by Paul Green, who was just an American playwright coming out of North Carolina, another play was written by Maxwell Anderson, who was an established playwright in the American theater, and the third was written by a man and his wife, Paul and Claire Sifton. That was their first play [1931—]. I think that was number three in the chronology of the plays that the Group did. That was a labor play that was involved with the labor struggle. Then there was a play, I think, perhaps the fourth—I'm not quite certain of the chronology here. It was a play by John Howard Lawson called *Success Story*. Now, let me put it that I would describe the plays as being serious plays, but not necessarily on a particular subject. They were plays that examined the life that we were living and the society in which we lived in various aspects. They were not fluff plays. They were not cream puffs, you know.

DESSERE:

According to your experience, would they look down on a comedy, for instance, as not really making things—just pure entertainment?

GORDON:

That's what I meant. They were not trying to tickle the audience with feathers. You know? They were trying to make the audience participate in a life experience and to think about problems and so forth and so on. However, a comedy was not really looked down on, except if it was simply an anecdotal comedy, a little joke that was expanded into the play. Those were not of interest to them. All of the plays had some kind of serious thematic underpinning, but it was enormously varied. I mean, *Men in White*, which was their first big success, for example, was simply a play about a hospital. The problems of interns, doctors, and the various ethical problems the medical profession had to deal with, as well as dramatic love stories, were in it.

DESSERE:

But it was not one of those, you know, soap operas that we see about the medical profession all the time.

GORDON:

No, not exactly. Although I suppose if one wanted to take a dim view of it, there were those elements in it as well.

DESSERE:

Yes, because sometimes it seems that the frontiers of realism are so tiny.

GORDON:

Actually, some of the plays that have to do with the medical profession that we see on television as series have moments of great seriousness in them. *Men in White*, I think, fell into that category. That was written by Sidney Kingsley, who later wrote *Dead End* and a number of other things. As I said before, the plays were essentially serious plays which had great ingredients of comedy in them, in many instances. I mean, Clifford Odets had a great sense of humor. His plays had many, many laughs. His first big success, which was *Awake and Sing*, is a play that has a great deal of comedy. It had comedy of characters as well as line comedy.

DESSERE:

And it was put on stage by the Group Theatre?

GORDON:

Yes. That came about—I would say—the sixth production in their chronology, something of that sort. That was also Odets's first play.

DESSERE:

So it seems that, in that context, you would have seemed more radical than they did, as a matter of fact.

GORDON:

The Theatre Union was much, much more committed to left-wing problems, left-wing attitudes, and with problems that did involve elements of what might be called the class struggle than the Group. Although, the people in the Group were very concerned with problems within our society. I can't remember exactly what year the first Group Theatre production occurred in, but it was probably in 1931, and the Depression was two years old already and getting deeper. Nothing very positive was emerging until 1933 when [Franklin D.] Roosevelt first took office. What was called the NRA, the National Recovery [Administration], was put into place, and some attempt to ameliorate some of the problems was initiated.

DESSERE:

So this is the time you joined? After the *Black Pit*, did you join the Group Theatre?

GORDON:

Yes, it was shortly after *Black Pit* was in its run. As I think I mentioned the other day, when I first talked to Harold Clurman, I said, "I'll do anything. I want to be with you. I'll even sweep floors." One day I got a telephone call from Harold Clurman, who said, "You want to sweep floors? We've got a job for you. We need a stage manager." Because they had two productions that were in work—they were in rehearsal at that time. They had a stage manager, but he was in one of them, and they needed another. So I joined them at that particular time. They were then in Philadelphia with a road production of *Awake and Sing* and were putting in rehearsal two plays at the same time. One of them was Odets's second play, called *Paradise Lost*, which I felt was a

splendid play. The other one was not such a good thing, called *Weep for the Virgins*, that didn't last very long. It was a big flop.

DESSERE:

It seems that Harold Clurman in his book, when he talks about his debut and how they started the Group Theatre, says that it was very difficult for them to start the early plays. "Well, we're not doing that well."

GORDON:

I'm trying to remember. They had a success with *Men in White*. That was their first success. They had some critical success prior to that time, but that was the first commercial success they had. I think that came before *Awake and Sing*. *Awake and Sing* had a commercial success as well. So they were on their way. At the beginning, however, their plays did not do well by Broadway standards in terms of box office appeal. But it began to collect an audience. They became increasingly known. At first, they were just no one, but they began to get favorable critical attention with their first plays, even though—as I said before—none of them up until *Men in White*, I guess it was, actually was a commercial success. I would say that that was probably their fifth play and maybe *Awake and Sing* was the sixth play. I'm not quite certain. The other plays were not successful.

DESSERE:

So did you go at an early stage to attend their seminars and their meetings?

GORDON:

Well, once I was a member of the Group, yes. The meetings were not wide open until I was taken into the Group, which was shortly after. First, I was taken in on sort of just an employee basis, but shortly thereafter I was invited formally to be a member of the Group.

DESSERE:

I see. But when you were in the Theatre Union, you said that you went to workshops and that's how you got to know them a little bit.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. That's true. I remember being in workshops conducted by Carnovsky and workshops conducted by Bobby Lewis, like that.

DESSERE:

Did they last several—?

GORDON:

Generally during the run of whatever they had. In other words, the locus—the place where those things were conducted—was usually in the basement of the theater where they had a play running. One I remember most particularly was in the Belasco [Theatre]. We were doing the same thing at the Theatre Union. We had workshops when we had plays running.

DESSERE:

You came and you talked about what you did during those two—

GORDON:

We did various kinds of things. We experimented with a variety of things. I remember there was a very, very interesting director—who had been a member of the original Habimah group in Russia that was led by [Evgeny] Vakhtangov—by the name of Benno Schneider, who directed a very, very stylized Yiddish theater group that did some extremely interesting productions. I remember prevailing on the Theatre Union people to engage him to conduct a workshop—this was during the run of *Black Pit*—because he was doing a kind of work that was different from the Group approach. It was more externalized. All of his actors and his productions looked like Chagall paintings. That kind of very strange and interesting stuff.

DESSERE:

And nonrealistic?

GORDON:

Exactly. Much more stylized work, and we thought it would be interesting for us to have that experience as well.

DESSERE:

So when you went to those workshops, that is when you started asking Harold Clurman to take you in.

GORDON:

Oh, I had done that long before. When I first came to New York, knowing from Kazan about the Group—that's how I first learned about it.

DESSERE:

Oh, he knew about them.

GORDON:

Yes, because Kazan was taken into the Group right after he graduated from Yale [University].

DESSERE:

Oh, I see.

GORDON:

Also, a fellow named Alan Baxter, whom I subsequently used to play the lead, he was also from Yale. He played the leading role in *Black Pit*.

DESSERE:

What was Kazan doing at the Group Theatre at that time? Was he an actor?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, although he didn't come to any particular prominence until that sort of satellite production of *Waiting for Lefty*, in which he played a very prominent role and did it spectacularly well and got a great deal of attention. After that, his career as an actor really, really rocketed ahead, and justifiably so, too, because he was extremely good.

DESSERE:

So when you got into the Group Theatre, I suppose they gave you a salary which was substantially different from what you were making as a director.

GORDON:

Well, the business of salary in the Group was a very, very strange thing. It depended, first of all, on how much money they had. But the salaries were ridiculous when you stopped to think about them at that particular time. Very often when we had a production—I'm thinking in particular when we did *Johnny Johnson*, which had a much larger cast that went beyond the nucleus of the Group. Came payday, people who were not Group members got the Equity minimum; those who were in the Group got what was left, which was often considerably less than theirs. Sometimes we would walk away after a week with maybe \$20.

DESSERE:

And how did you survive?

GORDON:

Well, \$20—you learned how to survive. As a matter of fact, when I first went to work for the Theatre Union, as I said, I sort of conducted the office. During that summer I was making \$10 a week, and I managed to survive. I paid \$3.50 a week for a room. You found a way of scraping bits and pieces together, and you did it.

DESSERE:

Because I suppose the involvement was so considerable that you didn't have time to get an outside job. It was impossible?

GORDON:

Oh, no. As a matter of fact, Equity minimums were not established until well into 1933. And at that time, the Equity minimum was only \$25 a week.

DESSERE:

Did you have an impression that you were working for a good cause by making those sacrifices? I suppose a Broadway director was very rich.

GORDON:

Well, I wasn't being bombarded with offers at that time, you see. It seems to me, as I look back at it, I was animated by several things. One was a belief in what the Group Theatre was doing. Also, the sense of continuity that being a member of the Group offered, rather than you did a job, it had its run, and

then it closed. Then here you were starting from square one again. The appeal of a sense of continuity and belonging was something that was of great importance to me. I didn't feel that I was making a tremendous sacrifice financially, because I never made very much money. When I was directing at the Theatre Union, I was probably making about \$25 a week, \$40 a week, or something like that. That's all.

DESSERE:

I see. But you could have aspired, obviously, to go, let's say, mainstream.

GORDON:

Well, of course. But as I said before, at that particular time I was not exactly in demand.

DESSERE:

Yes, but was there that difference in terms of what people—? Here you know that in Hollywood, if you direct one type of film, they are not going to necessarily consider you for another type of film. Did you find that there was the same division, you know, because you were in the Theatre Union, you were in the Group Theatre? You wouldn't be able to go to Broadway because Broadway would say, "No, he's not for us"?

GORDON:

No, I don't think that is true. I think that the very anarchy of Broadway precluded the possibility of that kind of typing. That was characteristic of Hollywood, where all of the studio heads knew one another. They knew what everybody earned, what their past salary was. That was not characteristic of Broadway, it was totally disorganized, which was, in a sense, a very good thing. It was far, far more independent and individualized than, I think, Hollywood was.

DESSERE:

Your work at the Group Theatre since you became, again, a stage manager—and you worked also as a lighting designer, didn't you?

GORDON:

Yes, that came a little later simply because it just evolved. I knew how to do it. That's all. And during that time, during the time when I was in the Group, I also began teaching through Sandy [Sanford] Meisner, who was the principal teacher of acting at a place called the Neighborhood Playhouse school. Which, you know, existed for many, many years and is really a highly respected institution. It has many distinguished alumni, including Gregory Peck. They wanted to expand their program, and I began to teach there as well. So that kind of thing was going on. As a matter of fact, I recall that a woman named Mrs. [Rita] Morgenthau, this elderly woman who had been involved, decided that they needed a kind of a workshop for their recent alumni who had not yet made it. And she asked me whether I would conduct that, and I did that as well for them.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (December 14, 1988)

DESSERE:

The Group Theatre seems to be, quote, unquote, an "un-American" institution, and even some people have used that in books when they were talking about it. Was that generally the consensus? How did people see that at the time? I mean, did people in the Group have a consciousness that they were doing—? They knew they were doing something different, but would they put this type of political color to their work, in your opinion?

GORDON:

Well, that designation that you talk about is something that I totally reject. Certainly we were serious. Certainly we recognized that among the serious problems that were confronting the country in the thirties were things that we should be concerned with. In other words, let us say, we were not—a term that was current at the time—escapist theater. We were not trying to divert people from their problems, but rather asking them to confront them, to look at them, and so on. And in that respect, it was to some degree—I would call it—it was a theater of protest. But if you want to call that un-American, I think that that, of course, is a point of view and a bias that I'm wholly antagonistic to.

DESSERE:

Good, good. But I mean it was something quite new, so I suppose that's why people saw it this way. I just want to ask you also about the—I think it was un-American in the sense that you made—everybody made—a lot of sacrifices to be able to put on the stage something that they thought was necessary to be political—

GORDON:

Let me say that I think that was true of some people. Someone like myself, who was not particularly well established yet—I mean, there was no great sacrifice to me in the sense that I had to make a decision, shall I take the backwards step in the interest of learning more? Which I felt that the Group experience would provide, an enrichment intellectually, emotionally, and in a number of other ways. But it wasn't as though I was turning down a lot of directing offers. There was no sacrifice for me. But for someone like Morris Carnovsky and some of the others, there was an element of sacrifice, and it was a sacrifice that was consciously made. It was, in a way, for Clurman and Strasberg, because they had connections with the Theatre Guild. That was a producing organization of high repute and great success and so on. And in a sense, at the outset, some of the leadership of the Theatre Guild—Theresa Helburn—I'm suddenly blocking on a name. A man who was one of the chief people. There were three people. [Helburn, Lawrence Langner, and Armina Marshall] But they more or less made Harold and Strasberg, both of whom had worked in Guild productions in one way or another—Lee as an actor, Harold as a kind of dramaturge or something—protéges of theirs at the outset and were very encouraging to them and helped them get started. As I said, this was long before I came to New York, and I know this only at secondhand. But then the Group began to stand on its own, and the connection with the Theatre Guild, you know, ceased to be. Except we did one production in the Theatre Guild's theater. That was Bobby Lewis's production of the first [William] Saroyan play, *My Heart's in the Highlands*. That was done in, I don't know, maybe '37, '38, somewhere in that period.

DESSERE:

So you were happy to be lighting designer for them, basically, because you were learning other things and different—

GORDON:

Well, I was doing some directing, actually. I was directing understudies, for example. And then there were—not under the aegis of the Group—but the rights, for example, for a couple of road companies of *Golden Boy*, later on, which were done by smaller producers who took them on tour. And I did two different productions of *Golden Boy* that I directed, following, of course, the patterns as established by Clurman. I mean, they weren't original productions of mine, but there was some degree of directorial activity that I was involved in. I was not exactly content, in terms of my life aspirations, to be a lighting designer. But I enjoyed doing it and I think I did very good work, and, you know, it was a good experience. In a curious way, I was a technical director of the Group after a while. As I said before, that was not what my heart's desire was ultimately, but I was gainfully employed, which was something. Not everybody in the theater could say that all of the time.

DESSERE:

Do you remember working as a lighting designer on the play called *Casey Jones*? What was the subject? Was it the railroad subject?

GORDON:

Yes, it was a railroad play. It was written by Robert Ardrey. We did two plays of Robert Ardrey's in quick succession. One an extremely interesting play, which I subsequently did here. I did the lighting design for that. That was a play called *Thunder Rock*, a very, very interesting play. That was not a big success in New York.

DESSERE:

You mean *Thunder Rock* or *Casey Jones*?

GORDON:

Thunder Rock. Neither was. Neither was a hit. You know, they were not miserable failures, but they were not, by commercial standards, successes, either one of them.

DESSERE:

And you also did *Rocket to the Moon*?

GORDON:

Yes. Well, *Rocket to the Moon* was—

DESSERE:

Clifford Odets.

GORDON:

Odets's third play. And it was a very, very interesting play. It had a run. It's a very good play. It's got some wonderful writing in it and fascinating characters. That was the great thing: there was continuity of work, for the most part. There were hiatuses, of course, from time to time. As a matter of fact, after *Johnny Johnson* closed, which was in January, I think, of 1937, I went to work for the Federal Theatre Project, because the Group was inactive for a period of, oh, I guess about six or seven months, until we went into rehearsal with *Golden Boy*, which was in the fall of '37. And during that time I was working preparing one of the Living Newspaper things that I was to direct. I worked closely with the author. This was about housing. It was called *One-Third of a Nation*—very, very interesting play, which I subsequently saw. But I went back to the professional theater, which was not in the Federal Theatre Project that was government funded—I suppose you know something about that. When employment in the private sector was available, you left the Theatre Project. That happened before *One-Third of a Nation* went into rehearsal, so I didn't get to direct that one.

DESSERE:

My Heart's in the—

GORDON:

My Heart's in the Highlands. That was a kind of, again, what one might call almost a satellite production. It was directed by Bobby Lewis; it wasn't directed by one of the Group's directors. And that was—I can't remember exactly the year that was done. But I did the lighting for that one as well.

DESSERE:

Can you say anything you remember particularly well?

GORDON:

Well, it was a very, very beautiful production, a wonderful opportunity from the point of view of lighting design, because Bobby Lewis, who directed it—I remember one of my very first discussions with him about what he had in mind, and I recall that he said, "I see this production like a beautifully illustrated children's book, a large children's book in which there are wonderful illustrations in color." It was wholly non-representational as a play, and one was not constricted by considerations of realism in lighting. So it became a wonderful opportunity to experiment with crimson skies and deep green skies on the backdrop, as well as vivid use of color in lighting. And this was exactly what Bobby Lewis wanted and which I enjoyed very much doing.

DESSERE:

The Gentle People?

GORDON:

The Gentle People was a play by Irwin Shaw, as you know, and that too was an extremely interesting play. Interesting from two points of view. First of all because Franchot Tone, who had been a big star on Broadway and who was a member of the Group—that was one of the sacrifice situations.

DESSERE:

He was a rich, rich boy.

GORDON:

Yes, but he didn't stay with the Group very long, because he had a Hollywood offer and he went out to Hollywood and became a leading man in Hollywood. A star of lesser magnitude; he was never a top star.

DESSERE:

And he married Joan Crawford.

GORDON:

He married Joan Crawford, with whom I worked subsequently when I was a dialogue director. Joan was starring in the film—I don't even remember the name of it.

DESSERE:

Was it directed by Alexander Hall?

GORDON:

Yes, Alex Hall, yeah. [*They All Kissed the Bride*]

DESSERE:

So Franchot Tone—

GORDON:

Franchot came back to do that play, *Gentle People*. That might have been—I'm not quite certain. I think Sylvia Sidney joined the Group for that production, and it was I think out of that association that Luther Adler and Sylvia Sidney got married. No, maybe—I don't know. I can't remember which came when. And what can I say? That also provided very, very exciting challenges in technical terms. There was a scene in a rowboat on the bay, and there was a scene at the end of a wharf, and so on. It was a very, very interesting and intricate set. I can't remember for sure who designed it. I think it was Boris Aronson, but I'm not positive about that. But it was a very, very interesting—it was more than one setting, as a matter of fact. I remember there was a scene in a Turkish bath, in which Lee [J.] Cobb played an elderly businessman and Marty [Martin] Ritt was the masseur, [laughter] Marty had already been in *Golden Boy*, playing a small part in *Golden Boy*. Several young actors who later became somewhat prominent—Karl Maiden was in *Golden Boy*, and Harry Bratsburg, who later became—what's his name now? It will come to me, but I can't remember now. [Harry Morgan]

DESSERE:

So you had a part in *Golden Boy*. You played Mickey.

GORDON:

I played Mickey at first. Then I was understudying, and I subsequently played Mr. Carp, and I also played the nasty newspaper reporter in the third act—at different times. Although there was one period when I was playing two roles simultaneously, doubling in the play. But that, you know, kept us alive for about two years with its Broadway run. Then we had this engagement for about ten weeks in London, and then we came back and went on the road

with it in this country. So that was one time where a measure of financial security was enjoyed by us.

DESSERE:

It was a big success.

GORDON:

Yes, it was. That was of course their biggest success.

DESSERE:

Was it difficult to combine the responsibilities of stage manager and actor?

GORDON:

Well, by that time I was above being stage manager. That is to say, I was called production manager or something of that sort. I had stage managers under me, because in a number of instances we had more than one play running at the same time. And so I was no longer stage managing by that time.

DESSERE:

But I suppose that gave you an opportunity to act. What is interesting is that it seems that in the Group Theatre it was like the theater by Brecht, you know. Some preeminent actors played secondary parts. This policy was—

GORDON:

At the start that was definitely the policy. It was very interesting, in a way. One of the things that I think was interesting about that was not only the fact that people played a leading role in one play and a lesser role in something else, but, for example, no one ever had a solo curtain call in the Group. There was only the full company call. On the boards out in front of the theater, the names were always in alphabetical order, regardless of the role that was played. No name was ever above the title and so on. That was the philosophy, that the ensemble was the star. No actor was the star, regardless of how spectacular the role may have been or how prominent he may have been—or she. However, starting, it seemed to me, with—well, perhaps even before *Golden Boy*, that began to erode a little bit. After a while they said, "Well, we don't want Roman Bohnen to play that tiny little part. We'll bring in an apprentice," as it were. That's how people like Marty Ritt and Karl Maiden

and [Harry] Morgan—that's the name I was looking for—came into the Group, to play these smaller roles.

DESSERE:

So they were some sort of star character actors, or did they have opportunities to do other things?

GORDON:

Who?

DESSERE:

I mean those actors. Or they were brought from the outside?

GORDON:

Well, they were used frequently if indeed they were suitable, but the Group Theatre had no commitment to them.

DESSERE:

Were they allowed to attend the workshops that Lee Strasberg was having?

GORDON:

The workshops, yes, but not the meetings.

DESSERE:

Not the meetings.

GORDON:

But the workshops, yes.

DESSERE:

Yes, that Lee Strasberg conducted during the summer.

GORDON:

Well, in the summer Lee did, and when we went away for the summer, which we did several times—1936 was the first one that I was involved in. And then later, again—I think we didn't for a couple of years until 1939, when there was another going away for the summer together. They had done that before a

couple of times, before I was with them. And Lee conducted workshops at—I mean, you know, classes, workshops. Stella did, Morris Carnovsky did. We were working all the time in '36 and again in '39. We had movement classes, we had working on Shakespeare, and things of that sort.

DESSERE:

You know, I remember that in the SMU [Southern Methodist University] interview, you tell a very interesting story that I'm not going to ask you to repeat here. I just want a comment on it from you. You mention how hard Lee Strasberg was sometimes. You did a little piece for him from *The Father*, and he was very cruel with you, apparently, to the point that—of course you said it with a lot of humorous content, but it must have hurt you considerably—you even contemplated suicide.

GORDON:

Well, I don't know how seriously I contemplated that, except, you know, in literary terms and theatrical terms. But, no, it was a traumatizing experience that ultimately bore some fruit. Because it drove me to sever the reliance or terminate the degree to which I depended on his approval for my own sense of myself. And I finally said, "No, I'm me."

DESSERE:

You admired him very much, obviously.

GORDON:

Oh, very much, and was very much in need of his approval up until that time. And I said, "Well, I want his approval, of course, but if I don't get it, I still have validity as to who I am."

DESSERE:

And also you spoke extensively about how Clurman—and it's very interesting, because you seemed to imply that Clurman was a man with a lot of ideas and he was a very brilliant man and he was—he had very abstract ideas. But sometimes, from the practical point of view, it was difficult for him to convey exactly what he wanted from an actor, in terms of the movement or an expression he wanted to get.

GORDON:

Yes. As a matter of fact, I felt that, let us say, that aspect of directing that one would call staging—he was not particularly expert in that regard. As a matter of fact, I felt he wasn't particularly good, that wasn't where his interest was. Lee was much more into the visual aspects of a production. I remember Lee was a great student of Chinese scrolls and Japanese painting and that kind of—and attempted to emulate some of the compositional values that appeared in those things. Harold was more theoretical, was more literary in a way. Not that he didn't have a good sense of practical theater, but it did not really extend over into the business of stage composition and that sort of thing.

DESSERE:

So did he ask advice from his assistants?

GORDON:

No. I don't think that he ever shared my view of his incapacity in that area.
[laughter]

DESSERE:

Do you think it's just because he didn't know about those things? He didn't feel comfortable with that? And it still fell into place somewhere?

GORDON:

Well, I've had occasion to say once before—or more than once before—that Harold Clurman drove a Mercedes that Lee Strasberg built. That he had a wonderful core of artists to work with, including a technician, which was me, who were able, all of us, to translate often what were his poetic or philosophical concepts into practical theater terms, and that was a great benefit which he enjoyed. So that there were many things that were contributed to Harold by virtue of both the talents and the experience of the Group people whom he was directing that many other directors would not have had the benefit of.

DESSERE:

But he seemed to have related to actors in very abstract terms, in terms of motivation.

GORDON:

Abstract is not the word, but he often would talk in terms of, I don't know, literary metaphors and symbols and so forth and so on. But not restricted to that. I remember sometimes his work, in theatric terms, with respect to characterization, was very, very particularized and very, very specific, to the degree that a role in *Paradise Lost* that Bobby Lewis played—he played the role of a professional arsonist who set fire to buildings, to small factories or workshops that were going to go bankrupt and wanted the insurance money. One of the details in describing the character—you know, in the early stages of rehearsal—he talked about the fact that he had a black finger guard on the fourth finger of his left hand. He had burned himself once or something. [laughter] I mean, it often would be that specific and that detailed and that theatric. So I don't mean to suggest for a moment that Harold did not have a good theatric imagination, but it did not extend very much in terms of those aspects of staging that Alexander Dean, my teacher at Yale, called "picturization." His productions were very, very interesting and very good despite his staging, not because of it.

DESSERE:

I see, I see. That's very interesting. You haven't discussed much of Stella Adler. Is there anything you want to say about her? Did you get to know her well?

GORDON:

Oh, yeah, I knew her pretty well, sure. She was, of course, and remained through the—you know, still is a very, very flamboyant personality. I remember a very funny remark made by Bobby Lewis, who was a very good friend of hers, but sometimes we were a little bitchy with one another. One Sunday night there was a special performance by Michael Chekhov in New York, in which he did a number of short things. Several of them were Chekhov's stories that had been dramatized, little bits and pieces. It was kind of a one-man show. It wasn't really one man; he had a little help. All in Russian. But we went to see it, to see this famous actor. And on Monday night when we came into the theater to prepare the show—I forget what we had

playing at the time—somebody said, "Oh, you know, I saw Stella at the Chekov thing last night." Bobby Lewis said, "What kind of a performance did she give?" You know, she was always on. I mean, just standing in the lobby, you know, "What kind of performance—?" That was very characteristic of Stella. I took a class with her, I remember, at the time. She was an extremely interesting and provocative and stimulating teacher.

DESSERE:

But apparently she disagreed with Lee Strasberg on some points.

GORDON:

That did not surface at that time. That was a later development, after Lee had left the Group, which was—I forget—1937, sometime. The antagonism between them—she was much closer, of course, to Harold than she was to Lee. And in that more rarified circle of the higher echelons of the Group, I didn't know too much about their personal relationships, you know. But there evidently was some degree of rivalry going on, and sort of sided with Harold rather than with Lee. The strong philosophical differences—there were artistic differences, there were methodological differences that surfaced. But things that have been written and said later on were not evident at that time.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (December 14, 1988)

DESSERE:

Okay, so we discussed Stella [Adler], And this incident with Lee Strasberg that you talked extensively about in the SMU [Southern Methodist University] interview, that he was really hard and you found that he was putting maybe some limitations, not necessarily to you, but to the scope people were working in. You said it was not happening at the time, but later. There's been a lot of things—even an actor who studied with Stella Adler has told me that she felt that he was restricting the imagination of the actor to some extent. And was that what you felt, maybe instinctively at the time, which made you try to find something else and try to go somewhere else?

GORDON:

No, not really. Lee was a pioneer advocating a method of working and criteria which from the outside, as I said, were both different from and somewhat antagonistic to what was the prevailing mode of work. What he was doing was, in varying degrees—at the beginning, you know, very strongly so—antagonistic to it. As he became increasingly successful, it was less so. But he, it seems to me, felt the need, even long after it was necessary to feel that, to prove the validity of his method. And it seemed to me on occasion that his priorities were wrong. It was almost as though the productions were to prove the validity of his method, rather than the method to serve the productions. Now, as far as the others are concerned, no, he certainly was not, in any sense of the word, restrictive to creativity or the creative imagination of the actors, so far as I could see. He was insistent on truthfulness and was very acute in perceiving when it wasn't there. And he was frequently very harsh—or severe, let me put it that way—in his criticism, which actors, of course, and even people who are not actors, can be very sensitive about. And so very often there were situations such as the one that I experienced. That was not restricted to me alone. I have a feeling, in a kind of way, that that was—[tape recorder off]

DESSERE:

You were making very interesting points, that Lee was very restrictive, you just said.

GORDON:

No. I don't think he was restrictive, as I said before.

DESSERE:

Some actors may have felt that.

GORDON:

Yes, in a way. I think that Lee did not have a great tolerance for disagreement. In other words, he was the authority, he was the word, and so on, and one was expected to accept what he said relatively uncritically. If indeed you did not have that respectful acceptance, you know, that this was the word, that would make him somewhat angry. And I think that's what precipitated the ferocity of his attack on me. Because I remember when I finished doing this

scene, which I had to do solo, the one that we were talking about earlier— Simply because I was the technician, I wasn't one of the acting elite, nobody would do a scene with me in this class, and I had to do one by myself, *The Father* thing that I prepared.

DESSERE:

So that was very hard already.

GORDON:

It was very difficult, yes. At the end of it, in a very characteristic way, Lee said, "So what were you trying to do?" And I was so sensitive that I said, "Well, Lee, I just spent six or seven minutes doing it. I mean, what do you want me to explain?" Well, you didn't talk to Lee that way. And that, I think, triggered the ferocity of his attack on what I had done, which was not without some justice, I must acknowledge. I mean, I was trying my best, but I certainly was not achieving the heights of the art of acting. But it was that kind of thing that one did not dispute with Lee very much.

DESSERE:

I suppose he was more interested in dramatic type of scenes in which an actor had to be constantly in touch with himself.

GORDON:

Always. I mean, that was always true.

DESSERE:

He wouldn't have accepted a comedy, necessarily.

GORDON:

No, he did not rule out comedy. Because one of the things that I have always felt and which made possible, for example, my getting Rock Hudson to agree to play *Pillow Talk* was the fact that you have to play comedy seriously. In other words, you don't "make funny, " you're not a comic. To be a good comedy actor means that you have to play with great reality. You heard me say, I'm sure, in my class, that my admiration for Carole Lombard—who was a powerful dramatic actress, as well as the most gifted farceuse that we ever had. And she played exactly the same way in both. But in the farce she had

funny things—the situation was funny. The situation, you know, had qualities of absurdity in it. We saw its ridiculousness. But for her, the problems that she had to confront—whether it was in *My Man Godfrey* or *To Be or Not To Be*, you know, much later, the problems were life and death to her character.

DESSERE:

I suppose you didn't see Lee Strasberg after you left the Group Theatre.

GORDON:

Oh, I saw him a few times, as a matter of fact. Yeah, I saw him on several occasions. Periodically, I mean. I had no direct—as a matter of fact, immediately after he left he was doing a production—and I can't remember the name of the play—that was set in an insane asylum, and I was sort of his amanuensis. I took his notes during the course of rehearsal and like that. I guess we didn't have anything on at the Group at that particular time. And so I did work with him after that, but that was very shortly after Lee had parted company with the Group.

DESSERE:

So he still saw you after that with—

GORDON:

Not very often. I bumped into him at a particular time when he was preparing a production that he did somewhat—oh, years later, after I'd been out in Hollywood.

DESSERE:

But you didn't resent him for—

GORDON:

Oh, no, no, no. I got over that.

DESSERE:

Yeah. No, that's good. So I suppose because of some things that you saw that the Group Theatre was not doing and you wanted to do, you left the Group Theatre at this point?

GORDON:

Well, the philosophy of the Group Theatre, as well as its practice, underwent a gradual erosion from what it had originally become. In September 1940, after we had been apart—in '39 we were all together for the summer. In 1940 we weren't. We reassembled early in September, I guess it was, right after Labor Day. Harold Clurman, who was then the principal director of the Group Theatre—because both Lee had left and Cheryl Crawford had left, so Harold was the head man—began at this meeting to articulate a new policy that he was proposing for the Group, which in effect was an attack on what he called the "paternalism" of the original Group Theatre idea, in which the Group was like a fostering mother, an alma mater, for the people who were in it, and we were dependent on the Group. He was affirming the need for independence and self-reliance and that the Group Theatre did not have any longer any obligation to the people if they were not suitable for a role. You see, originally, the Group Theatre was committed to the company of the Group and everybody was in it. And only when all of that cadre was employed and there was a need for others would we go outside. Well, this was gradually, as I said before, going through a process of erosion. At this point, in that particular meeting, Harold was proposing a total termination of that obligation. I remember during the course of the meeting, Harold said, in effect, "There can be a Group Theatre production with none of the Group actors in it." I remember thinking, although I don't think I said it at the time, "Does that mean that Harold Clurman is the Group Theatre?" Well, that was not what I joined the Group for, and it was that, more or less, along with other things that were ramifications, other aspects of the same principle, that made me say, "Well, this is not what I had in mind." And after that meeting, I remember sitting down and writing three letters to people I knew in Hollywood saying, "I'd be interested in coming out to Hollywood. Can you get me any kind of a job?" You know, "Do you have any connections?" Meanwhile, during this period I had begun work—I probably talked to you about this in the past when we were in class together, about my beginning experience with Frontier Films. Did I? Do you know who Frontier Films is?

DESSERE:

Yeah, they were making documentaries.

GORDON:

The documentaries, right. Well, I knew several of them before, and I was invited by I guess it was Leo Hurwitz, who was one of the main people at Frontier Films at one point, to give them a series of talks, little seminars, about how to work, not only with actors, but how to work with nonactors. They were preparing a film at that time, which subsequently was shot, called *Sunnyside*, I think was the name of it, which had to do with a kind of what you might call rent strike. Except it wasn't rent. It was like a mortgage strike of a development in Sunnyside, Long Island. They were using the people involved. The situation was that the builders of this tract of homes did not carry through on the commitments they had for a certain kind of maintenance and so forth and so on, and the people refused to pay their mortgage payments and they were dispossessed. The marshals would come and move the furniture out of the house onto the street—which was a phenomenon that occurred in New York a lot, mostly in rental situations. The neighbors all got together and moved the stuff back in the house again, and that was the basic situation. And so it was a semi-documentary in which the people in the neighborhood played the roles. We simply shot on Sundays. I directed that. But that was subsequent to—it was in preparation for that that I was invited to talk to them. That's how I became involved with them. Then I subsequently did a few other things with them and realized that (a) I was enormously interested in movies and (b) I didn't know a damn thing about how to make movies.

DESSERE:

But you basically coached the nonactors.

GORDON:

Well, yes. And, you know, talked to them about how to work with nonactors and so on. But I directed it. And then I did, for example— I don't remember what the name of the film was. I did some shooting and I had some wonderfully beautiful shots and never enough close-ups. I didn't know how to make movies at the time.

DESSERE:

Still in documentaries?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. And then there was a third one that I did some work on, too, and did some shooting, but I didn't really know how to make movies, I realize that. But meanwhile I was seeing films that interested me very much. Some of [Frank] Capra's early stuff I found very exciting, as well as some movie adaptations of stage plays that I had seen, which seemed to be more effective on film. So all of those things coincided in that September 1940. And as a result of the three letters that I had sent, I got a telephone call, a week or so later, from a friend of mine who was under contract, a writer with whom I had worked before.

DESSERE:

Who was that?

GORDON:

A fellow by the name of Lewis Meltzer.

DESSERE:

Who wrote the adaptation of *Golden Boy* for the screen.

GORDON:

Yeah, that's right. I knew him very well. I'd known him in New York. I had first met him when we were both on the Federal Theatre Project. As a matter of fact, it was through him that I met the woman who became my wife—my first wife.

DESSERE:

So you were married at the time?

GORDON:

When I went? Yes, yes, I was at that time.

DESSERE:

You were still with the Group Theatre when you got married?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. Anyway, he said, "I can get this lousy job for you at Columbia [Pictures Industries] if you want it." I said, "Lock it in. I'm coming." A couple of days later I got another telephone call saying, "You have to report next Monday." And so I just packed up and went, and my wife followed a little later. You know, got her stuff together or whatever.

DESSERE:

So you took the train?

GORDON:

No, I think I flew out. But, at that time, to go from New York to California, it was about a twenty-hour flight with about eight stops in between. [laughter] It was quite an experience.

DESSERE:

So what I have here is that you mentioned before that you worked for the Yiddish theater also.

GORDON:

Yes, that was the late summer of 1939.

DESSERE:

I see. So were you out of the Group Theatre at that time?

GORDON:

No, no. I just took a leave of a month or something and did this other thing.

DESSERE:

What was that play? Was it in Yiddish?

GORDON:

Yes. Well, it was actually in three languages, almost. That is to say, that was really the reason why I was invited to do it. At the time, the Yiddish theater, which had been a very, very flourishing enterprise, was beginning to dwindle off. The old people were dying off. Emigration from the old country was clamped down, you know—it was much more constricted.

DESSERE:

Yeah, the war.

GORDON:

Right, and so their audience was dying off. And there were these three actors who together formed a company, two of whom had played on the Broadway stage. The other had not, but was a very, very gifted comic. And I knew one of them pretty well, I guess. What they decided was they wanted to try to reach out to the younger audience. And so the play was partly in English, partly in a very Americanized Yiddish, and partly in a real, you know, echt Yiddish kind of thing. So it was really almost like a trilingual production. That's why they wanted an "American" director.

DESSERE:

That was a comedy, I suppose.

GORDON:

It was folksy comedy. It was called *In a Yiddishe Grocery*. And that was the setting, you know, and a lot of characters came in and out and so forth and so on.

DESSERE:

And the author was still alive or—?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Sure.

DESSERE:

He was already in America and had written this play, then?

GORDON:

Yes, he was a very, very important figure in Yiddish radio.

DESSERE:

Oh? What was his name?

GORDON:

Stutchkoff.

DESSERE:

Stutchkoff.

GORDON:

Yeah, Nachum Stutchkoff. I remember that name. It's not one you forget if you ever knew it. As a matter of fact, his son was in the play, playing the relatively small part of a juvenile in it. He later became quite a successful screenwriter in Hollywood under another name, Michael Morris. His name was Myron Stutchkoff, and he took the name Michael Morris. And I worked with him later on a project—I think you made reference to it. Was it you?

DESSERE:

I don't think so.

GORDON:

"The Smash Master." Was it you?

DESSERE:

Oh, "The Smash Master Caper."

GORDON:

He was coauthor of "Smash Master, " yes.

DESSERE:

Oh, really? Oh, that's interesting. So the Yiddish theater, I suppose, was a very interesting environment.

GORDON:

Oh, it was for me. You know, I had occasionally seen plays of the Yiddish theater, but I never had any connection with it. This was a very, very interesting experience.

DESSERE:

Because the plays you saw before were all in Yiddish.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes.

DESSERE:

Yes. And they had chosen you because they knew about your work?

GORDON:

Yes. As I say, one of the producers, one of the three producers, knew me pretty well. I can't remember from where, but he did. And that was the entree into it. Interestingly enough, I had to work from a translation myself.

DESSERE:

Because you didn't know Yiddish?

GORDON:

Not that well, no.

DESSERE:

You said that at home, also, you didn't have any background—very little background. [laughter]

GORDON:

No, not very much. But, you know, I discovered that I knew more than I thought I did, in a kind of way.

DESSERE:

But I suppose, though, that the Yiddish theater was inclined to do things in a more traditional way, because they wanted to preserve those old values.

GORDON:

Yes, in some respects, yes, it was. I mean the acting tended to be very flamboyant and hammy. One of the things that I was trying to do was make it less so. As a matter of fact, I brought a non-Jewish designer—Howard Bay designed the sets—and we got rid of the prompter.

DESSERE:

Oh, they had a prompter?

GORDON:

Oh, they used to have, yeah. They used to have like an operatic prompter. And the directing—I remember the first reading of the play was read by the playwright to the cast, very theatrically and so on. You were supposed to give them the line readings. And again, it was a very interesting experience.

DESSERE:

And a totally different tradition from the Group Theatre.

GORDON:

Very much so, yeah.

DESSERE:

So you were already looking for some variety at this time?

GORDON:

Well, I was looking for jobs. I wanted to direct. I hadn't really done any directing for about four years.

DESSERE:

Obviously, that was an opportunity. Because as a matter of fact, the Group Theatre didn't give you that opportunity that you were looking for.

GORDON:

No, except, as I say, to do understudies and so on, but no original directing on my own. There were too many people ahead of me who wanted to direct, like [Elia] Kazan, like Bobby [Robert] Lewis and others, you know.

DESSERE:

So it was, in a way, very hierarchical.

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, people had seniority, if you like.

DESSERE:

I see. It's interesting to see that hierarchy with a theater which was considered as trying to abolish certain traditions.

GORDON:

Well, in a way, yeah. But it was a matter of having priorities that made very good sense. I mean, certainly you couldn't quarrel on the basis of what ultimately developed with giving Kazan a crack at directing.

DESSERE:

No.

GORDON:

And the same with Bobby Lewis, too, who became quite successful as a director.

DESSERE:

Yeah. So did you go back to lighting designing? Because here I have a list of plays in which you—

GORDON:

Oh, yes. After that show I went back to the Group Theatre.

DESSERE:

So that's when you did *Thunder Rock*?

GORDON:

No, I think *Thunder Rock* was before that. I'm quite sure it was. I think *Night Music*—Clifford Odets's *Night Music*—came after that and—

DESSERE:

Heavenly Express—

GORDON:

Heavenly Express was not a Group Theatre production. I did that lighting for another company outside.

DESSERE:

I see, I see. So you were in demand? They asked you to come to—

GORDON:

Yes, yes. In several instances I did work outside of the Group in lighting.

DESSERE:

Heavenly Express was written by whom? I couldn't find that.

GORDON:

A man named Albert Bein.

DESSERE:

I didn't know him at all. And I see also that you directed a play called *Storm Operation* by Maxwell Anderson. Was it at that time, too?

GORDON:

No, that was later.

DESSERE:

Much later?

GORDON:

That was when I came back, after I walked out on my contract at Columbia and went back, in 1943. I went back to New York and I did *Storm Operation* at that time.

DESSERE:

So after you did *Heavenly Express*, that's when you went to Columbia Pictures. Or Frontier Films was before?

GORDON:

Well, Frontier Films was before that.

DESSERE:

So you were already in film in some way.

GORDON:

Yes, I had—but I knew how little I knew.

DESSERE:

Do you think any of these films that you worked on at Frontier Films are kept somewhere? Preserved?

GORDON:

No, I don't know that they are. As a matter of fact, I only did part of the last two that I mentioned. Because I began to realize, you know, what my deficiencies were, and I said, "Look, I'm not good enough to do it. You'd better get someone." And there were some very, very wonderful people involved with Frontier Films at that time. I mean, Willard Van Dyke, who made a great name for himself in documentaries later. Sydney Meyers, who became one of the top editors. Irving Lerner was in Frontier Films. Paul Strand, who was a still photographer, who ranks with [Edward] Steichen and [Alfred] Stieglitz, you know, with [Edward] Weston and Ansel Adams. I mean, he was a part of that group. And also, someone who is not known for art photography as much as he was for very high-class commercial photography, named Ralph Steiner, was also in that group. So, I mean, they were—oh, and Jay Leyda. Do you know him as a film historian?

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, of course.

GORDON:

He was also a part of that group.

DESSERE:

So the films they made were short films? Or would they be ninety-minute films or—?

GORDON:

The one that I made was a short film. I think it was maybe like a thirty-minute piece. The others that I worked on, I don't really know, because I never really saw the finished product. I just saw some of the dailies that I had made.

DESSERE:

Do you know if you received credit on that film?

GORDON:

On the first one, I probably did. I never saw the completed project. I wasn't involved in the editing at all.

DESSERE:

So you were at the Group Theatre when you started writing those letters to the people in Hollywood.

GORDON:

That was right after that historic meeting that I spoke of in September 1940 when Harold articulated the new policy. As a matter of fact, I don't know whether I should—I have a draft of a letter that I wrote to Harold Clurman after I got to Hollywood.

DESSERE:

Oh, I would like to see that.

GORDON:

It's long. It's very long. I can show it to you.

DESSERE:

I would love to see this.

GORDON:

It's on aging paper, you know.

DESSERE:

Yeah, but it's an interesting document. You should keep it.

GORDON:

Yeah, well, I have this draft of it, you know, in which I was very critical of him.

DESSERE:

Oh, really? So you took time to write this letter and to think about it?

GORDON:

This was after I got here. I had been in Hollywood perhaps a week. Harold was out of town when I left. I never had a chance to say good-bye to him, you know. And I wrote and told him why I disagreed with him, why I was leaving.

DESSERE:

Did you receive any answer?

GORDON:

Never did, no.

DESSERE:

And you never saw him?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I did subsequently. As a matter of fact, I did a play in 1945 that was an important turning point in my career—called *Home of the Brave*, in New York—that Harold had turned down.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, yes.

GORDON:

And I remember seeing him at a symposium that was held at City College in New York. He was on the panel and I was on the panel and several other people—the play had created a great deal of attention. Harold talked about the play and the production in very glowing terms. And, you know, I had seen Harold a number of times after that, yeah.

DESSERE:

And he never mentioned this letter.

GORDON:

No, we never talked about it. But it was already four or five years later.

DESSERE:

It didn't mean anything at the time.

GORDON:

No. As a matter of fact, I was just as glad, because I was pretty severe in my criticism. Some of the things that I said to you were in that letter.

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DESSERE:

So, in some ways, when you accepted this offer from Hollywood, you severed your links with the world of the theater. Did you feel this way? Did you feel that it was sort of treason at the same time, or were you just looking forward to doing something new?

GORDON:

No, I was very interested in movies, and I really wanted to work in movies. And the reason I came back was because while—I got a lucky break when I was at Columbia. I was a dialogue director for a year and a half. I worked with about seven or eight different directors on about twenty films, and then quite by luck they—Columbia had screwed up their schedule somehow, and a picture that I was a dialogue director on—it was just a twelve-day picture kind of thing. The director had to start another picture before he finished the one he was then currently shooting. You know, he was under contract there, as I was, and somebody had to finish the last three days of it. It was a director named Charlie [Charles T.] Barton, a very wonderful guy, and I was very grateful to him. Because they were deciding who was going to finish the picture, and he said, "Oh, hell, let Mike do it. He knows what's in the can, he knows the story, he knows the people. How badly can he screw it up?" And I shot the last three days of that film. They were apparently satisfied. They had me under contract, literally under Guild scale—that's another story—at that time. And within a month I had my own first picture there. Boston Blackie [Goes Hollywood] was the next picture that I did.

DESSERE:

Before that, I think, you had been interested in film, but did you go to see films a lot when you were working on the plays, or did you have time to do that?

GORDON:

Well, I was not like you, you know, who knows every foot of film that was ever shot. [laughter] But I enjoyed films and I went to see a lot of them. As I said before, I remember several films that I saw which, it seemed to me, came out that were adaptations of plays and I thought that they were better. Then there were a number of films that were very exciting. I was very interested in movies, you know. I used to go to movies because I would justify it for myself by saying, "This is part of my work." It wasn't just that I was flaking out or anything of that kind. A lot of foreign films I saw at that particular time.

DESSERE:

Do you remember a few of them?

GORDON:

Well, there were a number of very interesting Russian films that were made at that time, some films by [Alexander P.] Dovzhenko, for example. I remember a film called *Chapayev*. A number of films that I saw. Dovzhenko was my—

DESSERE:

Favorite.

GORDON:

I thought he was the greatest, you know. A film that was called— *Frontier* I think it was called in English. I think it was originally called *Aerograd*.

DESSERE:

Yes, *Aerograd*.

GORDON:

That I thought was just full of incredibly wonderful directorial stuff. So I was kind of very interested in it. And that was fed, too, by my experience with the Frontier Films people that I had worked with.

DESSERE:

Because they recommended those films to you?

GORDON:

Well, they recommended or stimulated my interest. The fact that I realized how—let me say, I had never looked at films technically. I simply had looked at them for enjoyment. But then I began to look at it with a more—what shall I say?—specialized eye.

DESSERE:

Because of your experience with Frontier Films.

GORDON:

Yes, right, right.

DESSERE:

Frontier Films, as a rule, was a company which was oriented toward subjects with a social dimension, too. Would you say that?

GORDON:

To some degree, yes, but not exclusively so. In other words, they were not doing some of the Pare Lorentz—you know, things like the beach, or stuff like that. It was a little more socially oriented, I think, than that.

DESSERE:

Yeah. Because it seems that the film you worked on would be a perfect subject for you.

GORDON:

That was, yes, yes.

DESSERE:

And what about—? Your political convictions were still as strong at the time? The Depression was a little bit back, at that time, but still—

GORDON:

Yeah, for a while, you know. I mean, not when I was in Hollywood, really.

DESSERE:

Well, I'm talking about the forties before you go—

GORDON:

Oh, yes, in the thirties in particular.

DESSERE:

Yes, all right. By the way, I want to ask you, did you ever see the film production of *Golden Boy*? Lewis Meltzer—

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

What did you think of it? I suppose you found it probably a little bit adulterated as opposed to what was put on by the Group.

GORDON:

I enjoyed it. I don't remember it in any particular detail. I mean, there was nothing—I didn't feel strongly that they had butchered it or anything of that kind, no.

DESSERE:

I see, I see. Not at the time. Rouben Mamoulian directed it.

GORDON:

Did Mamoulian? No, not the film.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, yes.

GORDON:

Of Golden Boy?

DESSERE:

Yes, with Barbara Stanwyck and William Holden.

GORDON:

Yeah, I remember Barbara Stanwyck and William Holden and Lee [J.] Cobb.

DESSERE:

And Lee Cobb, yes.

GORDON:

Lee, who had been with us in the Group. Did Mamoulian direct that? Yeah, I guess so.

DESSERE:

Yes, he did. He did it at Columbia, and your friend Lewis Meltzer wrote the adaptation with Daniel Taradash.

GORDON:

That's right, yeah.

DESSERE:

I thought that was an interesting—

GORDON:

Who produced that film?

DESSERE:

Well, it's Columbia who produced it in the studio.

GORDON:

Yes, I know, but—

DESSERE:

The person's specific name?

GORDON:

Was it Charlie [Charles] Vidor? No, he was a director; he wasn't a producer.

DESSERE:

No. His name escapes me right now, but I will find out and tell you next time.

GORDON:

It's not important.

DESSERE:

All right. Now, you arrived in Hollywood. So you had to leave pretty quickly. You had just gotten the letter and you had to be there.

GORDON:

I just jumped, yeah.

DESSERE:

When you arrived, what did you do? Somebody from the company came to welcome you?

GORDON:

Yes. My friend met me at the—

DESSERE:

Yes, so Lewis Meltzer—

GORDON:

Meltzer, right.

DESSERE:

He came to pick you up.

GORDON:

Right.

DESSERE:

I see. He was happy to see you.

GORDON:

Yeah. And then I remember having a meeting with Abe Lastfogel—because I had a connection with William Morris [Agency] at the time—and he said, "Go back to New York. You will never get out of this rut. This is a terrible job." He tried to discourage me from taking it, but I had nothing to go back to.

DESSERE:

I see. But you didn't feel that you were breaking any links with New York?

GORDON:

At the time, no. I did not contemplate going back to New York. But what happened was, after I had this break and I directed this film— And what I started to say was my contract started at \$100 a week at Columbia.

DESSERE:

Which was more than you had ever made.

GORDON:

Exactly. And it was the standard contract. I think originally they were six-month contracts, which was twenty out of twenty-six weeks. That is, they could lay you off for six weeks, but you couldn't—you were committed to them for twenty-six weeks, but they were committed to you only for twenty. Well, for the first three or four [pictures] I was never put on layoff. After I had done four pictures for them, I got a call one day from the man who was in charge, my administrative superior or whatever, who told me I was being put on layoff. And I felt that that was pretty cruddy, because by that time I was only making, I think, \$150 a week. I'd gotten two raises. And incidentally, that was below the Guild minimum. Because when the agreement between the producers and the Directors Guild [of America] was first initiated—it was, I think, in 1942, or something like that—one of the provisions was that prior existing contracts would not be affected by the new scale. And when I was directing my third or fourth picture, I was making less than my assistant director. I was making less than anybody. And so I felt that I was the best buy in town, for heaven's sake, and for them to put me on layoff was, you know, not—well, it was shabby. They didn't have to do it. However, it was in the contract. Right around that time—that was in 1943—I got a call from someone who has recently died, Sydney Harmon, whom I'd known from New York. He was a New York producer who, out here, was the head of the Office of War Information film division. And he called me one day and said, "Would you be available to do a film that we are doing? A short film."

DESSERE:

Instructional type of material?

GORDON:

Right. I said, "Well, it just so happens I'm on layoff, and I think so." He said, "Look, we don't pay anything. We just give you a \$10 per diem allowance." And that's \$70 a week. We didn't even have unemployment insurance at that time. Seventy dollars a week was better than what I was getting, which was zero. I said, "That's fine with me. But I have to clear it with the studio." I said, "There should be no problem because I'm on layoff." When I got in and I told it to the executive, he said, "Well, I'll talk to the boss. I'll talk to Harry [Cohn], and it will probably be okay." You know, he said, "Come in and see me on Monday"—or whatever it was. And when I came in on Monday he says, "Yeah, you can do it. However, you'll have to take a suspension while you're doing it." Now, a suspension would extend the layoff, defer my next raise, which was going to be for like \$150 a week or \$175 a week. And I got furious. I said that this was very, very crappy, and so forth and so on. He says, "Well, let's face it, it's in your contract." I said, "You can take your contract and shove it." He says, "Well, you can't do that." He says, "Don't be rash. Talk to your wife." And I talked to my wife about it. I said, "These bastards. I mean, this is outrageous and I don't want any more of it." Oh, I remember one further thing, you know, when I was making my appeal. I said, "It isn't as though I'm inconveniencing the studio by doing this thing. I mean, have you got an assignment for me?" He says, "No, we've only got good pictures coming up." I said, "Well, I'm ready. You know my background in New York. I directed there. You've seen the four pictures I made here. I'm ready for a good picture." Believe it or not, he said to me, "How can we give you a good picture at your salary?" That's when I said, "You can take your contract and shove it." I talked to my wife about it. I had, at that time, two small children, and I probably had about \$3,000 in the bank. I said, "What shall I tell them?" She was a rock. She said, "Tell them to take their contract and shove it," and we went back to New York.

DESSERE:

I see. So you didn't have any idea about organized labor at the time or anything like that. Or you didn't have an agent who would negotiate—?

GORDON:

Oh, I had an agent, but I don't even know if they were involved in this. Or they might very well have said—listen, I mean, their interest was certainly more in Harry Cohn's good opinion of them than in my not being on layoff. And so in

any case, that did not figure. I went back, and I remember this Max Arnow, who was the executive who I was referring to, he said, "Look, you can't walk out on a contract. You'll never work in Hollywood again." I said, "I'll take my chances," and I went back to New York. I was in New York for three years, during which time *Home of the Brave* happened. Actually, again, the factor of luck was so incredible. I had gotten a call—I was working in New York at that time. I was getting a few jobs here and there. *Storm Operation* was the first of several. I got a call from the William Morris Agency saying that Mr. Lastfogel wanted me to come out to Hollywood. He was going to set up some interviews for me with people. I said, "Well, that's lovely, but I can't afford to come." They said, "Well, we'll pay for your transportation, provided if you get a job you'll repay us," which actually did happen. I went out and he took me around to independent producers. I met with Bill [William] Goetz, who was then International Pictures; with [Milton] Sperling, who had his independent company; with Walter Wanger, who had his independent, with Samuel Goldwyn. You know, people like that.. While I was here—it was, I think, in May of 1946—*Weekly Variety* came out with its critics' poll of the bests of the preceding season. Lo and behold, my direction of *Home of the Brave* was a tie with Gar [Garson] Kanin for *Born Yesterday*, the two best directors and so on. There it was. And of course, Lastfogel got twelve copies of it, and we marked it and sent it around. As a result of that, there were about three or four offers that came. Not immediately. That was to start in September. So I went back to New York, and we made preparations. And that's when I came out, in the fall of 1946. But it just couldn't have been planned by a press agent any more effectively than I just lucked into it at that particular time. Of the various offers that were forthcoming, I remember Hellinger—is that the name?

DESSERE:

Mark Hellinger.

GORDON:

Mark Hellinger was one of the people whom I saw at that particular time. Goldwyn was the one I was most interested in, but he just wanted me on an observing, apprentice capacity. And I said, "I've served my apprenticeship, Mr. Goldwyn. I admire all of your work, but I don't want to go back to that again. I mean, either I'm a director or not."

DESSERE:

What did Walter Wanger say to you?

GORDON:

Well, Walter Wanger didn't have anything specific at the time, you know. In any case, I got the offer from International, and it was the one we accepted. In the intervening time between when we signed the contract and the time I came out, International merged with Universal [Pictures], and of course my contract was transferred to— UI [Universal International] it was then called.

DESSERE:

Very good. So when you arrived, how did the studio structure strike you? When you arrived, what was your first impression?

GORDON:

Well, my first impression was great, because I was making \$1,000 a week, and with a contract for a year.

DESSERE:

Being a dialogue director, then?

GORDON:

No, no—oh, are you talking about the first time? 1940?

DESSERE:

Yeah, I'm talking about the very first time.

GORDON:

Oh, oh, the first time. Well, the first time I didn't know what was what. I was referring to when I came back in '46. No, when I first came out in '40, I knew that I had a six-month contract, and they stuck me in a little office in the annex, which was on the next street, a little—

DESSERE:

On Gower [Street]?

GORDON:

Not Gower. It was on the next street, whatever that was called. And then I was there just a couple of days, and I got a call to come over to the boss's office.

DESSERE:

Harry Cohn. You didn't know anything about him at the time?

GORDON:

I guess that was my first—maybe Lewis Meltzer, who was kind of buddy-buddy with Harry Cohn—that's how I got the job—I may have met him, just "How do you do" when I first arrived on the lot.

DESSERE:

But you didn't know about his reputation?

GORDON:

Well, I'd heard some stuff.

DESSERE:

Some stories.

GORDON:

Yeah. In any case, he called me into the office, and there was Everett Riskin and Bill [William] Perlberg, I think, who was the producer, and Al [Alexander] Hall.

DESSERE:

I think he's the one who produced *Golden Boy*, as a matter of fact.

GORDON:

May very well have been. I came in and saw this palatial office of Harry's—you know, vast, with a big desk in it and so on—and he said, "I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing. I'm going to start you on an important picture. Al Hall is going to be starting in the next week or ten days or whatever it is, and you're going to be a dialogue director for him."

DESSERE:

Do you remember what picture it was? It wasn't *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*?

GORDON:

No, it was before that. That was about the third picture that I did with Alex Hall. I can't remember what it was called. I think it had— What's her name? Who played Craig's wife.

DESSERE:

Rosalind Russell.

GORDON:

Rosalind Russell I think was in it, and I think that Melvyn Douglas was in it—I think. I don't remember the name of the picture. So "Here's a script. Look it over, and you start in ten days, " or a week or whatever. And I was expecting to get a call from the director to come and talk to me about it. Meanwhile, I was studying the script, and, you know me—

DESSERE:

Yes, notating everything.

GORDON:

Doing rewrites and so on.

DESSERE:

Rewrites, yes. That's something I've always wanted to ask you. On the plays you were asked to direct before or you were working on, did you ever argue with a playwright on—?

GORDON:

Oh, I worked in a collaborative capacity always, always—with some more extensively, some less extensively. But sure, I—

DESSERE:

Because you had a degree in play writing, so I suppose there was some kind of, I don't know, writer's unconscious desire—[laughter]

GORDON:

Well, it wasn't so much that as, really, to make the script better. I mean, it wasn't an ego trip for me. But I wanted to make it as good as it could be. In any case, I was waiting to get a call from Al Hall, and I didn't get one. Here we were, a few days before we were supposed to start—two or three days—I still hadn't heard from him. So I phoned him. He said, "Oh, yeah, come on over, " and I went over to his office. It was an office about this size, that was all, but in the main building. And when I opened the door—and knocked, you know, and "Come in, come in"—he said, "Look, I've been making pictures for a long time, and I make a lot of money. I never used a dialogue director, I don't need one now."

DESSERE:

So were you shocked?

GORDON:

And he said, "You know, just be on the set and keep out of my hair and we'll get along fine." And that was the introduction. Needless to say, he asked me for a second picture and the next picture after that, and I think I did four with him.

DESSERE:

So you stayed very quietly on one corner of the set? Was that your function—that you prepared all the scripts in detail?

GORDON:

No, the job was to make sure that the actors knew their lines. That was the minimum. So that you were cueing them, you were running lines with them.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see, so you were sort of a coach at the same time.

GORDON:

Well, except you weren't supposed to be a coach. But I did.

DESSERE:

Yes, you coached them, you should say. [laughter]

GORDON:

But you musn't let anyone catch you at it. At first, I just wanted to make sure I wasn't in the camera shot, you know, and not to trip over the cables and like that.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course, because all of this was new to you.

GORDON:

Exactly.

DESSERE:

The incredible amount of equipment and—but Alexander Hall was one of the most important directors on the lot, I suppose.

GORDON:

Yes, he was. He was a very successful director. He was always in comedies, of course, and he had good actors. And with him I know that there was the Rosalind Russell picture and then there was one with Loretta Young and *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*. And then there was one with Joan Crawford and with Bob [Robert] Montgomery, and so on. So he was working in the fast lane, as it were.

DESSERE:

Yes. And I suppose his films—I mean, he took time to make his films.

GORDON:

Well, not by standards of today. I don't think the longest shooting schedule was more than eight weeks. I mean, then it was nothing like a half year or anything like that. And, you know, they were A pictures, but it wasn't *Gone With the Wind*. It wasn't that kind of film.

DESSERE:

Yeah. Do you remember shooting in color at that time?

GORDON:

None of those films with Al Hall were in color. That wasn't really until later.

DESSERE:

But I think it's very interesting that Harry Cohn decided to bring dialogue directors from New York like yourself, because you know in the—

GORDON:

Bill [William] Castle was a dialogue director at the same time. He was there ahead of me.

DESSERE:

Oh, really? He had arrived earlier than you?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. And they subsequently had others as well.

DESSERE:

Because it seems, to go back to the thirties—in the thirties, when pictures began to talk—I mean, it was of course 1927, the first talking film. But, you know, when they started making those things from plays, then they brought dialogue directors. This is the way Mamoulian or George Cukor started their career. I would imagine that practice would have been abandoned by the time you started, but obviously it went on.

GORDON:

No, it wasn't. I mean, it was going on. Irving Rapper was doing that at Warner Brothers [Pictures], and there were others. It's not a function that exists any longer.

DESSERE:

Yes. Because I think it would be—I mean, a director would be offended to have—

GORDON:

Right. But you weren't supposed to direct. I mean, I was told that my only job was to make sure that they knew their lines when they were on the set. I held the book during rehearsal and that kind of thing and even during the take,

something that a script clerk would perhaps do under normal circumstances. But I was doing that, and my responsibility was to see that they said all the right lines and to call the director's attention if they didn't.

DESSERE:

You didn't do any continuity. You would just get the notices from the production manager, and he would tell you the day before, "Well, we are shooting this scene."

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I'd get the call sheet like everybody else, you know.

DESSERE:

And did you have to get meetings with the actors in order to—?

GORDON:

Only on the set. I didn't meet with them outside.

DESSERE:

Oh, you didn't meet with them outside or during rehearsals—?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes. While they were setting up, while they were doing the lighting—which 75 percent of the time is setting up for the shots—that's when I'd be working in the dressing rooms with them.

DESSERE:

I see. And after that they would go with the director to rehearse the actual scene.

GORDON:

Exactly, yeah. Or they maybe would have one run-through, and then if they weren't quite up on their lines, I would just run with them, if an actor was insecure. Sometimes I would take the initiative and I would say, "Why don't we run the lines?" And sometimes they didn't want to. In other cases, the stars—this is something I learned to respect them for—were very, very responsible, very good at their jobs. I remember Joan Crawford in particular. I

mean, four o'clock in the afternoon, when all of the master shots had been done and it was just pickup, close-ups and so on, she'd yell, "Mike! Come over. What are we doing tomorrow? Let's run it." You know. I mean, she was wonderfully conscientious that way.

DESSERE:

So you would go to her dressing room and go—?

GORDON:

To her dressing room, and then we would just run the lines. And I would do that with all the actors, in varying degrees, depending on how much they had or how much they wanted to. Sometimes you had to jolly them into it, you know, cajole them into running the lines. Nobody ever wanted to much.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

Except a few.

DESSERE:

Were you intimidated a little bit by the people you saw around you, because you had heard about them, or—?

GORDON:

Well, let me say, the first day I remember a very funny thing that happened. I was very bewildered and intimidated on my first day on the set. And in that first day of shooting, I saw someone whom I knew as an actor from New York and I said hello to him. He came over and gave me the warmest greeting, "Oh, Mike, it's wonderful to have you out here," and so forth. His name was Allyn Joslyn.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes.

GORDON:

He was never a star, but he was a very, very good—

DESSERE:

Character actor.

GORDON:

—character actor and so on. And I remember some years later seeing him, and I said, "Allyn, I'll never forget how wonderful—" Because the assistant director, who had been bossing me around, when I was greeted by an actor—you know, he was an important actor—suddenly his attitude toward me changed a little. I saw Allyn, oh, a year or so later, and I said, "Gee, I'll never forget. I'm so grateful for what you did. There I was a babe in the woods and frightened and—" And he said, "Are you kidding?" He said, "When I saw a friendly face—I was so nervous—" [laughter] It was the first day of shooting.

DESSERE:

It was mutual support.

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DESSERE:

So how long did this "apprenticeship" last?

GORDON:

About a year and a half.

DESSERE:

About a year and a half. So how many films, approximately, do you remember shooting?

GORDON:

You mean as a dialogue director?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

I would say it was close to twenty.

DESSERE:

Close to twenty?

GORDON:

Yeah, because a lot of them were the quickies, you know.

DESSERE:

Oh, you did a lot of, also, twelve-day productions. I see, I see. So you were—

GORDON:

I mean, there were several major ones as well, but I don't really remember the number. There were the four that I made with Alex [Alexander] Hall—

DESSERE:

With Charles Barton you mentioned.

GORDON:

Well, Charlie Barton. Those were B pictures. Those were short-schedule pictures.

DESSERE:

Did you work with Charles Vidor, also?

GORDON:

Yes, but only part of a film, and I can't even remember what film it was, except that I do remember that Paul Lukas was in it. As a matter of fact, it was during that time that Lukas came to me one day and he said, "You're from New York." He said, "I got this telegram. Read it and tell me what it means." And the telegram was from a very reputable agent in New York. I can't remember which one it was, but it was a very well established agent. It said, "Herman Shumlin interested in you, new Hellman play." And "Are you available?" I can't remember the name of the agent, but it was one of the top agents in New York. He [Lukas] said, "Well, what is this?" And I said, "It's wonderful." I said, "Shumlin is one of the best producers in New York, Lillian Hellman is one of our great playwrights, and this is a very, very reputable agent." He said, "Well, what do I do?" I said, "Are you available? Are you interested?" And he said,

"Well, I might be." So I said, "You send a telegram back saying yes and 'What are the particulars?'" And he said, "Well, you're very good, Mike. You do it, you send the telegram." I knew Paul by that time. He was the cheapskate of all— I said, "No. I'll write it for you; you send it." I wasn't going to pay for the telegram.

DESSERE:

Oh, that's what he wanted, you to pay? [laughter]

GORDON:

So anyway, I wrote the telegram for him. And I remember what happened after that. Several days later I said, "Well, did you hear from them again?" And he says, "Yeah, they telephoned me." I said, "Do they want you for the play?" And he says, "Yes." In the telegram I said, "Send me the script, " you see, and they sent him the script. He had told me he had gotten the script, and I said, "How was it?" And he says, "It's wonderful, it's wonderful." I said, "That's great, are you going to do it?" He says, "No, they want me for the wrong part." Now, he was always playing villains, and, of course, the film was *Watch on the Rhine*. He said, "They want me for the wrong part." He said, "There is a part in there which I can play and I can be great, but they want me for the villain role"—that [George] Coulouris later played. And I said, "Well, tell them that." He said, "I did." And I said, "Well, were they interested?" And he said, "No, it's impossible. They want me to read." I said, "So big deal, so you read." He said, "Look, I was a star in Budapest," and whatever. "I don't read. I don't audition for a part. There's so much [film]." I said, "Yes, but you've been doing the other kinds of roles," and so on. I think he gave me the script to read, as a matter of fact. I read it and I was thrilled with the script. In any case, I had to try to persuade him. They were going to come out and they wanted him to read, and he didn't want to. And he finally said, "Look, English is not my native language. I don't read well." I said, "Oh, come on, you can do it. What is there to do? You'll just do what you ordinarily do. You'll have the script in advance. You'll familiarize yourself. It's not going to be a cold reading." He says, "Well, you're from New York, what do they look for in a reading?" And for about four days, after shooting, he came to my office and we went over it together and I coached him. Although we never acknowledged that's what I was doing. It was like, you know, "I know what they look for in a reading. They'll look for this,

they'll look for that, and so forth and so on." Well, the rest is history—he got the part. But he had to be persuaded. He was very nervous about it, and I think friends of his like Billy Wilder encouraged him to do it, and other people and so on. And of course he was magnificent, both on Broadway and, later, in the film.

DESSERE:

Were you receiving credits as dialogue director?

GORDON:

No.

DESSERE:

Not at all.

GORDON:

I mean, nobody got credit for that. You mean screen credit?

DESSERE:

No screen credit, that's what I was—

GORDON:

No screen credit, no.

DESSERE:

Yeah, because in the early days, the end of the 1920s, they did.

GORDON:

I suppose they did, yeah.

DESSERE:

They did, because it was a very important function. But at that time, although you were necessary, you didn't really—

GORDON:

Yeah. And not everybody used them even then. But Harry Cohn felt it was efficient, and that was the practice at Columbia [Pictures Industries] and at

Warner Brothers [Pictures] and one or two others. But some places didn't use them.

DESSERE:

So was Harry Cohn close to collaborators like you who were in a semi-modest position at the time?

GORDON:

Well, not really. But it wasn't that you never saw him or spoke to him. I had occasional talks with him, but not very much.

DESSERE:

You would have to go to see him sometimes even on behalf of the director?

GORDON:

There were a few times, but it wasn't important until much later when I went to see him, after I had left and come back again.

DESSERE:

Did he come on the set very often, would you say?

GORDON:

No. He looked at the dailies every night, of course. Harry Cohn was a filmmaker, which a lot of executives were not. I don't think he was quite in the same class as Darryl [F.] Zanuck, who I thought was great. He really was. I mean, when I worked at Twentieth [Century-Fox Film Corporation] later on, I was amazed at the grasp that Zanuck had of what was going on. He knew every foot of film that was shot on the lot and was very, very perceptive.

DESSERE:

Well, he was a remarkable editor—that's what I've heard.

GORDON:

And he had a very, very good story sense.

DESSERE:

Yes, he was a writer originally.

GORDON:

Yeah, he was better than Harry. But Harry was a moviemaker, too, which I don't think, for example, guys like Bill [William] Goetz ever were or people at Universal [Pictures]. They were not moviemakers in the sense that—

DESSERE:

But they were the producers.

GORDON:

Yes, they were and the studio heads and so on. But Cohn and Zanuck definitely were [filmmakers].

DESSERE:

Did you ever see him do nasty things to people? Because, you know, he has a very strong reputation—

GORDON:

Well, let me say, the only one that I remember that I had any direct participation in was Christmas Eve. Harry Cohn had a big party in his office, and [Lewis] Meltzer and I and a few other guys had a crap game up in Meltzer's office. I don't know how Cohn got wind of it, but it was interrupted by two cops coming in to bust up the crap game, and we were under arrest and carried down to Cohn's office.

DESSERE:

And that was a joke?

GORDON:

Yes. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Oh, good. I bet you were terrified. Because it was forbidden to play craps?

GORDON:

Oh, sure. You don't do that on a studio lot, for heaven's sake.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Well, we didn't. At least I didn't think so.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. I didn't know that. I wonder why, because it seems that—I don't see why a studio lot should not be a casino. [laughter] That's for some preparation for *The Lady Gambles*.

GORDON:

But we were actually under arrest and brought down to Harry's office. We thought at first we were being taken to jail—you know, to the station or something. Instead we were taken to Harry's office, where the party was in progress. And we were humiliated in—

DESSERE:

In front of everybody.

GORDON:

—in front of everybody.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. But you never saw him do verbal abuse, the way he called some—he used to call Rouben Mamoulian "the Armenian rug peddler," and he referred to Kim Novak as "that fat Polack." This has been in print in books.

GORDON:

Well, yeah, I don't put it past him. He certainly was a vulgarian.

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

But he certainly also knew what he wanted. I remember a story that was told to me involving Charlie Vidor and Oscar Saul—a very good screenwriter with

whom I worked on several projects. They were working on a picture that took place on shipboard—it was a tramp steamer or whatever—and there was a storm scene. They had been working for a long time developing the script, and at the last moment he canceled it. He decided they weren't going to make it—Oscar is the one who told me—and they were devastated. And they said, "Why, Harry? You liked the script." He said, "I don't like pictures where the audience has to look at it sideways." [laughter]

DESSERE:

Well, I'm sure he wouldn't have liked Abel Gance to be one of his directors, because he used the camera a lot like this, you know, to give you the impression that you were in a boat. [laughter]

GORDON:

Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

So, perfect. So you worked with Vidor, Alexander Hall, and then they moved you around a little bit in all styles of production.

GORDON:

Oh, yeah, whatever they needed. I was just hired help, and they could—you know, the contract enabled them to employ me in any way that they wanted, as a writer, as a dialogue director, as a director, maybe to open the big doors and shut the big doors if they wanted to. And that's how there was no change in my contract when I began to direct—that was part of the contract.

DESSERE:

I see. But tell me, knowing the inquisitive mind that you have, I suppose you went everywhere to see how it worked in all the departments.

GORDON:

Well, let me say, one of the things that I set for myself as a task when I first came out—first of all, I wanted to discover what of my past experience had relevance, you know, and I found that a great deal of it did, of course. Now, what are the areas where I'm an illiterate, where I really need to learn? It really fell into three categories: the camera, the sound system, and the cutting

room. And that's what I set myself to learn. I bought a cinematographers' handbook for myself.

DESSERE:

Was it the one from ASC [*American Society of Cinematographers Handbook and Guide*]?

GORDON:

That little thing. So I found out what the lenses did, what the stops signified. I began really to study for myself as well as observe. I went to dailies every night. And then I talked to people. In other words, I made friends with the guy who was a mixer, and so on. You know, I found out how the thing operated and what the criteria were and what the dials signified, the whole miking process, the booms and so on, and, you know, became aware of mike shadows and that problem and that sort of thing. And hung around the cutting rooms a lot when I had time to do it, to see both the mechanics—and then I had the experience of working with directors who had been something else. I mean, Robert Florey was one I worked with.

DESSERE:

Oh, you worked with him? Did you work on his [*Meet*] *Boston Blackie* film?

GORDON:

No, I worked on another one that Peter Lorre played in.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, *Face Behind the Mask*. That's a wonderful film.

GORDON:

And that's when I did my first directing, because there was a second unit, and he said, "You do it while I'm working on this." A house was on fire, a rooming house or boarding house, and there were a whole lot of people who were fleeing the fire, people who were the inhabitants, the residents, of the house. And he said, "Why don't you just shoot it and have them come down that stairway three times carrying their belongings." I said, "Should I go down to the prop room and pick out some stuff?" And he said, "Yeah, whatever you want." So I got a lot of the conventional things. I mean, suitcases and a

birdcage. And I found one thing in the prop room which was a concertina. Do you know what a concertina is?

DESSERE:

Oh, yes.

GORDON:

You know, a squeeze-box? I said, "Oh, I've got a wonderful idea. I'll break the strap so that when it's carried, it goes waa-waaaa-waa-waa, " and I included that. And when he saw that in the dailies, he said, "Genius! Genius! This is wonderful." I remember I was in the supermarket many years later, and I heard a voice say, "Genius!" And it was Florey. He was in the market, and he still remembered the squeeze-box.

DESSERE:

I'm sure he must have liked these little details, because he was a man who was very concerned about atmosphere and—

GORDON:

Yeah, well, of course he had been a cameraman at first. And he was the one who was always making, you know—

DESSERE:

Stilted angles.

GORDON:

Through the armpit and crotch shots and whatnot. He was about six foot three [inches]—he was a tall stringbean of a guy—and he would be crawling around with the finder and that type of thing. But with no sense of dramatic values at all, not any. I mean, he would set up a shot, and I would say, "Hey, wait a minute, he's got to be hidden so that they can't see him, " the pursuers, you know. But he says, "Yeah, but it composes so well." He had a great eye for composition, filming composition, but he wasn't really into the story values or performance or anything of that sort. Let's see, who were some of the other—? Oh, I did several pictures with Eddie [Edward] Dmytryk, who had been a cutter, and I learned a great deal from him. Actually, I think I learned as much about cutting from a producer I worked with much later named Jerry Bresler,

whom I did three pictures with. That's when I was at UI [Universal International].

DESSERE:

But you were an established director.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. But in the meantime, I was really studying. As a matter of fact, I remember what I did after, let's say, the first six months, when I began to get a grasp. I would get the call sheet for tomorrow's work, and then I made it a practice after dinner each night to sit down and plan the next day's shooting as though I had to do it. Then I would compare what I did with what the director did the next day. And I realized I had left out important things or that I didn't do it as well as he had done.

DESSERE:

Did you do little storyboarding, drawing—?

GORDON:

Only to a slight degree myself, but principally it was verbal. I had a pretty good visualization. I didn't really need a storyboard very much. But after a while—as I say, at first I realized where my deficiencies were. Then later on I began to have a sense of where the director's deficiencies were. My planning was better than his, I thought. And so I was really quite ready when I got the crack at it.

DESSERE:

So you worked also with—you said Edward Dmytryk. You worked on some of his films for a—

GORDON:

A couple of his films. And let's see, who else did I work for? Irving—what was his name? There were several brothers. He had a brother who was an agent. Salkow, Irving Salkow.

DESSERE:

Is it Sidney Salkow?

GORDON:

Sidney Salkow. Irving was the agent.

DESSERE:

Yes. Sidney Salkow taught at [California State University] Northridge.

GORDON:

Oh, Sidney did?

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, yes.

GORDON:

Oh, really? Let's see, who else?

DESSERE:

Richard Wallace.

GORDON:

Oh, Dick Wallace—oh, I loved him. Yeah, marvelous guy. And I don't know, I can't remember now.

DESSERE:

Any actors besides—?

GORDON:

Oh, oh, and one guy—what was his name? A very, very funny guy. Oh, gee, I do remember several now. Green.

DESSERE:

Alfred [E.] Green.

GORDON:

Al Green.

DESSERE:

Yes, who was a silent director.

GORDON:

Yeah, because he often referred to dialogue as titles.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

He'd say, "Did he say that title right?" [laughter]

DESSERE:

That's a lovely story.

GORDON:

And there was someone else who was on the tip of my tongue a moment ago.

DESSERE:

Well, Richard Wallace we mentioned.

GORDON:

Dick Wallace and—oh, yes. I can't remember his name. He did the Blondie series.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes. I can't think of his name.

GORDON:

I worked on a couple of the Blondies as well. I can see him, but I can't remember his name.

DESSERE:

Yeah, well, I'll check and I'll—

GORDON:

Well, it's not important.

DESSERE:

Well, it's important, because if you have something to say about him—

GORDON:

Well, he was just very funny. He used a lot of very cornball terminology. He was the guy who would say, "Do a high, wide, and gruesome." [laughter] That meant a delayed take with a jump. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So the atmosphere was very friendly?

GORDON:

Oh, I enjoyed myself very much.

DESSERE:

You didn't feel out of place? Did you have a reputation of being an intellectual in this milieu or—?

GORDON:

Well, I tried to conceal that as much as I could.

DESSERE:

Oh, so you didn't want people to ostracize you?

GORDON:

Oh, no.

DESSERE:

Because they didn't know. They just liked you because—

GORDON:

I was just a guy.

DESSERE:

And Edward Dmytryk, were you close to him at some point? Did you become good friends at all?

GORDON:

We did at one time, yeah. Because I often, after dinner, would go over to his house as he was preparing the next day's work. I wanted to see his approach.

And I knew Eddie very well. I worked in a couple of pictures with Eddie. I can't remember what they were. I can't remember all those pictures I worked on.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course, because there are a lot—over twenty pictures. But they were all willing to share, it seems?

GORDON:

Well, in certain instances. I didn't have that kind of relationship with them. With Al Hall I ultimately did, you see, because I did four with him over a period of about two years. And Dmytryk, as I said, I did a couple of pictures with him. I guess those were the only ones with whom I had a relationship away from the studio at all.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. Did you share some political views with them? For instance, with Edward Dmytryk?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Oh, sure, to some degree.

DESSERE:

Yes. So that was a good atmosphere, basically. You enjoyed it.

GORDON:

And Eddie had a great deal of savvy with respect to cutting, because that was his background.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, he was very knowledgeable. GORDON; Just as, I guess, a little later, guys like Mark Robson and Bob [Robert] Wise—at one point I was going to be working with those two guys—we were going to form a company—with Bob Wise and Mark.

DESSERE:

Did you know they all started in RKO [Radio Pictures] with Val Lewton and productions of horror films? Those films are very fondly remembered now.

GORDON:

Yeah, *The Cat People*.

DESSERE:

The Cat People and *Isle of the Dead*.

GORDON:

Yes, yes. I knew Val Lewton slightly too.

DESSERE:

Yes, but he was a different company. You didn't have any relationship with people from other companies?

GORDON:

Oh, sure, to some degree. You met them after a while.

DESSERE:

You met them socially?

GORDON:

Yeah, sure.

DESSERE:

And they knew who you were and—?

GORDON:

Some did, some people.

DESSERE:

So there was a way of making contacts.

GORDON:

Well, you know, you met people always.

DESSERE:

So you started finally. You worked maybe on the original *Boston Blackie*.

GORDON:

It wasn't the original one. The one that I worked on—I mean, *Boston Blackie* was already a series. And then another picture that I did, I guess it was the third picture, was also a series called the Lone Wolf. That was not in the title, but there was the running character of the Lone Wolf.

DESSERE:

Yes. So they used to develop a number of series at that time. Charlie Chan and—

GORDON:

That's right, yeah.

DESSERE:

And made at other studios than Columbia. Who was *Boston Blackie*? Can you describe him as a character?

GORDON:

Chester Morris.

DESSERE:

Yes, I know the actor, but the character, who was he?

GORDON:

A private eye, I think.

DESSERE:

Yeah, that's what I've read, that he was a private eye. I've read that Robert Florey made the first *Boston Blackie*, as a matter of fact, and gave it a very interesting, atmospheric color. And then, apparently, you are the one who made the second one.

GORDON:

Was it the second one?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

Oh, I didn't realize it was. I thought that there had been more than that.

DESSERE:

Oh, there are a lot.

GORDON:

No, no, no, I mean I thought there had been more before mine. Maybe not.

DESSERE:

Well, according to the chronology, I found here that there was a *Boston Blackie, Booked on Suspicion*, that was made in '45.

GORDON:

That was after.

DESSERE:

Yes, it was after you. *Boston Blackie and the Law* in '46, *Boston Blackie's Chinese Venture* in '49, *Boston Blackie's Rendezvous* in '45. So yours was apparently the second, because you made it in '42.

GORDON:

Yeah, '42, that's right.

DESSERE:

So how was Chester Morris?

GORDON:

Wonderful, wonderful to work with. Interesting. Chester Morris, among other things, was a very, very good sleight of hand expert, with cards, with coins, with all kinds of things, and I wanted to put it in the picture. He said no. I said, "Why?" He said, "Because everybody knows you can do tricks with films, and it would cheapen my skill." And so he would not do it in film. But I think he had done some stage presentations. He was extraordinarily expert with card tricks and whatnot, just marvelous sleight of hand.

DESSERE:

So the *Boston Blackie* series would be considered now B films, because they were made on a low budget—

GORDON:

Very low budget.

DESSERE:

—and shot very quickly.

GORDON:

Twelve days, yeah.

DESSERE:

How did you make the plans? How were the plans made for such a series? Was it decided—? I mean, did you just walk in and all the sets were ready, and did you have a vision—?

GORDON:

No. Oh, no, no. I had a script, that's all.

DESSERE:

You had a script.

GORDON:

And then you worked from there, because a lot of it was done on the back lot as well as within—there may have been his office, I don't recall. It would have been a studio set. But, you know, I remember shooting a lot of stuff on the back lot. I remember a pretty good scene on a fire escape, and Chester Morris was so wonderful. We got ourselves into kind of a bind direction-wise—camera left, camera right kind of thing. And he had to shoot—you're the camera, and he had to shoot someone over there. It was a very bad position. And without my saying anything, when he had to shoot, he did it with his left hand. I didn't even have to tell him. I mean, spontaneously, you know, bang, and it worked fine. But he had that kind of inventiveness. He was a very, very

conscientious, hard worker and very good in terms of what he did. You know, he had had stage experience.

DESSERE:

Well, he was also the bat, you know, *The Bat Whispers*.

GORDON:

Oh, is that so?

DESSERE:

That film that was made in the thirties in which he plays a sort of private detective who disguises himself as a bat.

GORDON:

I never saw that.

DESSERE:

This film was restored in 65-mm by UCLA film archives.

GORDON:

Oh, is that so?

DESSERE:

Oh, yeah, so that's where I saw him.

GORDON:

Chester was expert, very, very good. Always up on his lines and very, very inventive physically. I mean, he was a fine performer.

DESSERE:

A lot of critics see those films, the B films, now as very important films. Because it seems that through a set of established themes, you were able to impart a different vision, that gave birth after that to the film noir theory, in which directors were able to impart some kind of social comments because they were less watched by the producers than they would have been in a major A production. Have you ever thought about all this?

GORDON:

No, because none of the four pictures of that kind that I made had any of those elements in them. One of the more interesting ones, and I have a feeling—this is one I would love to see again myself. It was one that we started and was supposed to be a series, and I think it was.

DESSERE:

Crime Doctor.

GORDON:

Crime Doctor. I did the first of that one.

DESSERE:

Yes, it was a series.

GORDON:

And I had a feeling that there were very interesting elements in that film.

DESSERE:

I would like to finish that part, if that's possible.

GORDON:

What's that?

DESSERE:

Talking about those four films.

GORDON:

Oh, yeah, sure.

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DESSERE:

We were talking about *Boston Blackie Goes Hollywood*. I thought those films probably seemed to you some kind of a puzzle and you had to put the pieces together. Was that the impression that you got at the time?

GORDON:

I don't quite know what you mean.

DESSERE:

Because *Boston Blackie* was already an established series. Had you seen the previous film? Did it familiarize you with the character?

GORDON:

No, I don't think I ever saw the other one. No.

DESSERE:

I see. I would think it would be difficult, because when they have established a character, you would probably have to go with the stereotypes donned by others.

GORDON:

Yes, to some degree. I had that experience when I worked in some series in television much later, but I don't recall that happening in either the *Boston Blackie* or the *Lone Wolf*. I guess it was the second film that I did that was just by itself. It was not part of any series. There was *Boston Blackie* and there was a thing called *Underground Agent* that was just a melodrama with espionage background or something. And then came the *Lone Wolf. One Dangerous Night* I think was that film. And then starting from scratch with *Crime Doctor*.

DESSERE:

Yeah. So about *Boston Blackie*, again, how did you work on the preparation? I'm just curious. What about casting? Of course Chester Morris had been chosen before you knew as the character.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

But what about the rest of the cast? Did you cast or was it already planned by the producer or the casting department?

GORDON:

No, except for one or two running characters, I think. There was the detective who was established and his sidekick—Georgie [George] Stone, I think was his name—who was a running character and had been established.

DESSERE:

Yes "Runt" was his name.

GORDON:

Right. But apart from that, it seems to me that everything else was cast from scratch.

DESSERE:

So you cast yourself?

GORDON:

Yeah. Well, I mean the casting department. I was involved in okaying it and in describing the types and so on.

DESSERE:

I see, so you described the types to the casting department and they tried to find a suitable actor or actress?

GORDON:

Yeah. Of course, they first went—because then the studios all had big contract lists of contract players. Those were the first ones they wanted you to use. You tried to find ways in which they would be suitable. And then beyond that they got day players or weekly players and so on.

DESSERE:

Since you were directing for, let's say, the first time, although you finished *Face Behind the Mask*, did you collaborate very closely with the cinematographer? Did he help you set your shots?

GORDON:

No, I don't recall. I don't recall that happening. I don't even recall who the cameraman was.

DESSERE:

Henry Freulich.

GORDON:

Oh, is he on that little thing?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

I remember him.

DESSERE:

So did you work very much on creating something very atmospheric with the cinematography? Did you put it in striking black and white or with a ray of light crossing the screen diagonally or—?

GORDON:

I don't recall doing that particularly. The one thing that I remember working on, and where we did use some storyboard, was that elevator shaft sequence that I talked about.

DESSERE:

Yes, you told me about that. Was it in that film?

GORDON:

Yes, I think it was, yeah.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. So it was difficult sometimes for you to visualize some points.

GORDON:

Yeah, sure. Let me explain something with respect to pictures of that kind. I can't remember whether it was on that picture—I think it was on that picture. I fell about a quarter of a day behind schedule. I was called in to Irving Briskin's office. Irving Briskin was in charge of that B unit. He called me in to bawl me

out for falling behind schedule. And he says, "Look, I know you guys. You want to do it very, very well." He says, "Look, we're going to make this picture for \$110,000. If it's very good, we will gross \$125,000," [laughter] or whatever the number was. "If it's very bad, we'll gross \$125,000." He says, "I don't want it good. I want it Thursday." [laughter] That was the attitude towards those pictures. I mean, they were just a product that was ground out. And it's amazing that sometimes imaginative work did happen. Because it was not the art of cinema. I mean, it was the movie business.

DESSERE:

Yes. It just happened by chance a little bit that you were able to—

GORDON:

It always has astonished me that—Hollywood never set but to be a beaux arts enterprise. The fact that as much artistic work emerged from Hollywood [as did] is the miracle of the twentieth century for me.

DESSERE:

[laughter] Yes. So your next film was *Underground Agent*?

GORDON:

Yeah. That was the least interesting of the films that I made I think.

DESSERE:

Why do you think it's—?

GORDON:

It was just routine kind of stuff.

DESSERE:

It was another routine thing.

GORDON:

Yeah. Who was the cameraman on that?

DESSERE:

The cameraman on that was L. W. O'Connor. Do you remember him?

GORDON:

No, no, I don't.

DESSERE:

Apparently you got a very good review on this, you know.

GORDON:

Oh, I did?

DESSERE:

Yeah, I will show you this file. I will give them to you after I'm done. I have the original book, but I made those copies. Now, it was also part of a series. Did you know it was part of a series called *Sabotage Squad*? Have you heard of that?

GORDON:

No, I didn't know that.

DESSERE:

They made two films. This one, which was *Underground Agent*, and the other one was called *Sabotage Squad*, which I haven't seen.

GORDON:

I never made that.

DESSERE:

No, I know. You didn't make it, but it was also another espionage thing.

GORDON:

No, I don't know anything about the other one.

DESSERE:

I was going to ask you about Herman Brit, who was the star of this film, who was a Tarzan before.

GORDON:

Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten. Who was the girl in that?

DESSERE:

The girl was Leslie Brooks.

GORDON:

Oh, lovely girl. I remember her.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

I don't remember too much about that except one time when the script girl goofed—I goofed too—but they were going down a manhole, and five days later or six days later we shot coming out of the manhole and they were in a different costume. Once he had a coat on and once he had a coat off.

DESSERE:

So that was another twelve-day picture?

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

Do you know that Forrest Tucker was in *Boston Blackie Goes Hollywood*? Do you remember that detail?

GORDON:

I remember Forrest Tucker, but I don't remember him in that.

DESSERE:

You don't remember directing him?

GORDON:

Well, yes I do remember directing him, but I'd forgotten in what and I can't remember what he did.

DESSERE:

There was a very good character actor in *Underground Agent*, Frank Albertson. Do you remember him?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, yes. I can't remember the role though. But I knew Frank Albertson from New York, as a matter of fact.

DESSERE:

You knew him personally before?

GORDON:

Well, sort of. You got to know the people on Broadway at that time.

DESSERE:

So maybe we should move on to the next film, *One Dangerous Night*.

GORDON:

Yes. Now, that was classy. That, I think, had a little longer schedule and a little higher budget because—who was the actor who played—? I can't remember his name.

DESSERE:

Warren William.

GORDON:

Warren William. You know, he was very elegant, and it was evening dress and that kind of thing. This was upscale in costume.

DESSERE:

But I can imagine you would feel more comfortable with that type of material, because that would remind you of the days in the theater when you were—

GORDON:

Well, I can't remember too much about the picture. I don't even have the remotest idea of what it was about. It was a jewel thief or something like that? I don't know.

DESSERE:

Yes, it was the Lone Wolf series. It was about a jewel thief in Monterey, of all places. You don't remember that at all?

GORDON:

No, I don't remember where it was.

DESSERE:

Do you remember, also, working with Eric Blore, who was a very famous—?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. Oh, yes, he was his butler.

DESSERE:

Yes, he was butlers all the time. And also Ann Savage was in it. Do you remember her? She had probably a smaller part, but she appeared in the famous film by Edgar [G.] Ulmer, *Detour*. I don't know if you're familiar—

GORDON:

No, I don't remember.

DESSERE:

Edgar Ulmer was an interesting person because, like you, he directed for the Yiddish theater and also he made films in Yiddish for the Jewish community in New York.

GORDON:

Oh, really? Did he do a film called *Grune Felde*—*Green Fields*?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

I saw that film. I remember that.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. So I was wondering if you knew about that. Apparently, you had the same cinematographer. [laughter] You don't remember L. W. O'Connor, so your time with this man must have been very quick, twelve days here and maybe fourteen days another time.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

This was apparently the second film of the Lone Wolf series. The things I've read about it were very positive.

GORDON:

Well, that had a much more polished look to it, especially after *Underground Agent*, which was very—as I remember that, somehow my images are of a kind of drab photography, but there was a kind of elegance in the Lone Wolf.

DESSERE:

It seems to me that it would be a theme that would be more interesting to you than maybe *Boston Blackie* or—

GORDON:

I enjoyed *Boston Blackie*.

DESSERE:

Because the character seemed to have, as you say, elegance, he could be a deeper character probably.

GORDON:

I don't know that he was any deeper, but there was the quality of elegance. There was that. He was the leading-man kind of thing. Whereas in the other pictures, we didn't have that.

DESSERE:

Perfect. So we come on to the last film of this series, which is *Crime Doctor*.

GORDON:

Yes, Warner Baxter.

DESSERE:

Warner Baxter. You enjoyed making that one.

GORDON:

Yes, I did. We worked on that a long time. We were on the script, because we were just beginning it. And that was a film that had amnesia—

DESSERE:

As a theme.

GORDON:

—as a theme in it. One of the things I didn't want to do was to do the old cliché of the guy gets hit on the head and he loses his memory and he gets hit on the head again and his memory comes back. But the studio was insisting on that kind of thing. We tried to do something which was psychologically more legitimate, which was almost working through the process that psychologists called abreaction. To try to create a situation similar to the one in which the original trauma occurred, and then by playing through it to see whether that would bring the memory back. [laughter] And I remember there was some executive from the Columbia sales department, when the guy got his memory back—we did it in psychological and emotional terms. And after he saw the rough cut he said, "Well, when he got his memory back I didn't see him get hit on the head." [laughter] I said, "He didn't." He said, "The guy can't get his memory back unless he gets hit on the head." [laughter] So I think that a sound was dubbed in.

DESSERE:

I see. It was dubbed as a sound. So they didn't ask you to redo this because there was no budget?

GORDON:

No. Oh, no. Redo it, God forbid. You don't redo anything.

DESSERE:

That was also a twelve-day picture?

GORDON:

I think so, yes.

DESSERE:

It originated with a series on the radio apparently. Were you familiar with it?

GORDON:

I don't recall. I probably had some familiarity, but I don't recall that.

DESSERE:

You know, I'm surprised also—something interested me when I read the credits. You had three writers credited to work on this. Did you change—?

GORDON:

Louis Lantz was the one who was the principal writer on it.

DESSERE:

Graham Baker and Jerome Ortland. It was based on a program by Max Marcin.

GORDON:

I don't recall the other two writers.

DESSERE:

But do you remember, yourself, changing things in the script here and there?

GORDON:

Well, I worked, really, in a direct collaborating capacity. I was really co-writer of the script that we shot. But at that time, if you were a director and didn't announce that in advance and didn't write more than half, you couldn't get writing credit.

DESSERE:

Writing credit, yeah.

GORDON:

Lou Lantz was the principal writer on the thing. I think there may have been, what, a scenario in advance or something of that sort, but it was not followed

closely. I seem to remember that we practically started from square one and developed a screenplay along the lines that we hammered out. We worked on it a very long time. Ralph Cohn, who was a nephew of Harry's, was the producer on it—a very intelligent man. It seems to me that we worked on it for a couple of months in developing the screenplay before we ever shot it.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. I was just curious. How long did it take for such a script—you know, those four films—to reach you and then decide that you were going to do it and working on it and then going through the things of preparing the sets and all this?

GORDON:

It varied quite a lot. I can't remember other than to remember that more time was taken in preliminary preparation—not so much in terms of physical production, but in terms of the script—on *Crime Doctor* than on the others. I mean those were pretty much—the scripts, you know, were finished, and maybe with minor revisions, and so on, and that was essentially it. But on *Crime Doctor* we started without a script, really. I think that possibly, as I said before, it was some scenario or something of that sort. That was all.

DESSERE:

But once you had worked on the script, that's when the actual film went into production? They started designing the sets as you were revising the script? Or how did it work?

GORDON:

No, I don't recall that happening until the script was finished, until we finally said, "This is the script we're going to go with." Probably there was a draft and then a revision and maybe a slightly other revision, and that was the shooting script.

DESSERE:

I see. So you had meetings with the writer?

GORDON:

Well, I worked with the writer every day.

DESSERE:

I see, you met them every day.

GORDON:

Well, there was just the one writer on *Crime Doctor*.

DESSERE:

Crime Doctor, you only met with him in particular.

GORDON:

With him and with the producer. We worked very closely. At that time, Columbia had set up another annex office on Santa Monica Boulevard just near Gower Street, and we were down there. We were pretty much off by ourselves. Ralph Cohn was like the executive producer.

DESSERE:

There was a unit at Columbia which was specifically making the B pictures.

GORDON:

The B unit, yes, that was under Irving Briskin's charge.

DESSERE:

Each producer was starting, making his debut, would you say?

GORDON:

No, Ralph, I think, had done pictures before that. The guy who did the *Boston Blackie*, for example—

DESSERE:

You mean the producer?

GORDON:

The producer, you know, had been a director himself.

DESSERE:

His name, the *Boston Blackie* producer—his name is Wallace McDonald.

GORDON:

Yeah, Wally McDonald, yeah. You know, he had been a director and was now producing. I can't remember the name, but I can see the guy who was the producer of the second film. I don't recall now.

DESSERE:

You're talking about *Underground Agent*? The producer is Sam White.

GORDON:

Oh, I remember Sam White very well. And he too had been, or became, a director. No, I guess he had been a director. I don't know, he directed too. He was a member of the Directors Guild [of America].

DESSERE:

And David Chatkin produced *One Dangerous Night*.

GORDON:

Oh, David Chatkin, yeah. He was a very, very funny guy. His use of language was very much like the way they attributed to Sam [Samuel] Goldwyn. I mean, he would use language in a very funny way. I remember he would say things like—he wanted to say "clandestine," and he called it "candlestein." [laughter] I remember that one in particular.

DESSERE:

So malapropisms.

GORDON:

Yes, yes, he was very, very funny. He had been an exhibitor, and he really knew nothing about movie making at all. I mean, he was literally just in the way.

DESSERE:

But you had to work with him anyway.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

I suppose they put him there so that he could get some experience.

GORDON:

Presumably to learn, yeah.

DESSERE:

So the B unit, in that sense, was very helpful, because it was a sort of training ground.

GORDON:

It was, it was a training ground for a lot of people, sure.

DESSERE:

You could make your mistakes in some way.

GORDON:

Sure, and what Irving Briskin said was right. They were doing kind of block booking at that time. They knew what their market was for those B films. Whether it was good or bad, it wasn't going to make any difference in terms of their return. And that's why budget, boy, was the thing. I mean, you had to stay on schedule, you had to stay on budget.

DESSERE:

Yeah, finish it on time.

GORDON:

Absolutely. There were instances—I didn't have this experience, but I heard of instances—where they shut it down even though there was stuff that hadn't yet been shot. Put it together and—

DESSERE:

And it would work.

GORDON:

They'd make it work in some way or other simply because they couldn't go over budget. If you didn't get all the stuff in the can by the end of the twelfth day, that was it, buddy.

DESSERE:

It seems that the atmosphere on these films is something that has been lost in recent years, because people are so concerned about money and everything. It seems that you had fun shooting some of these.

GORDON:

You know, Jerry Bresler, with whom I worked on three films, had grown up on poverty row—even lower budgets than the B in the major studios. He was very, very helpful to me in learning what you could do, where you could get stock footage and incorporate it into the picture, that sort of thing. And he was a very, very knowledgeable producer. When he really began to work on—this was at Universal. They were upscale at the time. But he still had great efficiency, you see, as a result of his early training. He had worked, I don't know, maybe in the trailer department, for example, at Metro-[Goldwyn-Mayer] before he came over to Universal. He was very, very good. I learned a lot from Jerry—cutting-wise, too, he was much, much more knowledgeable than I. I learned a great deal from him.

DESSERE:

Did you feel you knew very well at that time what makes a scene? When you were making those?

GORDON:

Well, that, of course, I knew from the theater. That's my background. That I didn't have to learn over again. But there were certain things about actual cinema making and what the juxtaposition of images—the concept of montage, that was something—I used to set myself little etudes. I mean to say, three still pictures that tell a story: a window open and a curtain blowing, a chair knocked over, and a drawer pulled out. [claps three times] Burglary. You know, that kind of thing. I used to set myself little tasks like that. What can be a rape? Three things, you know. Or a murder or whatever.

DESSERE:

It was very economical, too. [laughter]

GORDON:

Yes, but it was movie, and that was something that—I had to train myself to think in those terms a little bit more fully than I had done in the past.

DESSERE:

When you shot those films, you had to go very fast, I suppose. You were always—

GORDON:

We were shooting at least twenty setups a day.

DESSERE:

So you usually started with a master scene and then covered, in detail, all the points of the—

GORDON:

Either. Sometimes I did it that way, but of course that was later, actually. You know, at one point, in the first picture I was making at Universal, I actually made only a master scene, a very complex master scene with a lot of people. It became a close-up, it became a two-shot, it became a group-shot as the camera was "carried" by an investigator. And I remember the production office, in that day of shooting, almost had a nervous breakdown, because here it was twelve o'clock and I hadn't had anything to print yet. I was rehearsing, rehearsing, rehearsing, and then I got the whole thing in one take.

DESSERE:

And you were able to solve that—

GORDON:

Yeah, and had no coverage at all, because I knew it was all in the camera in that one single shot. That was in a thing—

DESSERE:

Do you remember the film?

GORDON:

What the hell—? Vincent Price and—

DESSERE:

Oh, is it *Woman in Hiding*?

GORDON:

No, no, it's before that.

DESSERE:

It's *The Web*.

GORDON:

The Web, The Web. And that thing got a lot of attention. That turned out to be something of a sleeper.

DESSERE:

Because in what I've learned from you, and also the films I have been able to see of yours, you don't seem to believe so much in very long takes.

GORDON:

Well, let me say again, I learned out of necessity that you don't— Unless you want a long take—and there are many things which I have which are long takes in some of the pictures. But if you're going to cut it up, don't knock your brains out to get a perfect master. But you have to know where you're cutting, you see? In advance. I mean actually a certain aesthetic of cutting that you develop after a while, which, incidentally, Stanley Kramer never shared with me. That is to say, he didn't believe in what I believed in, and his great cutter who did *Cyrano [de Bergerac]*—he won an Oscar for something.

DESSERE:

Yeah, we'll find his name in a second.

GORDON:

But I didn't like the way he cut. He cut too abruptly. I always felt—

DESSERE:

It was not smooth enough.

GORDON:

I felt that cuts should be unobtrusive, unless you definitely wanted a violent shock effect. So that I would actually plan my staging so that, let us say, the cut was led to where you were going to cut to. Do you see what I mean?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

And so that it was just very, very smooth. I remember him very well, and I can't think of his name. But he won an Oscar, I know, for something. The cutter did.

DESSERE:

You mean the cutter who made—

GORDON:

Who did the *Cyrano*.

DESSERE:

Cyrano, yes. All right, so those films, they were more training ground for you than—?

GORDON:

The ones at Columbia? Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

You didn't give them too many—? You don't see—?

GORDON:

Well, you did the best you could. You worked very fast, and it required a great deal of preplanning, and I did. I worked in great detail. When I went in, there was no "Let's see, what are we going to do now?" I had it all written out in my mind—sometimes with sketches, sometimes, more often, without.

DESSERE:

What was the situation professionally for you? Did they put you in the category of B directors at this point or—?

GORDON:

Well, at that time—I left and came back again. And then I came back doing not triple-A pictures—because *The Web* was not a high-budget picture—but it was way, way above what I had done up until then.

1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (December 15, 1988)

DESSERE:

Yesterday we talked about your years at Columbia [Pictures Industries] and the films you made. I wanted to ask you a question which applies, also, to your later career, which is a general question. How did you perceive the role of a director in a film as opposed to your experience in the theater? I'm speaking more, this time, in terms of status. It seems that in the theater the director has an incredible status, whereas in films, and particularly in the films that were made at Columbia, it seems that the director was just one element, maybe the top element, of the technical crew, but that he didn't actually participate that much. It seems that a lot of the ideas of the director were taken away from him because of the mode of production. Have you ever thought about that problem? You know, it offended a lot of directors at some point. Some directors who came from abroad and a little bit in Hollywood. I wanted to know your impression about that.

GORDON:

I didn't feel any resentment except, particularly in those early days, in terms of what happened with the final product, after shooting was done, after first cut was done, and so on. The advancements that were made in the areas of artistic control since that time have been enormous. I remember when, after viewing the first cut—the first rough cut, which I had nothing to do with—of my first picture, of *Boston Blackie*, I had some ideas as we sat in the screening room, the producer [Wallace McDonald] and I. I felt that certain things were not right that ought to be changed in the editing. I remember at the time that Wally McDonald, who also was a director or had been a director, but who was

now producing, quoted to me from the basic agreement that the Directors Guild [of America] had with the Producers Association, which said—and I think I'm quoting this almost verbatim—that the director shall be invited to view a first rough cut of his film, at which time the producer shall listen respectfully to his opinions. He says, "I've listened respectfully to your opinions. Now get your ass out of here."

DESSERE:

Oh, boy.

GORDON:

That was the attitude at that time. Now, of course, as I just said, since that time there have been a number of rectifications of that deplorable situation, but, still, the final cut—I recall a few years ago when we did have a right to really supervise our first cut and have the right to a director's own first cut, but there was no provision to whom it needed to be shown. Even Stanley Kramer, for whom I had the highest respect, insisted, as the producer on the final shot of *Cyrano [de Bergerac]*, in making a change which I did not like. I had a certain concept at the end, which I can't defend in terms of history or logic or anything of that sort, to have a kind of a pieta as he died, which is a group of people at the foot of the cross. The cross was merely a configuration of paths in a convent garden which you never perceived from ground level. I had a long, high-angle pull-away, so that ultimately that was the final image of the picture. He made a cut-away, which I felt was laboring the point too blatantly. Those kinds of things were factors in the final product over which the director did not have control. I think, in some respects, they still don't.

DESSERE:

When you felt that sometimes you had a vision—the subject was dear to you, to your heart and your interpretation—did it hurt you? Did you feel that your integrity as an artist was being molested?

GORDON:

In the first four pictures, I didn't feel that any of those were great art projects. I tried to do them as effectively as I could, and I think that they were, perhaps, quite craftsmanlike, with a number of ideas and so on. But I didn't feel

violated as an artist, because the imperatives of schedule and of budget and casting it out of the pool of contract players, frequently, that the studios had—there were a number of those elements which were par for the course that you knew you didn't have control over. So you reconciled yourself to the realities. But apart from that, as I said before, it wasn't really until the very end of the process, the post-production process, that in a few instances such as those I just mentioned, I felt it wasn't truly representative of my vision.

DESSERE:

Yes, because I know some directors have really been hurt by that process, because they liked a particular subject and they really cherished the opportunity of doing it. I know you have pet projects. I know you like *Another Part of the Forest* very much.

GORDON:

Yes, and I had no problems with that at all. We worked right on through with that. Jerry Bresler, who was the producer of that project, and I had a very, very good rapport with mutual respect. In no case that I can think of in that particular film was there an arbitrary overriding of what my vision was.

DESSERE:

But for instance, as you know, Stanley Kramer evolved to be a director himself—I think he wanted to do that very much, because I even asked him a question about that subject about a film he made called *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T*. I said to him, "But why did you chose Roy Rowland as a director?" He said, "Because I could have more control." [laughter] He said that really practically like this. So I thought that would be a good question.

GORDON:

Now, with the exception of that last shot of *Cyrano*, I didn't feel that Stanley did anything that bothered me in terms of the final cutting and so on, with the possible exception of the bookkeeping. [laughter] Neither Joe [Jose] Ferrer nor I ever got the amount of money that was deferred on our original fee, much less any residuals or profit participations from it. Even those moneys that we were not paid, that we had deferred, were actually computed into the cost of production. Moneys that were never spent, you see, by them. But that was

part of the cost of the production that was never recouped, you see. The "creative bookkeeping" that was characteristic—I don't attribute that wholly to Stanley Kramer, but to United Artists, who distributed it. You know, that kind of thing. But, no, apart from that one thing where he had the right—we discussed it. I said I didn't think it was good, and he felt it was too long the other way and so on, and he had his way. He did it that way, and I felt that it was a little hurtful to the final image. It made something, I felt, blatant that should have been subtle.

DESSERE:

Now, another question I want to ask you about your philosophy of directing is, how would you define yourself? You, of course, have heard a million times about the auteur theory. If somebody comes to you and is going to say, "Well, Mr. Gordon, I see in your films a certain unity in themes—" Somebody watching your films can find that you would be interested in some subjects more than others. Some subjects just came your way and you did them, but others were dear to your heart. So how would you define yourself? Would you say that you are what is called in general terms an interpretive director? Did you feel like you just took a script and then—? You know that, for instance, George Cukor never did anything, never tampered with a script. Where you, I know, collaborated to some extent on the screenplays. But the writing—he usually respected the writing—the writing was the writing. I suppose also that you had that experience in the theater when you were given a play and you were interpreting this play to the best of your knowledge and understanding and belief in that play, but not necessarily in terms of tampering with the writing as much as you would for film. So do you like that idea of being defined as an interpretive director?

GORDON:

Well, everyone is an interpretive director, I suppose, to some degree. I dislike your use of the word "tampering" in your question. [laughter] Actually, in the overwhelming majority of the films that I worked on, I did work virtually as a collaborator on all of them in the pre-production phase. Not exerting muscle—that is to say, not merely saying, "I'm the director and therefore it's going to be that way"—but working really in a collaborative capacity with the writers. The fact is that by virtue of some of the regulations of the Writers

Guild [of America], in particular, I got no screen credit on any of them. Nevertheless, in terms of actuality, I was a co-writer on, I would say, every one. I can think of none on which I wasn't. Now, as far as the interpretation is concerned—the concept of auteur I think in one sense has been badly abused. What I mean—the fact that in many instances the director indeed is an auteur, whether he gets screen credit or not, is true. But the fact that the recognizability of the director's characteristics is a sign of a particular excellence I think is a serious mistake. It gratifies the critics that they can see the "touch" of Howard Hawks or of [Alfred] Hitchcock in a particular setup or in a particular way in which a scene is treated or in a concept of montage or whatever. I don't think that is a virtue. The *reductio ad absurdum* of that, it seems to me, really existed in two films, and I think I have the titles correct, that were made by Bill [William A.] Wellman about seven years apart, in which both of the films—both were westerns—started with the same opening sequence almost shot for shot. If you saw the first one, on seeing the second you'd say, "Oh boy, that looks just like Bill Wellman." The films, one of them was—oh, gosh, I suddenly have blocked on the titles. One of them, I don't know, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* [*Yellow Sky*] or something like that. The other one was *The Ox-Bow Incident*. The opening sequence was a couple of saddle bums ride into town—you're looking at the western street—they tie up their horses at the hitching bar on camera left, then go into the bar, and then you have the usual hostility between the strangers and the bartender. "What do you want?" "Whiskey." "What kind of whiskey?" "Bar whiskey!" You know, that kind of thing, for no reason except to generate a little tension. The bartender slams down the bottle and two glasses, and one of the guys pours each of them a drink. They sort of hold the drinks up to one another and they start to drink, and they stop just before they drink: their eyes are caught by something. You cut to what they see, and there's a big, billowing 1890s nude painting behind the bar. The same sequence, shot for shot, in these two pictures. Now, as I said before, that's "auteur." I mean, you can identify. So what? No, I think that the artistic objective of the director ought to be to serve the material, not necessarily to project his personality or his idiosyncrasies or his particular cinematic vision. I mean, that's going to come through anyway, but that should be subordinated to the particular material. Now, actually, there are some people who have seen a lot of things that I've done both in film and in the theater who say they can recognize certain characteristic things

which I do. And that may very well be true. It's a little too technical to talk about what they are, but a certain thing that I call secondary impulses, contrary impulses, arrested action and that sort of thing, which is just the way I feel about making scenes interesting and effective. I suppose they do recur a great deal, but I would hope not obtrusively. As a matter of fact, I must shamefacedly confess to something that I did which would be considered auteur. When I was making *An Act of Murder*, the leading woman—Fredric March's wife [Florence Eldridge] (his own life wife as well as the film wife) was suffering from a brain tumor, and it was prognosed that she would suffer spasms of severe pain and so on. In one sequence they were preparing to go out to dinner. She was sitting at her vanity at her dressing table and was doing something with cologne. She had a bottle of something in her hand, when she had one of those severe spasms. In the recoil, she accidentally smashed the mirror with the vial, you know, the heavy cut glass vial of the perfume. The shot was taken over her shoulder. You were looking at her mirror image, and she abruptly disappeared as the mirror—

DESSERE:

The mirror crashed.

GORDON:

Just crashed, fell apart, right. It was a very good effect and really I think cinematized, theatricalized, if you want to call it, the obliteration of awareness in the face of this pain. Now, I guess it was about, perhaps, five years later, I was making another film, *The Secret of Convict Lake*, in which there was a situation in which a woman allowed herself to be seduced because she was lonely. Her husband was off in the wilderness. She was standing in front of this mirror overcome with a sense of shame, and she deliberately smashed the mirror. The setup was the same—over her shoulder onto the mirror image—and she obliterated herself purposely. I said, "Gee, I wish I hadn't used it in the old picture." I was embarrassed to do the shot again. But I said, "Yeah, but it's better here. It serves more of a dramatic purpose." There it's just an embellishment; here it's the story. And I did use it again, but always with the sense of shame that I was repeating myself.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. I was going to say that. I was going to refer also to the unity of certain themes in your films. Do you see yourself a sort of unity in themes in the things that you have done? I'm talking about films.

GORDON:

Well, actually, as far as the themes of the films themselves are concerned, I would have to say no. Because what it means to be a professional doesn't mean only that you're expert at your job. It means that too. It also means that's how you make your living. And if you're imprudent enough to get married and to beget children, then you suddenly find that you're faced with a number of very, very heavy responsibilities—to shelter and to feed and to clothe and to educate. You've undertaken those responsibilities. So to be a professional means that you take the best job that's available to you when you need a job. And that it is not necessarily because the script or the material itself satisfies your heart's desire. So I cannot say—I mean, if there is a particular theme, it's to keep working. Now, there are some films about which I was more thrilled than others, but I did many which didn't thrill me at all. Yet I worked just as hard on them, because one has a sense of pride in one's own craft and a sense of responsibility to those people who, in good faith, employ you. So you do the best work you can. But I could not find, simply in looking at the films, any thematic consistency or continuity, because they ranged all over from very serious, heavy pictures to romantic pictures to melodramas to comedies of varying degrees of wildness. Possibly I tried to work truthfully in all of my pictures—as much in the comedies as in the dramas. For example, I'm thinking now of a sequence in one film which was as broad physical comedy as you can imagine. A woman, Doris Day, who had been shipwrecked on a desert island for ten years, came back, and she's trying to get away from her husband. She's driving this convertible which had all the automatic things that she had never dealt with before, gets trapped in a car wash and pushes the wrong buttons. The convertible top comes down, and she gets doused with water and drenched with soap and a big wheel coming down on her. But even the circumstances leading up to how she happened to get into the car wash—from which she couldn't extricate herself because of the traffic—were worked out with meticulous care as though it were in a drama. Even though at the conclusion of that comedy, we had to build a special car almost, as her husband finally catches up and opens the door—the dam bursts, and a flood

knocks him down and sweeps him up against the retaining wall. I mean, it's wild. Nevertheless, you try to do it with absolute fidelity to the realities as you see them within the parameters of the particular work that you're doing. I think that that was characteristic of virtually everything that I did. And the comedies, as I say, as fully as in the case of the serious dramas like *An Act of Murder* or *Another Part of the Forest*.

DESSERE:

So, actually, when you were doing a scene like that, you were not laughing on the set at all. You were planning everything very carefully.

GORDON:

Well, the planning, possibly, was done in advance, and I saved my laughing until I said, "Cut." [laughter]

DESSERE:

It was a laughter of relief in that case.

GORDON:

Very often the truth.

DESSERE:

Very often. So after those four films at Columbia, you said that you went back to the theater.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

I have here a few plays that I have written down. So did you do plays like *Storm Operation* at that time?

GORDON:

Yes, I think that was the first one, and that was a play that I did not start. There was a case where I did virtually nothing with respect to the writing. The play was already in rehearsal. It had already opened in Baltimore, which happened, by curious coincidence, to be my hometown. The author, Maxwell

Anderson, and the producers were not particularly satisfied with the work the director had done. They wanted to replace him, and I was called in. The play, after Baltimore, played in a couple of other cities before coming into New York. It was, in some respects, redirected. I think there were a few cast replacements, and a lot of the staging was changed, but not the script.

DESSERE:

What was the play about?

GORDON:

It was a war play about the North African theater of war. It had to do with soldiers and nurses. You know, it was not really—it was a play about that material, that environment. It had various story threads, romantic story threads. A GI who marries a Bedouin girl—that sort of thing. I should be saying, it was not a play that was—what shall I say?—generated out of strong thematic thrust.

DESSERE:

Oh, but still it seems to be very much in the—I mean, it was a play which was reflecting the times.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, very much so, and Maxwell Anderson had written a couple of war plays. Maxwell Anderson, as you may know, was one of the outstanding dramatists of the period of the thirties and forties and was a highly revered playwright in the American theater. He had done another war play a couple of years before called *The Eve of Saint Mark* that was very successful, and this was just another one. It was not quite as heavy as *The Eve of Saint Mark*, but it was reflecting the life of the GIs in the war theater—their language and diction and so forth. He was experimenting, Maxwell Anderson, in that particular play, with different ways—and he had it in the earlier play as well—to try to reflect the characteristic use that the GIs made of "fuckin' this" and "fuckin' that." Not quite to say it, but almost to say it. You know, so that he got comedy values out of that.

DESSERE:

So how did you get brought into that play? Do you remember the circumstances? Because you had been in Hollywood, and then you went back.

GORDON:

I think, as I remember, in that particular case I got a call from [Elia] Kazan, who said they were looking for a replacement director. "Are you interested? Are you available?" I said, "You bet I am." I went over to see them. I went down to Baltimore. I think that Max knew me—the author, the playwright, knew me. I don't remember who the producer of that play was. Oh, I think it was their company. It was called the Playwrights Company. There were about four playwrights who banded together to make their own theater. They were tired of having commercial producers. Anderson was one, Robert [E.] Sherwood was another, Sydney Howard, I think, was another, and I think Elmer Rice. I think that they were the four—oh, and S.N. Behrman.

DESSERE:

Yeah, I don't think Sydney Howard, because he was dead at that time.

GORDON:

He was already? Maybe it wasn't him.

DESSERE:

No, he killed himself after he finished writing the first draft of *Gone With the Wind*. He was dead at the time, unfortunately.

GORDON:

Well, I guess he would have been by that time. I didn't know that. S. N. Behrman then, yeah.

DESSERE:

Yeah. So do you remember anything about your direction of this play, what you changed and the cast? Who was in the cast?

GORDON:

The leading woman in the cast was an English actress named Gertrude Musgrove, and I think it may have been the only thing she ever did here. She was fairly prominent. I think she had been with the Old Vic [Theatre] in

England, in London, and made some films. One of the leading players was a man I worked with subsequently named Bramwell Fletcher. Myron McCormick was in it, but it was not what one would call a glittering, star-studded cast.

DESSERE:

You went back again to a theater which was more, you know, not the typical Broadway type of—

GORDON:

Well, it was in that particular case.

DESSERE:

It was.

GORDON:

Sure, because Maxwell Anderson was a very, very successful dramatist by Broadway standards, one of the most.

DESSERE:

But he still himself wanted to do something a little bit different.

GORDON:

Well, he did a wide variety of things. He wrote plays in verse; he did a number of historical plays.

DESSERE:

Mary of Scotland.

GORDON:

Yes, exactly. He did several plays of that—I think he did one called *Elizabeth and Essex*. He was a very protean writer—he wrote in a number of idioms.

DESSERE:

So I also have here that after that you worked on a play named *Sophie*.

GORDON:

Yes, that was originally titled *Sophie Halenczik, American*. It was based on a series of little short stories or sketches that appeared over a number of months in the *New Yorker* magazine by a woman whose name was Rose Feld. She, along with someone else, did the adaptation. I can't recall who the other writer was. They later changed the title. The original title, they were afraid of it. They were afraid people couldn't pronounce it. It was about a woman who had a Czechoslovakian peasant background, who was an immigrant to this country, and it was in a war setting. She wanted to both bring her children up—she was widowed—

1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (December 15, 1988)

DESSERE:

So you said that Sophie was a woman who was brought up and wanted to become an American, yes?

GORDON:

Yes. It was a kind of family play. It was set in Connecticut, in a small town in Connecticut. She had three children, one son and two daughters. The son was in the army. There were a whole series of little problems with the children. One daughter was getting divorced, and another one was unmarried and had a boyfriend who was a real Connecticut Yankee, whose father did not approve of this marriage. It was a domestic kind of thing.

DESSERE:

Generations. [laughter]

GORDON:

Yes, except it was much, much lighter in tone than *Generations* and didn't have the dark overtones of *Generations*. We had a very, very exciting star to play Sophie, Katina Paxinou.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, yes.

GORDON:

This great Greek star who had made quite a smash in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as the gypsy woman.

DESSERE:

And she was in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

GORDON:

Yeah, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The film version. Yes, played very, very brilliantly there. She turned out to be a grave disappointment in the theater, though.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Because she had a number of old-country ideas. I remember when we had our first performance out of town, of all places, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where it opened. She had a clique. She had distributed a number of tickets among the Greek—

DESSERE:

Community.

GORDON:

Greek-Americans in the community. This was our first performance that I had—the first ten minutes of the play had been built up to the entrance of the star. I'd gotten a very charming entrance, where she's getting early American antiques—that's how she wants to furnish her house—and she's bringing in a commode. Do you know what a commode is?

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

She's holding the front end of it, and the fellow, the postman, who's interested in her is carrying the back end. [There was] much hand [applause] on her appearance in the audience. Much to my dismay, she drops her end of

the thing, turns to the audience and makes a very graceful bow and a bow and a bow, and then goes back to the action. Well, it was dreadful. But I talked to her afterwards, and I said, "Look, we're trying to create a character; we're trying to create an environment. And the bow as an actress is not the character." I said, "Besides, we don't do that in this country anymore. The opera maybe a little bit. But it's out of fashion, it's out of style." She seemed to respect that in a kind of way. Then we played quite a while out of town—about five weeks—before bringing it into New York, and opening night in New York she did the same thing. The play had gone swimmingly up until that point, and you could hear all over the audience at that moment an audible gasp. We lost the play right then and there.

DESSERE:

So I suppose—

GORDON:

The play was a failure.

DESSERE:

Totally, because of that.

GORDON:

I think that that was the whole thing, yeah.

DESSERE:

How did you get approached to do that play? Again, somebody had seen your previous—?

GORDON:

Yes, and through an agent who sent me the script, or whatever, it was and I talked with the producer and the authors. The co-producer and coauthor—god, I can't remember his name. I knew him very well. He had been a theater publicist and a journalist too. He did a column for one of the papers about restaurants or something. Gee, it's terrible that I can't remember his name, but I knew him very well at the time. We're going back forty-odd years you know.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

You know, they hired me. [laughter] What else?

DESSERE:

That was a play that interested you, and I can imagine that feeling.

GORDON:

Yes, it did. It had a large cast. There was a variety of characters. As a matter of fact, I still have a workbook, my director's workbook, with character sketches and so forth and so on. It involved some very complicated staging problems. For example, taking just a kind of an oval table in a living room and having it set from scratch for eight people to sit down to dinner while the action was going on. It was as intricate as a complex football play. Everybody had his own little ground plan that I had written for them to choreograph that whole bit of staging. But the thing that was most interesting about it was the variety of characterizations, and it had a number of excellent actors in it. Besides Paxinou, none was a star other than Will Geer, who later became important in films as well as in the theater that he had up there in Malibu, up in the hills. He played one of the leading roles in it as well.

DESSERE:

So, you know, with plays with a subject you were very much in touch with what was happening at the time in the theater, because those plays in the thirties they were the social commitment.

GORDON:

There was some of that, sure. It had a strong anti-prejudice bias. In other words, my point of view was populist, if you want to call it that. Do you know what I mean?

DESSERE:

Yeah, I like that.

GORDON:

There was also a great deal about foreign cooking. Sophie is supposed to be a great cook. I said, "Well, you know, there's so much written about this wonderful Czechoslovakian food." I searched out a Czechoslovakian restaurant and tried all of these dishes that were referred to. They killed more people than Hitler, that food. [laughter] I mean the dumplings—bang! If you dropped them on the plate, they went right through the plate. [laughter] However, that was the nature of that play. But we tried to research it quite responsibly. Rose Feld, the original author, had done a great deal. She knew what she was writing about. Because, as I said, the play was based on—oh, there must have been a dozen stories that periodically appeared in the *New Yorker* over a period of many months.

DESSERE:

Since the play failed, did that cause any problem to you?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, when a play fails it causes a problem. You're hungry again, you're out of work, and you're looking for another job.

DESSERE:

And what about *The Gods Sit Back*? That's what I found.

GORDON:

No, *The Gods Sit Back* was done in the course of a summer in that period in a small theater [the Wharf Theatre]—a rather famous one historically because [Eugene] O'Neill was done there—at the tip of Cape Cod in a town called Provincetown. It was a very well known old theater, and that was an extremely interesting experience. A very, very difficult play.

DESSERE:

Who wrote it?

GORDON:

A man by the name of Halsted Welles, who may have gotten a screen credit on *The Lady Gambles*. I brought him out for his first film engagement. This was several years later. Halsted Welles was a man I had gone to school with. He had been at Yale [University]. But I never knew of him as a writer at the time.

He was very much interested in scene design. I was in the writing program, and he was in the scene design program. Quite by chance—let's see. I hadn't seen him for perhaps twelve years or had any contact with him at all. Someone gave me this script. I read it, and I was fascinated right from the beginning. I was enjoying it so much that I almost didn't want to read ahead, because I had a feeling I'd be disappointed. And I kept going and I kept enjoying it. I was impressed with the writing, I was impressed with the theme, the material and so on. That's when we first got back together again, at that particular time. It was done under these conditions. It was a very, very interesting play, the subject matter of which was very, very dark.

DESSERE:

What was the subject?

GORDON:

Well, it had several subjects. The principal story though, and the theme that emerged from it, is kind of interesting. It had to do with a struggle that went on in New York in 1832 for an objective that seemed tragically impossible of accomplishment, of achievement. In the course of this struggle, all three of the principal characters ended up dead. One a suicide, one a victim of a murder, and one death from having contracted cholera—because the first cholera epidemic that struck this country occurred at that time in New York and then spread throughout much of the country after that. One of the leading characters in the play was a pioneer in steam navigation for boats, particularly. One of his boats, which he— After having gotten a degree of success in his struggle, working with Robert Fulton, who was the inventor of the steamboat more or less—the story began with the first transatlantic crossing from Belfast, in Ireland, which brought three people who died of the plague on shipboard. Now, there is also a story of municipal corruption. If this were known, this would have quarantined the port of New York. In order to avoid that happening, the city officials decided that they would have, as it were, this conspiracy to get rid of those bodies, right? It's very complicated, I mean as the story developed.

DESSERE:

A very dark subject.

GORDON:

Yes. Cholera epidemic. And the thing that they were struggling for, that was impossible of achievement in their eyes, is something that we take so for granted today that it never occurs to us that it even had a history, much less a history of conflict. It was for the installation of sewers in the city of New York. At that time there were no sewers. The trash, the garbage, the ordure, and so on, was taken care of by what were called "night scavengers"—men who went around in the dead of night and collected all of the ordure and dumped it into the river. There was the struggle for sewers. There were people who opposed it for reasons that it would increase taxation. Well, those were the materials of the play. The interesting thing is that the theme that comes out of this tragedy— It's a play that I would call an optimistic tragedy, because there's a very affirmative theme, a majestic theme, that emerges from it which can only be defined through a process of extrapolation. Let me put it this way: that if that which to our great-grandparents was something that was impossible to achieve, an impossible dream, is something we view as a commonplace today, then conceivably, those things which to us today are our impossible dreams would also be susceptible of achievement if we don't lose heart and give up the struggle. So it was a very affirmative theme. We spoke the other day of *Thunder Rock*, which in a totally different way dramatizes a very similar theme. Totally different way. This was something that appealed to me very, very strongly, as well as the quality of the writing. Because Welles had written this play with a kind of beauty of language. I don't mean in any florid sense, although there were passages of that as well among certain characters, but even the music of the vernacular, of ordinary, everyday speech was colored by his ear for rhythm, for alliteration, for assonance—many of those things that we regard as important elements in contemporary poetry that go beyond merely meter and rhyme. That was a very exciting play to work on, which I later tried very hard—as a matter of fact, I succeeded in getting someone to take an option on it and participated in the effort to raise funding for it. It was a very heavy production, with about three major sets and a large cast. So it wasn't a promising commercial venture, and it never actually got done. When I first came to UCLA, the then chairman of the department [Walden Boyle] asked me whether I would do a play. I said, "Sure, I'll do a play. Do you have anything in mind?" I remember he said, "*The Man Who Came To Dinner*." I said, "Wally, I wouldn't even do that for money." [laughter] It's a play I don't

like. It's funny, but I don't like its spirit. I don't like who's made fun of in that play. He said, "Well, is there something that you would like?" I said, "Yes. I know a play which never got a commercial production for very understandable reasons. It wasn't a commercial play, but it's the very kind of play that a university theater should do." He said, "Well, by all means do it." I said, "Would you like to read it?" He said, "No, I'll take your word for it." That play I did here was the first play that I did at UCLA. That was in '71. We had done the play in Provincetown in '45. So that was—what?—twenty-six years later or something.

DESSERE:

Which company put up this play? I mean *The Gods Sit Back*.

GORDON:

When?

DESSERE:

I mean in 1945.

GORDON:

Oh, in 1945 it was just a man who conducted a summer-stock operation at that tiny little theater in a summer resort town on Cape Cod. It simply ran for a week, was part of a season that he had. I think in the course of that summer he probably did eight plays. That was the only play that I was involved in. Right after that play, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, a couple of weeks later. Here, of course, it was done by students in the summer. I was able to engage a couple of professionals to play in the leading roles, and it was a very, very interesting play.

DESSERE:

I have here also that you worked on a play called *Laura*.

GORDON:

Yes, *Laura* was a play that was co-written by George Sklar and the author of both the novel and the coauthor of the screenplay, Vera Caspary.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes. That's the *Laura* by Otto Preminger.

GORDON:

Yes, and it was made after the film. I mean chronologically.

DESSERE:

Had you seen the film?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I'd seen the film. But the play was written after the film. She went back to her original material. It was a melodrama, as the film was. It was a very effective one with a very interesting actor—she was a bit too old to be ideally cast. Miriam Hopkins played *Laura*.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, yes. How was she?

GORDON:

Oh, very good. I mean, she was good to work with.

DESSERE:

Yes. Because you know she had this reputation of being difficult sometimes.

GORDON:

I found no difficulty, really, with her. But, you know, very often people who are essentially theater actresses or actors—with limited experience in film—sometimes feel that they don't have time to develop their roles. I remember having an interesting kind of problem with Florence Eldridge, Fredric March's wife, when we were doing *Another Part of the Forest*. Because I did two pictures with Fredric March and Florence Eldridge. The first one was *Another Part of the Forest*, and then we did *The Act of Murder* later. *Another Part of the Forest* was not as successful as *The Little Foxes*, which preceded—both written by Lillian Hellman, as you know. It involved the same family twenty-five years earlier, right? The play was respectfully received in New York, but it wasn't the same kind of hit that *Little Foxes* was.

DESSERE:

The same actors, Fredric March and Florence Eldridge, played in the original New York production?

GORDON:

No, they didn't. Neither one did. I forget who played the—it was Charles Dingle, and Tallulah Bankhead played the role—no, Tallulah played the daughter. Mildred Dunnock played the role of the mother that Florence Eldridge played in the film. Now, we had both seen the New York production. Mildred Dunnock, the woman, goes mad in a way, kind of a crack-up in the play, because of the depravity of her family. What I'm about to say probably has little scientific validity, but it means something to me. I felt that Mildred Dunnock, who did a brilliant job, played the role—her interpretation of the role was as a borderline psychotic. I felt that the role would dramatize the theme more effectively if she played it as an intense neurotic. My definition is that the psychotic has a predisposition to a crack-up, right? And a neurotic is driven to it by external circumstances. You see what I mean? So there were certain things in the performance—not trying to copy Mildred Dunnock, of course, but still Florence was influenced by what she had seen. It was a little too close, in the first couple of days of shooting, to Mildred Dunnock's interpretation. I was trying, as it were, to nudge her away from that in my direction. I remember it was on about the fourth day of shooting, the Thursday of the week, during the course of the morning's shooting, she said, "Let's you and I have lunch today. There are some things I want to talk to you about." I said, "Fine, I'll call up the commissary and I'll reserve a table for the three of us." She said, "No, no, just you and I, not Freddie." I said, "Uh-oh, something is coming, of course." So we did, and we ordered, and I said, "What's on your mind?" She said, "Mike, I know what you want, and I agree with it and I'm working toward it. But you've got to be patient with me. You have to be a little more patient with me." I remember replying to her, I said, "Florence, do you remember on Monday at about a quarter past nine or a quarter of ten or whatever it was, I said 'Cut, print.?' " I said, "That was opening night for that much of the picture." See, this was a concept which Florence, who had not—I think she had made one picture long, long before.

DESSERE:

Mary of Scotland.

GORDON:

Right, long before.

DESSERE:

She played the queen, Elizabeth.

GORDON:

Right, but had not been in movies for years, lost sight of—that whole business of rehearsal in the theater as a process of gradual exploration and growth is something which is lacking in the way we make films. In other words, we have a phenomenon in film in which, for all practical purposes, your first rehearsal is your dress rehearsal. That is something that I had to convey to her. I could not be patient, because the pictures that we had shot and printed in the first three days, that's opening night already. So we have to be a little impatient at the beginning in making sure that we're setting the character in the right mode. You see? This is one of the interesting differences between working in theater and working in film.

DESSERE:

You told me a charming anecdote about her also. I don't know if you remember that one. When you were calling for a take, she would enter—you explained to me that she would enter the frame, that—

GORDON:

No, then you misunderstood me. What I was saying is that if she had to—ff we were in a close-two shot—and part of my shooting in that was very much influenced by what Willy [William] Wyler had done in *The Little Foxes*. I mean depth of focus—enormous depth of focus. I mean we had more lights than technicolor took at that time. We were able to stop down to F-12. Sometimes we were working out of, let's say, a close-two shot in which a character would then move leading a pan. Of course the operator had to be right on his toes to get in sync with her. She would, as it were, make what in ballet is called a preparation—which is very nice in the theater. That is to say, before I move forward, I get my weight on my back foot and have a nice graceful takeoff. The cameraman was thrown, because her stage techniques always impelled her, in a kind of way, to have almost a backwards step, or the pushing of the weight

on the back foot before taking off, and he would be ahead of her. He's already panning ahead of her out of sync.

DESSERE:

Did you choose the depth of focus because you had admired it in the particular film?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I definitely said this is the same family, and I would like to keep it in the same stylistic mode that I think—who was it? Leo Tover who had done *The Little Foxes*?

DESSERE:

I believe it was Gregg Toland.

GORDON:

Gregg Toland, right, yeah. Leo Tover, I think, did another film with Willy, too. I think he did—oh, gosh—*Washington Square*.

DESSERE:

Yes, which was called *The Heiress*.

GORDON:

The Heiress, exactly, yes. I wanted to do that kind of thing. From that point of view, I think the camera work was excellent, because we really, really stretched the focus. You know, sharp foreground figures and action in the background at some distance away, shooting it, let's say, very often with a 25-mm lens and stopped way down, with a hell of a lot of light and so on. It was a tough picture to shoot from that point of view, but I think it paid off. We even designed the sets with that in mind. I said, "I want—" You know, a lot of it took place in the home. The architecture of the home itself invited it.

DESSERE:

So you moved the walls when the camera—

GORDON:

Only when necessary. Out of the room is a long hallway, and beyond the end in the hallway is a stair. So you had a lot to shoot. You weren't shooting up against close walls. Do you see what I mean?

DESSERE:

Your cameraman was Hal Mohr.

GORDON:

Hal Mohr, yes, I remember him very well. He also did the next picture, *The Act of Murder*, as well. Yeah, Hal Mohr was an old cameraman with a beret. He disdained using a light meter. He would squint. I said, "Don't you get retinal fatigue toward the end of the day?" He said, "I compensate for that."
[laughter] But he had his gaffer going over it with the light meter, too, behind him. He said, "I don't need a light meter. I can tell when we have the right intensity," and that sort of thing. He did an excellent job though.

DESSERE:

To go back to your play before we go into your films, I want to—you did *Laura* before you did *Home of the Brave*, or was it after? Can you remember?

GORDON:

Laura, I think, was after *Home of the Brave*. I think so.

DESSERE:

So *Home of the Brave* was a big success.

GORDON:

Yes. That was in 1945 I think.

DESSERE:

Yeah. You've already talked about it. I don't know if you've seen the film. Have you seen the succeeding

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Oh, sure. It's very different. I mean, it's essentially the same kind of theme, but there they had made a very, very marked, radical adaptation of it.

The central figure in the play *Home of the Brave* was a Jew who was traumatized by anti-Semitism. In the film it was a black who was traumatized by racial prejudice. They did a very intelligent adaptation, although I always questioned the premise, because the identifiability of the black is very different than the difficulty of the immediate identification of a Jew who is a white Jew, until you get to know him in a kind of way. So that there the psychological problem is not quite the same. Do you see what I'm—?

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

But I think that Carl Foreman made an excellent adaptation of the film in all other respects.

DESSERE:

Yeah, because, you know, Stanley Kramer mentioned that since the film was made in the fifties it was apparently more relevant at the time to show a black man. That was before he made *The Defiant Ones*, which was another—

GORDON:

Yes, yes.

DESSERE:

And also, you know, it seems that this question of anti-Semitism appeared historically in films more at the end of the forties, with *Gentleman's Agreement* for instance.

GORDON:

Gentleman's Agreement in particular, yeah. I think there may have been one other film, but I remember that one in particular. The only other thing about the movie that I didn't like, in a curious way, was the fact that they didn't use silence enough. That is to say, there were certain things that we did in the play, in a crucial part of the play, in the jungle, where just the cracking of a twig was like a cannon going off because there was such deep silence. In the movie, unfortunately, they had the melodramatic underscoring. That wasn't as effective as the silence could have been, it seemed to me.

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DESSERE:

Very good. So *Home of the Brave* brought you a contract with Universal [Pictures].

GORDON:

That's right.

DESSERE:

You've already spoken about that you were before persona non grata, and now you were back into the saddle and with a very good project, which is *Another Part of the Forest*. script. I had just gotten there. I had been there only about two weeks. I said, "You can't shoot that script. That script isn't any good." He said, "But you signed a contract. You've got to do the script—you're assigned to it." I said, "I won't do it. We'll just cancel the contract or whatever." You know, with my heart in my mouth, because I needed the job very badly.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course.

GORDON:

I was referred to—what was his first name? Bill [William] Goetz and Leo Spitz, they were the two heads of what was International Pictures at that time.

DESSERE:

So it was not Universal International?

GORDON:

It was Universal International, but Universal was largely in charge of distribution and business. International was, in a certain sense, in charge of making the product at that particular time. It changed later on, but that's the way it was at the time. As the executive producer of the studio, Bill Goetz was the principal one. I don't recall speaking with Bill about it, but I was sent over to Leo Spitz, who was an attorney originally and very fatherly. He told me what my responsibilities were and so forth and so forth. I said, "Yes, but for

the same money you're going to make a bad picture, you could make a good picture. Because there's a lot of good stuff in it. We could make a good film out of it, but we need time. I understood we were going to have it when I agreed to do the film, but it was on the reassurances of the producer. Now he doesn't want to do anything." He says, "Well, we just engaged another producer on the lot. Would you like to talk to him?" I said, "By all means. I'd like to talk to anyone who is receptive, who recognizes that this script is very infirm and needs to be made better." That's when I first met Jerry Bresler, who read the screenplay and agreed with me. Then we sat down to work. It took us only, perhaps, about four weeks. We did quite a thorough revision of the screenplay with a writer whom Jerry knew, I think, named Bill [William] Bowers, who did a marvelous writing job. He was very, very good with dialogue. I was really very good in structure, I must say, with no false modesty. And we hammered out a very, very good script. Then we shot it. It was on a relatively—it was a more generous shooting schedule than I'd ever had before.

DESSERE:

Longer.

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, I think that we must have had maybe, oh, I think on that particular picture, perhaps four, four and a half weeks, which was much more—and later on, some of the pictures like [Twentieth Century-]Fox [Film Corporation]'s, I think, had a six-week shooting schedule. Some things came out quite well on that, which was a relatively low-budget picture by International standards, which had done more ambitious things with larger budgets. We didn't have big stars. We had Vincent Price and Edmund O'Brien and—what was her name?—Ella Raines, who was a contract player. The picture came out surprisingly well and was regarded as kind of a sleeper.

DESSERE:

Well, they had seen your play, obviously. Somebody from Universal, a talent scout, had seen your *Home of the Brave*—because you had received an award for it.

GORDON:

Yes. I don't know whether they ever saw the play, but they did see the award as reported in *Variety*, [laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes, yes. How did you see that subject? Did you see that you could do something, or was it for you a simple crime melodrama?

GORDON:

It was essentially a crime melodrama. I wanted to do it stylishly and well and get some humor into it. Bill Bowers made marvelous contributions, because he was really, a very, very deft writer and with a good flair for comedy.

DESSERE:

And the film was well received?

GORDON:

Very well received, yes.

DESSERE:

Did you find that you had more freedom at Universal International?

GORDON:

Oh, than at Columbia [Pictures Industries]? Oh, yes, much more.

DESSERE:

They gave you more autonomy?

GORDON:

Right. I mean that even though I was signed on a term contract there, I wasn't quite the same kind of hired help that I had been at Columbia.

DESSERE:

The contract was on several films?

GORDON:

The contract was for a period of time. There was no specified number of films.

DESSERE:

I see, I see, not at the time.

GORDON:

I mean, it was just a year's contract with their options for renewal, and it was renewed twice. So I did three years at Universal at that time. During that time I did five films there.

DESSERE:

Did you have any involvement with post-production?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, more there, especially because I had a very, very good rapport with the producer. The first three pictures that I made were with him. Was it three that I did with him?

DESSERE:

Well, *Another Part of the Forest*—

GORDON:

Yes, *Another Part of the Forest*, *An Act of Murder*, and the first one, *The Web*.

DESSERE:

Since you mentioned the importance of music in your education, did you have any collaboration with a composer?

GORDON:

Yes. Well, not exactly collaboration, but I worked much more closely with the composer on those pictures, [Daniele] Amphitheater of, whom I got to know very well and respected very highly. I did consult with him. We talked a great deal [more] than I did almost ever again. I never [again] really had as good, as close a relationship with the composer of the score as I did with Danny.

DESSERE:

Did you feel, at the time, that the principal role of the director was to cover the scene from as many angles as he could? Was that usually your attitude? And then deliver everything for the editor to put the piece together? Or did you have any say on this?

GORDON:

Oh, no. Of course I did. Let me say, first of all, it wasn't as many as you could get, but rather the ones you wanted. My preplanning went beyond simple staging and camera angles. I had in mind what the montage should be. When we looked at dailies with the cutter there with me, I would tell him that this is what I had in mind: "Cut, go with the close-ups through here," and so on. And very often in the first cut my ideas were executed quite closely except, that there were many more intercuts that the cutter did than I'd anticipated, which is very good in a way, because I didn't have quite as refined an eye for cutting. I had some very good cutters. I can't remember who was on what. There was a fellow named Carruthers.

DESSERE:

Russell Schoengarth was on—

GORDON:

Schoengarth, yeah.

DESSERE:

—was on *The Web*.

GORDON:

Oh, in *The Web*. But who was on *The Forest*? Do you recall?

DESSERE:

On *The Forest* that was Milton Carruth.

GORDON:

Carruth, that's the one I meant, yeah. They were very good. I mean, Carruth was extremely good. We worked very closely together. I would give him my general ideas and allow him to make his first cut. We would go over it again, back and forth on the moviola, and change a little thing here and a little thing there. We worked very closely during the whole cutting process at that particular time, which I had not had the opportunity to do—

DESSERE:

At Columbia at all.

GORDON:

At Columbia at all, no.

DESSERE:

No, I suppose you were supposed to deliver it and—

GORDON:

Well, probably I was working on another film by the time it was being cut.
[laughter]

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, but when you were at Columbia you saw the finished product. I suppose you had your curiosity of seeing how they had put it together.

GORDON:

Yeah, but I had no say about it, of course.

DESSERE:

So that was a major improvement I suppose.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, of course. In planning my shooting schedule, I always had a cutting design in mind. You know, starting from the simplest things of where a close-up was needed, where cross angles were needed, and so forth. I didn't just cover it like a tent, but I would cover it to my preplanning.

DESSERE:

You know that somebody like George Stevens would shoot a scene from how many possible conceivable ways.

GORDON:

Yes, I remember watching him, because he was at Columbia making the major pictures when I was making the B's. Sometimes, between films, I would wander onto his set and see how he was covering. He would go right around the compass, you know, covering scenes. I never worked it that way. I don't

think I would have wanted to even if I had had the liberty to do it, which I never did, actually.

DESSERE:

But you see that would prove that you would have a vision. You know when I was asking you that question? You definitely had a vision.

GORDON:

Yes, I've always been very, very devoted to the importance of preplanning, whether it be in the theater—this is something which I din into the students here, that you cannot come in, say, "Well," and scratch your head and say, "What should we do?" You must have a plan, you must have a scheme, and work with efficiency and not abuse the patience and the talents of your actors by fumbling around.

DESSERE:

Do you think the other directors you worked for, for instance dialogue directors, were they working this way?

GORDON:

Yes, in many instances, in varying degrees. But I think that what George Stevens did was regarded as rather exceptional throughout the industry. I mean that he had a luxury that very few people could afford.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, yes. But would you say that even the old directors that you mentioned before, you know, Alfred E. Green and people who had really years and years of experience before, would they also? Or would they have a sort of instinct and just shoot it like this? [snaps fingers]

GORDON:

No, I think they did some preplanning. I mean, Green, as I recall, shot the thing in a very conventional way.

DESSERE:

I see.

GORDON:

Master shot, two cross angles over shoulders, then two close-ups, and that was basically the coverage. Do you see what I mean?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

And he's simply relying on the material itself. I think that Al [Alexander] Hall had a better eye than that, and Charlie [Charles] Vidor even more.

DESSERE:

What about yourself? Do you consider that directing a scene for film and talking about the visuals is very important? Are you inclined to move the camera a lot or just concentrate on the protagonist so that there would be, let's say, a stronger identification with a conflict?

GORDON:

In a kind of way one can say something like—we're talking about moving pictures. Something has got to move. If the characters don't move, then the camera should move. If the characters move, then the camera doesn't have to move so much. You understand what I mean?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

In other words, you avoid the static unless that serves a very compelling dramatic purpose, which sometimes just sitting and waiting does and you don't want any movement at all. I wasn't "dolly happy," you know? One of the things that I always disliked in seeing it in others were arbitrary God's angles. Suddenly you're shooting from—[Alfred] Hitchcock did it all the time. You say, "What the hell are we looking at it from up here for?"

DESSERE:

But, you know, I am just asking you that question, because we'll talk about that when we talk about your films from the fifties, the end of the fifties, when I think of the famous scene of the bathtub in *Pillow Talk* in which you use split screens. So I would imagine that you were at this point taking advantage of all the technical means.

GORDON:

Oh, of course. In that particular case for comedic values. I don't recall ever using split screens in any other film that I ever made. But it worked very well for this one.

DESSERE:

My opinion of what also I learned from you is you prefer to emphasize the character's conflict and keep the camera very much on the protagonist.

GORDON:

Well, again, not for that conscious purpose. You try to say, "What is interesting in this scene? What is the appropriate focal object?" And you photograph that. It might just be the slow turning of the doorknob because the audience knows that the villain is coming down to kill you. Or maybe it's somebody's left eyebrow—whatever. That you focus on. You have determined that in terms of your analysis of what is the important element in the scene.

DESSERE:

But you like to make this very invisible, I suppose.

GORDON:

I would say that I've always been guided by that principle. I don't want the audience to be conscious of the directing. I want them to attend to the story.

DESSERE:

Just a side question before we go on on your films. What do you think nowadays of films which have a very heavy "visual," quote, unquote, impact? In which really the visual style seems to be everything. Have you had a chance to see a few of those films?

GORDON:

Oh, yeah. You mean the *Star Wars* kinds of things where special effects of all sorts are the primary interest.

DESSERE:

Or even I was thinking about this last film that David Lynch made. I don't know if you've seen it.

GORDON:

Which one?

DESSERE:

Excuse me, the title now escapes me. I have a little blank—*Blue Velvet*.

GORDON:

No, I didn't see that one. Again, I was never—or rarely, let me put it this way—preoccupied with style for style's own sake. The closest that I came to it, in terms of a stylistic concept, was *Another Part of the Forest*. I had an image that I felt, a feeling of the look of that picture that I wanted. With that as a premise in a kind of way, you work within it on the scenes. But apart from that, in terms of an overall picture, I rarely had that feeling. I remember, for example, in the [Ida] Lupino picture that we made, there was a scene—

DESSERE:

Woman in Hiding.

GORDON:

Woman in Hiding. They came back from a funeral. I remember saying to Bill [William H.] Daniels, who was a marvelous cameraman, I said, "Bill, I want this scene to be the loneliest scene in the world. And that we don't go in to close-ups until very late. I want to see people lost in this empty house. Father has just been buried, and the girl is left alone." You know, he was able to translate that. I remember when I saw it in the dailies, I almost broke into tears because it was so perfect.

DESSERE:

But was it difficult sometimes to establish a dialogue with cinematographers?

GORDON:

Not really.

DESSERE:

They would understand it?

GORDON:

Yeah. I mean, at the beginning, since there was such—what should I say?—a difference between what the eye sees and what comes on the emulsion, I was often saying, "Gee, it's too bright, get it darker," until I learned. The cameraman would say, "Well, look, it's going to be dark enough, trust me," Of course, I learned to, and after a while my eye became more sophisticated. But having done lighting in the theater, what I saw in others' lighting was what the audience was going to see. Well, that, of course, is not true in film.

DESSERE:

Yeah. So then after *The Web* came, *An Act of Murder*—

GORDON:

No, *Forest* was first.

DESSERE:

We've already discussed that film enough. I want to go into *An Act of Murder*. One thing I didn't ask you about *Another Part of the Forest* was your collaboration with the screenwriters. It was a very well respected play by Lillian Hellman, who was a very established writer, and of course she had nothing to do with the script.

GORDON:

Nothing to do with it at all and was not very gracious. We went to see her, you know. Her attitude was not particularly friendly about it in advance, when the producer and I met with her in New York. She was just reasonably polite. Although she did point out that she had been offered the chance to direct the picture, but she turned it down—which didn't make me feel very good. She was not exactly gracious, because it was the first time that I'd ever met her,

and she didn't know me. But we had no problems with her, even though we did make a screen adaptation. I mean, we didn't just photograph the play.

DESSERE:

Did you show it to her?

GORDON:

I'm sure it was shown to her. I wasn't present. What we did, I mean the starting point—this has been true in a number of things that I've worked on that involved the expansion of a stage play onto film. The starting point is to answer the question "What would a playwright have dramatized rather than narrated if the playwright had not been confined by the restrictions of the medium of theater?" In that case, then, you say, "Ah, yes, that's something that we should develop and shoot." If somebody talked about the terrible thing that happened last night when this lynch mob rode down this fellow, this banker from the north, and it's told narratively in the play, I say, "This is going to be great footage," and so we shoot that sequence. That sort of thing. There were a great many things in the screenplay that were not actually within Hellman's play. I'm not sure that she always liked the idea of that expansion.

DESSERE:

Would you say that she was upset about what had been done in other films?

GORDON:

I never heard anything about it.

DESSERE:

All right. On that adaptation you said that you worked with Vladimir Pozner. You liked working with him?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, he did a very good job. Really I was a co-screenwriter on it. Because he was, as you know, a Frenchman—of Russian origin, but he was a Frenchman. His English wasn't perfect in terms of vernacular, especially period and especially southern. I did a great deal of the writing with him. We were side by side, collaborating right from the beginning.

DESSERE:

Then *An Act of Murder*. It seems that *An Act of Murder* was a very controversial subject—

GORDON:

It was at the time.

DESSERE:

—in the beginning, because it's about euthanasia.

GORDON:

That's right.

DESSERE:

Was this subject offered to you spontaneously, in view of the work you had done before?

GORDON:

Well, I was known as a "serious" film director.

DESSERE:

Yes, that's what I wanted you to tell me.

GORDON:

I mean, I couldn't buy a ticket to a comedy at that time. [laughter] I suppose from that point of view I seemed like a logical choice. There might have been others. [Jules] Dassin might have done it, who was also on the lot at that time, although working with one of the independent producers, Mark Hellinger. It was offered to me. It was really an interesting thing that happened, which bears out something that I've often thought about. There's a term in economics called Gresham's law, which dates back to Elizabeth I. Gresham was the chancellor of the exchequer. At one time they debased the currency. They put less silver in the coins and more lead and so on. They discovered that all of the good currency that had the intrinsic value of more silver disappeared from circulation. That went under the stone in the hearth or in the mattress. Only the poor money, the bad money, was in circulation. The concept of

Gresham's law is that bad money drives good out of circulation. I often felt that in films, in theater, and I suppose in other kinds of fiction, that the more sensational aspects of a story obliterate the subtler ones. It didn't start out to be a mercy-killing picture. It was based on a novel that was written—I can't remember whether it was a German or an Austrian—

DESSERE:

I'll tell you in a second. It was written by Ernst Lothar, and it was called *The Mills of the Gods*.

GORDON:

Yes, *The Mills of the Gods*. Essentially what it was about originally was about a judge who was a strict constructionist of the law. Not because he was sadistic or harsh or cruel, but because he firmly believed that the foundation of society was based on a strict construction of the law. And in the course of his life he gets involved in a situation in which he does something which is just but illegal, and as a consequence of what that got him into, there was a change in his attitude.

DESSERE:

So you moved the theme from euthanasia to the theme of fortitude in some ways.

GORDON:

Yes. Euthanasia came later. That was the problem, that was the predicament that he found himself in. Having learned that his wife was terminally ill, that the prognosis was one only of extreme suffering and pain—she herself wanted to end it, and he decided to cooperate. Because he committed this act, or intended to, that's where he did something that was just under the circumstances, in his judgment, but against the law. That was the way the theme was dramatized in the film. Well, it quickly became not a film about the judge, but about euthanasia. The sensational aspect drove out the good. I remember our first meeting. The author, Michael Blankfort, and the producer and I, Jerry Bresler and I, sat with two men from what was then the [Eric A.] Johnston [Bureau] office [Motion Picture Association of America], the Hays [Code] office. I can't remember who was in charge of the censorship bureau at

that time. We didn't have the rating system. You either got the seal or you didn't. And the opening line of dialogue when we had the meeting with those fellows—after they had read the script, one of the men said, "You have a very, very interesting script, boys. It's too bad you can't make it." That was the opening line. Euthanasia as a subject was taboo. We were ultimately compelled to make a compromise that was very embarrassing to me, but we did it in order to get the picture made. The only way we could get the seal was that while the judge intended to perform this mercy killing, his wife died of natural causes—which was a terrible cop-out in a way. However, that only came at the very end of the picture. The ironic aspect of what I'm telling you now was that shortly after the picture was released, there was a case in New England, in the eastern part of the United States, in which there was a situation very much like that. A mercy killing apparently was performed by a doctor on an elderly woman who was terminally ill, and his defense was that she had died of natural causes. He had thought of committing this mercy killing, but she had died, as I say, of natural causes before he could do it. What made the case exceptionally interesting was the fact that he happened also to be the beneficiary in her will, which gave it a very, very—

DESSERE:

Ambiguous.

GORDON:

—kind of overtones, right? I think he beat the rap. I don't know that he ever saw our film, but sometimes ideas begin to circulate beyond—if in any way his defense had been sparked by our film, a terribly immoral, unjust thing occurred in the interest of serving the moral code. In any case, the picture was very well received. But I always felt very squeamish about the fact that we had to make that story compromise.

DESSERE:

Yes, I suppose it was a major twist, yes.

GORDON:

He was going to do it, but they had the car accident and she died of natural causes. Some of the aspects, the problems, the questions with respect to

euthanasia were dealt with in the picture. As a matter of fact, I know that my own thinking underwent quite a transformation during the course of working on the subject. Because at the beginning I said, "Well, of course euthanasia. The only sensible thing to do, right?" But then as I really began to explore the subject and saw how it could be abused and how irrevocable the results of an abuse could be, I began to question my own convictions about this subject, and I think—

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DESSERE:

So you said that there was an interchange between the doctor—

GORDON:

What happened was the doctor, who was a very close friend of Fredric March, the bereaved husband—it was he who had told him the prognosis of what the wife could anticipate. He was called as a witness—I can't remember whether it was witness for the prosecution or the defense. He was asked directly whether he believed in euthanasia. To Fredric March's dismay, the doctor said no. Later on, after they had left the courtroom and he was back in the cell, March said to the doctor, "You said you were against euthanasia. Why?" And the doctor said, "Because there are ten thousand laboratories all over the country. What's incurable today is curable next Thursday." That line and that interchange came out of certain changes that had gone on in my own psychology, my own thinking about the subject.

DESSERE:

Did you realize at that point when you had to make that big change in the script that there were some constraints to film as opposed to the theater? It seems you had more freedom.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I mean, as far as that was concerned. That was a forbidden subject, just as many years ago, *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*—the original was based on a play called *Heaven Can Wait*, and at that time the censor board said, "Heaven cannot wait. That's sacrilegious. You cannot use that title." Now, later on a

wholly different film did use that title, but there had undergone a certain change in the psychology of censorship at that time.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. All right, so the next film, *The Lady Gambles*, was another very controversial subject it seems.

GORDON:

It was about compulsive gambling. And here again, I know that I and others worked very, very conscientiously doing exhaustive research, to the degree that there was the opportunity for research, because there were very few materials, surprisingly enough. A man who was a psychiatrist whom I was acquainted with gave me access to his library of all the journals of the American Psychoanalytic Society, or whatever the association was called, and one could find nothing that was specifically about compulsive gambling, although there were references to it as a part of a syndrome of other symptoms. I remember reading Dostoyevsky's "The Gambler," which was very illuminating. His insights were quite extraordinary with respect to that and confirmed by some of the things that occasionally surfaced. Then there was one monograph that we came across that was written by a Los Angeles psychoanalyst, who I think had been Marilyn Monroe's analyst—his name was Monroe Greenson—which was about compulsive gambling, which was very helpful, very illuminating. Although in some respects I thought it was rather silly, just in terms of terminology and language. He felt that there was a very, very large element of anal eroticism involved with compulsive gambling. He used as an example the terms in gambling—"the pot," "flush," terms like that. I said, "Is this reflected in all languages?" Found out that it wasn't. And if it's only in English, these little puns, these little word plays, that doesn't make any sense, because it should not be simply a national phenomenon that's characteristic of English and not of German and not of French or whatever. You know, even poker was phallic—that kind of thing, you know. A straight was phallic in his book. I said, "Oh, this is nonsense," it seemed to me. However, there were many other things that were very helpful and very interesting. We attempted to stay within reasonable parameters of how compulsive gamblers behaved under certain stressful circumstances and

adhere to it as reasonably as we could consistent with the development of the story.

DESSERE:

It seemed to take place also in the career of Barbara Stanwyck in terms of—before, she had done this incredible performance in a film by Anatole Litvak, where she's threaten by somebody calling from outside.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes—*Sorry, Wrong Number*.

DESSERE:

Sorry, Wrong Number. That was just before, so I suppose she—it seemed that the studio wanted to use her in that particular fashion—that she would play very strong characters.

GORDON:

It was an intensely dramatic role. She gave herself to it very, very fully. She also had a very lively sense of humor. That manifested itself in a number of ways. I remember the first time I was shooting some costume tests. I had the two men, Bob [Robert] Preston and [Stephen] McNally, standing alongside of her. She was sitting in a chair in the costume. Just for fun, I sort of told the guys, "After we've taken the shot, at the end of the shot, you two guys shake hands right in front of her face." [laughter] You know, this was just a costume test. The moment they did that, her skirt went up to here. [laughter] She said, "I know a thing or two."

DESSERE:

So she knew all the tricks of the trade.

GORDON:

And a very funny thing happened. One time in the middle of a scene, I had to get an insert of an empty hospital bed, because her sister was going to commit suicide or something of that sort. While I was in the setup, I interrupted the scene. I said to the cameraman, "Let's just grab twenty feet," and just counted off the footage. Evidently I had a habit of doing something which, when it's obvious, is stupid. Afterwards, when I said, "Cut" after he rolled twenty feet,

Stanwyck, who was standing on the side, said, "That was great. Let's do it again." Which is apparently what I always would say after a take when I wanted to go another take. "Oh, wonderful, wonderful—let's do one more." [laughter] Always saying it was wonderful first. So I realized that I had done it so often that it became like a tic. Everybody recognized it, and she was the one—of course the whole set broke down in laughter when she made that crack, because they'd heard me say it a hundred times by then. [laughter]

DESSERE:

When you came to that story, was it still a story or was it a finished script? It was originally a story by Lewis Meltzer and Oscar Saul.

GORDON:

Oscar Saul, yeah, whom I've worked with many times. Umm—

DESSERE:

You don't remember.

GORDON:

No, I think there must have been a first draft screenplay, but we did a very extensive rewrite on it. Hal [Halsted] Welles, I think, was the—first Meltzer and Saul. Then, I think, Roy Huggins did a screenplay. And then Welles was brought in on top of that. So it went through quite a lengthy process.

DESSERE:

Were you forced to have a happy ending at the end, or did they force you to do something in that direction? GORDON; I don't think it had such a happy ending, did it?

DESSERE:

No, but I was wondering if you—because she was supposed to commit suicide because she has ruined her whole household with her gambling. There is a scene in which she is—here, look at this frame. Does that ring any bell to you? Did you end up the film on that shot?

GORDON:

She didn't jump. [laughter]

DESSERE:

I mean, did she actually—? How did the film end? Do you remember?

GORDON:

No.

DESSERE:

Not at all?

GORDON:

I remember there was a frame that—the picture opened with a crap game in an alley, and you suddenly saw that she was in it. The picture ended with a flashback of that. It ended with a repeat of that scene in the alley in which she was being beat up. The ending simply came that the cops came and she was, as it were, rescued. But I don't think that there was any happier ending other than that that I can recall.

DESSERE:

So the story—

GORDON:

It was a dark ending, yeah.

DESSERE:

Yeah. In the ending she's talked out of committing suicide.

GORDON:

Well, no, that was earlier in the story sequence. I mean, the final sequence in the play, I think, was a sort of continuation of the frame that started it, the crap game, like a prologue and an epilogue.

DESSERE:

It seems that the obsession was also a theme that was current at the time, since *The Lost Weekend*, for instance, was made around the same time.

GORDON:

Yes, that's true.

DESSERE:

So you were still dealing with themes that were very preeminent at the time.

GORDON:

Yes, I mean, they were serious themes.

DESSERE:

And I'm sure you were probably very happy at the time being able to make those.

GORDON:

Yes, I enjoyed it very much. See, the [Ida] Lupino picture—

DESSERE:

Which one?

GORDON:

—I think which followed that was just an out-and-out melodrama. I mean, it had none of this kind of significance.

DESSERE:

It didn't have any depth, but apparently it was a film that you were—they offered you that film because they prolonged—

GORDON:

Yeah, well, I was still under contract there at the time.

DESSERE:

At that point you were.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

So they required you to accept some films as opposed to—?

GORDON:

That's right, but if you screamed or strongly objected, I don't suppose you'd have to do it. If they'd asked me to do one in the Talking Mule series they made, I wouldn't have done it. But they wouldn't have offered me that.

DESSERE:

No, but you could say no to that.

GORDON:

Well, it would be a hassle if you did. But they never asked me because I wasn't a comedy director—until later, when there was suddenly a transformation.

DESSERE:

Also, the time was very propitious, because it was the theme with these very heavy, intense, dramatic moments.

GORDON:

Well, there were all kinds of pictures going on at the time. There were comedies being made as well, you know. *Ma and Pa Kettle* was being made by that company. They never asked me to do a *Ma and Pa Kettle*. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So *Woman in Hiding* was the next film.

GORDON:

Yeah, that's the one with *Ida*.

DESSERE:

Ida Lupino. I know you coached her because she wanted to become a director.

GORDON:

As a matter of fact, yes, during the course of the picture, she was preparing that first thing of hers that had to do with an unwed mother. It was the first—

DESSERE:

That was *Not Wanted*.

GORDON:

That's right. Sally Forrest I think was the lead. I remember sitting on location with her after we had finished our picture. She came to me with certain problems: how you plan, what you do, and so forth. I think I was of some help to her. I did actually watch some of her shooting in the first couple of days of her shooting on that picture.

DESSERE:

She was a very well established star.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, she was a big star.

DESSERE:

Yes, but she was very kind or approachable?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, very much so. Actually, she was very, very different than her image on screen. It was almost the reverse of Bette Davis. Bette Davis was very frenetic on screen—always—and a very calm and collected person in person. Ida was just the opposite. She was very calm and collected on screen, but very hyper personally.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yeah, but not difficult to work with.

DESSERE:

She wanted to do many things obviously. But what was *Woman in Hiding*? Was it just, would you say, a suspense, a melodrama?

GORDON:

That's all, yeah. I mean, the man who killed her father finally wanted to get her so he could get control of the factory or whatever.

DESSERE:

I see. So it was a film in which there were no very important themes, as you had before.

GORDON:

No. Let me put it—sometimes plays, I mean screenplays, are about an idea and sometimes they are simply about a story. This is what I would call an anecdotal picture rather than a picture that has any really pervasive theme that comes through it.

DESSERE:

So after that *Cyrano* [*de Bergerac*].

GORDON:

Yes, *Cyrano* was the next.

DESSERE:

How did *Cyrano* come to you? Do you remember? Because it was not made by Universal. It was—

GORDON:

No, this was an independent—

DESSERE:

—Stanley Kramer.

GORDON:

My UI [Universal International] contract was expiring. Before that, incidentally, I got a call from Columbia again. The reason I got the call from Columbia was because Sam Wood, who was just about to start a picture, I think with Margaret Sullavan—a very tragic picture about a woman who knew she was going to die. Happily married, she wanted to prepare a successor for herself with her husband. A real hearts-and-flowers, a four-handkerchief picture kind of thing. Just before they were going into production, Sam Wood died. I got a call to come back and talk to Harry Cohn. I read the script, and I went in to see Harry Cohn, whom I hadn't seen since I walked out on the contract four years

before. In talking with him I said, "Look, Harry, the very reason that you want me to do this picture is the very reason I'm not very keen about it. I just made a picture like this. I'm not particularly eager to repeat myself. I mean, this is a very different picture, of course, but it has the same kind of feel." I said, "However, I'll make a two-picture deal with you." He says, "Fine, fine, make a two-picture deal." But I said, "No, but there's a particular picture that I want to make." And he said, "What's that?" I said, "*Born Yesterday*." They had just paid a million dollars for that play. And he blew his stack. He said, "You son of a bitch, what makes you think you, blah, blah, blah, blah," and he practically threw me out of his office. Because there again— I said I couldn't buy a ticket to a comedy.

DESSERE:

Yeah, you wanted to do a comedy very badly.

GORDON:

And that one in particular. Because my favorite genre, if I can say anything of this kind, is the comedy about something, and *Born Yesterday* was. It was a comedy, a very successful comedy, for which I had great respect, because it: was about something. It was not just about getting laughs.

DESSERE:

No, it was on the exploitation of women.

GORDON:

Exactly.

DESSERE:

It's a very interesting thing.

GORDON:

And not only exploitation of women, but corruption in government.

DESSERE:

Government, of course, yes.

GORDON:

That kind of thing, which is still current today. While the woman question may not be the same, the other question is. One of my favorite experiences in all my life was when I did a play called *The Male Animal* in New York, which was a comedy about something—about academic freedom.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes.

GORDON:

You see? It was a wild comedy, but it had a serious theme. And Harry just threw me out. As I said before, I couldn't buy a ticket to a comedy. Later on, after *Pillow Talk*, I couldn't buy a ticket to a serious play, I mean in the pictures that I got. Because with the exception of *Portrait in Black*—that was the only serious picture that I got in that whole period of time.

DESSERE:

And you probably had to struggle to get it.

GORDON:

Well, not really, because it was produced by Ross Hunter. We had had a very good relationship on *Pillow Talk*. He said, "Come on, you're going to do the next picture."

DESSERE:

Yeah, so he trusted you.

GORDON:

Because I still had the reputation—I mean, for everybody, at first, *Pillow Talk* was a freak. That was the kind of picture that I didn't make. *Portrait in Black* was the kind of picture I did make. In any case, how I got *Cyrano*—I don't really know how it happened.

DESSERE:

Did you know Stanley Kramer before?

GORDON:

No, I don't think I did. But the script was sent to me. They knew that I had been in the theater. This was a famous stage piece. I don't know how I got it, I really don't. But it came through the agent, and I said, "Yeah, let's go."

DESSERE:

So I suppose you were a little bit appalled by the restriction of the budget, because I don't think there was a lot of money.

GORDON:

No, and we shot that picture on a very, very short schedule. We shot it in twenty-one days, believe it or not, which is a very, very tight schedule. But with a great deal of preplanning in advance.

DESSERE:

Did you at that point use storyboarding for individual scenes?

GORDON:

A few, yes. I mean, not extensive, but we did use some. But the one thing that was characteristic of that picture, because of the way the contracts of the principal players were set up—they were picture contracts, not weekly or daily—we did have a very, very solid week of rehearsal apart from the fencing. The fencing, we had six weeks of rehearsal with a maitre d'armes. And I worked with him too. Both Joe [Jose Ferrer] and I, actually, had worked with the same maitre d'armes in New York. There was a man who had been the Olympic coach for the United States named Georgio Santelli, who had a salle d'armes, and he liked theater people. In the daytimes—most of his clientele were evenings—he gave us the facilities for practically nothing. I think we paid fifty cents a day to work out using his foils, his masks, and so on. We had to bring our own towels if we took a shower afterwards, [laughter] He liked actors, and we had both worked with him. But when you start with a new maitre d'armes you've got to start all over again. "Parer quatre," "Parer six," and like that.

DESSERE:

Footwork.

GORDON:

Then we worked out the routines. I'd say that we worked, particularly Joe, every day for about six weeks to get the major routines done.

DESSERE:

So the six weeks was only for the duel scene.

GORDON:

That was before we started, yes. The six weeks was only for the fencing. But we had one week of rehearsal with the actors. I had never had that luxury, and we got an awful lot done. I did something else that was a very good strategic move, and I was aware of it at the time. I knew the kind of schedule we were going to be on. I also knew Joe Ferrer from New York. I also knew that he not only starred in the role, but he had directed it, too. The one thing we couldn't afford was when I started to give some direction, some staging, if he were to stop and say, "You know, Mike, when we did it in New York—" Now, we'd get into a discussion and we'd lose an hour of shooting time, and we'd be dead. So what I did was I talked to Joe on the phone. Now, there was another thing. Joe was interested in directing films. He had never directed films at all. So I said, "Bring your promptbook from the stage production with you, because I'd like to go over it, and I'd like to know everything that you did." I saw the production, but obviously I didn't know it on the basis of one viewing. I was telling him about movies and how we worked and so forth. We went page by page through the stage promptbook. I asked him to describe to me everything that he did. I asked him certain questions about why he did this or why hadn't he thought of that? We did that after the fencing sessions. That went on over a period of almost a month, at the end of which time, I knew the New York production as intimately as he did, and I was able to forestall the delays that I dreaded might occur. Not that we didn't occasionally have disagreements, a little here and there. Inevitably, with a star like that, you do. But they were resolved, and there never was any real serious problem as a consequence of that. It was only because of that, the rehearsals that we had as well as the discussions that we had—. Incidentally, in the rehearsals we had the sets to work with. It was very intelligently designed, and the sets were built on wagons which could be turned. They were with four walls, and they became, by rearrangement, different streets, different parts of Paris.

DESSERE:

Oh, that was very subtle.

GORDON:

Yeah, it was very well designed.

DESSERE:

Excuse me, where did you shoot that film? Do you remember where?

GORDON:

Yeah, it was down on Cahuenga [Boulevard] near Melrose [Avenue] or Ivar [Avenue] or someplace down there. I forget what—it had a name at that time.

DESSERE:

You had rented an independent studio at that time?

GORDON:

That was Stanley's base of operations for all of his films down there.

DESSERE:

So he had a little studio of his own?

GORDON:

I don't know that it was wholly his. I think other people shared it. He wasn't in production all the time, but that's where his offices were. That was his headquarters, and that's where he made his pictures. I forget what the name of it was. It had a name, it was called something. They had about three soundstages, that' all, down there.

DESSERE:

They were all yours? Did you have parts of the sets different?

GORDON:

No, nothing else was shooting there when we were there. All of our stuff was done indoors. Nothing was shot on location at all.

DESSERE:

I'm interested in that, because it was one of the first independent productions, after all, in the fifties.

GORDON:

There were a number of—what should I say?—semi-independent productions that were released through established studios. When I first came to the UI lot, there was Walter Wanger on the lot, Mark Hellinger was on the lot, and maybe somebody else, who were in effect independent producers working on some kind of partnership arrangement with Universal International.

DESSERE:

That film was released a United Artists film.

GORDON:

It was released by UA, yeah.

DESSERE:

So *Cyrano* is one of your pet projects, I would imagine. I think it's a film that you were very happy to do. It was a challenge also.

GORDON:

Yes, it had a certain prestige too. It's one that I always cite as one of my films. It was not my favorite film of the ones that I made. [*Another Part of the*] *Forest* was my favorite.

DESSERE:

Because *Forest* had also a different theme. There was the theme of the family, which was something that you have handled very often in your work.

GORDON:

But I was very pleased with *Cyrano*. I particularly wanted it to be an entertainment. You know, everybody thought of *Cyrano* as a "classic," which it isn't. One of the things that I wanted to do was take away that quality of classic period piece and to make it enjoyable. But there are a number of things—and we made a lot of cuts.

DESSERE:

And you rewrote certain things.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, there was a great deal of—the screenplay is quite different than the play, both in terms of things that were excised as well as things that were added. The things that we cut out were things that an American audience had no way of understanding. Maybe even French audiences don't understand. Why is Roxanne not—? In the script it says "Madeleine Robin, known as Roxanne." What does that mean? People who know the period know *Les Precieuses Ridicules*. You know, that fashionable young ladies would take the names of neoclassic heroines. That kind of was a popular affectation. Contemporary audiences don't know anything about that unless they happen to be scholars of the theater or French literature. So we eliminated that. A lot of the poets were eliminated. But where the duel with a hundred men is treated only narratively in the—

DESSERE:

You showed it.

GORDON:

We shot it.

DESSERE:

That was a major decision, I suppose.

GORDON:

Of course, of course. But that was the same principle that I was talking about with respect to when we were talking about *Forest*. About how you open up a stage play for the screen. You say, "What would the playwright have done if he hadn't been constricted by the medium of the theater?" And the duel with the hundred men was a perfect example.

DESSERE:

What was it to work with an independent unit like this as opposed to what you had done at Universal? Would you say that there was a sensible difference?

GORDON:

Yes, it was work that was, in a sense, on a more intimate scale. I mean, you weren't dealing with a huge bureaucracy and so forth. From that point of view it was very congenial, it was very good. However, it had its limitations. I mean, in a big studio you could call for this and you'd get it. It didn't work quite that way. But on the other hand, the compensations—! would just as soon work that way all the time.

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DESSERE:

So *Cyrano [de Bergerac]* was well received?

GORDON:

Yes, it had a fine critical reception, but according to the accountants, it never made any money.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

It never got its nut back. Even though its been shown on television endless times, you know, innumerable times, there never were any residuals. Because when the retirement fund was established between the producers and the [Directors] Guild [of America], one of the provisos was that pictures that were made prior to 1960 would be free of residuals. I think that we once got one very small payment before that happened, in addition to the half salary that both Jose [Ferrer] and I got. We never got our full money.

DESSERE:

So at the time you didn't do this type of negotiation that would be getting some money out of the gross of the picture? You know, being interested in profit participation. That never occurred to you? Your agent didn't suggest it to you?

GORDON:

Oh, it occurred, but we were not—neither of us, I think, was in the position to demand that. What we did, we deferred half our salary until such time as the original production costs could be recouped. But with the production costs and advertising and distribution costs and so forth and so on, the more money the picture made, the farther away it was from being recouped. We never got the money we deferred. I don't recall whether or not we were to have gotten some participation after that, you know, after we got the rest of our money. Both of us worked for a pretty low salary. We got \$75,000, both of us did, and we only got half of it and deferred half, which we never got.

DESSERE:

After that you moved to Twentieth Century-Fox [Film Corporation]. Was it an important move for you?

GORDON:

It was one that I wanted very much, because at that time in particular I felt that Fox was the very best studio.

DESSERE:

Oh, really?

GORDON:

Yes, I really, really did. More than Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)], more than Paramount [Pictures], more than any. I felt the quality of work under the leadership of—[Darryl F.] Zanuck, at that time, was turning out a lot of extremely good work.

DESSERE:

Yes, they made very ambitious films.

GORDON:

A lot of them, and they also made some lesser ones as well. But everything, it seemed to me, was of sterling quality—pretty much.

DESSERE:

But MGM, I would imagine—because Dore Schary was more interested in socially redeeming themes, and it was around that time that he moved to MGM, if I'm not mistaken—

GORDON:

Yes, it was shortly before that. He had been at RKO [Radio Pictures]. When Howard Hawks took over, they didn't get along, particularly about one picture called *My Cousin* something or other, which Hawks didn't like. He was kind of asked to leave, or invited to leave, which he did, and went right over to Metro and became right-hand man to Louis B. Mayer at the time.

DESSERE:

So how did you manage to get a contract on a picture like *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*? That came naturally or your agent—?

GORDON:

I can't remember whether being assigned to the picture preceded the contract or the contract preceded the assignment. I can't recall.

DESSERE:

But when you went to Fox—it was a promotion for you—I would imagine Universal [Pictures] didn't want to make any other films with you.

GORDON:

What happened at Universal was that they had reached a point where, after the third year—because each renewal of the option carried a raise with it. At that particular time the raise was fairly substantial, maybe in the neighborhood of \$500 a week more if they picked up the option, and they said that they were not going to go past the third year. Irving Pichel was terminated in a kind of way at the same time that I was, because he had reached that level. I was invited to stay if I would forego the raise that went with that continuation of the contract. I was ready to do that, because I didn't know what was coming up, but my agents wouldn't let me.

DESSERE:

No, they wanted you to get more money, and I suppose Fox offered you more money.

GORDON:

Yes. Abe Lastfogel, who was my agent at the time, got a considerably higher rate than I would have gotten had I stayed at Universal for that length of time. It went even higher than that, yeah.

DESSERE:

When you worked on *Cyrano*, you had a certain amount of freedom, more freedom than at Universal. Was it the same thing at Fox? Would you say that?

GORDON:

Well, no, not really. I mean, one of the things that impressed me very, very much about Zanuck—I remember in the first week of shooting, after the first day, I got a note from Zanuck. You know, the next day, after they saw the dailies. He felt that I needed another close-up in a certain place, and so forth and so on, but it was generally very complimentary. During that first week, I was getting a note from him every day. And after that, the next week, maybe twice a week, and then maybe once a week. He was very, very much on top of everything that was being shot on the lot. And I subsequently discovered that there wasn't a foot of film that was exposed on that lot that Zanuck didn't—even long after, when we sat together for the first cut, he remembered what he had seen in dailies. While sometimes I felt he was mistaken as to what was needed and what was useful, he remembered what had been shot. He had that extraordinary grasp of what was going on and a great deal of savvy about filmmaking. He was a real filmmaker. So in that respect it was not necessarily a constriction or a liability—sometimes he was very helpful. He had a very good sense of what was wanted. Sol [C.] Siegel, who was the producer of that film, was an old-line producer, and he was somewhat authoritarian, but not in an obstructive way. As a matter of fact, he had some very good connections to people who were in the garment business in New York. We went back to New York and were able to go around the shops there to do some research to see how the whole garment business functioned and operated. It was a very good experience. I enjoyed it very much.

DESSERE:

You worked on that film with Abraham Polonsky.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

So do you know—?

GORDON:

Let me say—no, I didn't work with him. I worked on the script afterwards, really, and I didn't—

DESSERE:

Everything was written.

GORDON:

Pretty much, yes, yes. We did some rewriting on it, but not much.

GORDON:

So you didn't meet him at the time?

GORDON:

I knew him, but I don't recall meeting him at the time at all. He wasn't on the lot at the time when I was brought in.

DESSERE:

And Vera Caspary, did you know her?

GORDON:

Vera, yes, I think Vera was there, and it seems to me that we did some rewriting together.

DESSERE:

Yeah, you had directed her *Laura* before.

GORDON:

No, it was later I directed it. Now, wait a minute—

DESSERE:

No, that was before.

GORDON:

That was before, of course, but I had known Vera before that. I mean, we just had known one another socially. I knew her very well.

DESSERE:

So Abraham Polonsky, you had no relationship with him, practically, doing the film.

GORDON:

No. I mean, certainly not during the film, although I had met him elsewhere, you know, in totally—

DESSERE:

So this novel by Jerome Weidman—had you read it? Did you know about it?

GORDON:

Yes, I had read the novel. Of course the screenplay was quite different than the novel in a lot of respects. [tape recorder off]

DESSERE:

There is an anecdote that has been reported on this film that I want you to confirm or deny, as they say. There was a scene in which you— A lot of the film was shot on location.

GORDON:

Not very much. There was some. We must have done about maybe a week and a half of shooting in New York.

DESSERE:

That's it?

GORDON:

Yeah. Most of it was done on the lot.

DESSERE:

On the lot? What about shooting on location? What about it in general? You started shooting on location, really, when you made that film? Or had you already had some experience of it?

GORDON:

Well, I had worked with Frontier Films, and we had a little bit.

DESSERE:

That's right.

GORDON:

I had some experience of that.

DESSERE:

But I suppose that was a more intimate type of shooting than—

GORDON:

Well, no, there were some large crowd scenes in that one as well. The neighbors in that particular neighborhood were—you know, the putting of the furniture back in the house and difficulties with the marshals and so on.

DESSERE:

But do you remember that story that—? I'm reading something: Shot on location in New York City, one scene called for [Susan] Hayward and [Dan] Dailey to be inside a car. Before the cameras rolled, a crowd began to form around the auto, dozens, then hundreds of fans pressing in on the auto, which frightened the actors, who thought the car might be turned over. Director Gordon saved the day by worming his way through the immense throng and ordering Hayward and Dailey to sign autographs from each window, which they did until they were arm weary.

GORDON:

I don't recall that. [laughter]

DESSERE:

You don't remember that story at all? You know, I just found it, so I thought that it would be interesting to ask you this.

GORDON:

No, I don't recall. Something of that kind might have happened, but not to anywhere near that degree. Because you always did get that kind of thing when you shot in New York. Later on I was working on a syndicated television show in New York, and a lot of it was shot in the streets. I would set up a dummy camera on one corner and shoot the scene on the other corner. Because when they see the camera set up, the people would all go over there, and meanwhile, with a hand-held camera, I would shoot the scene across the street.

DESSERE:

Was this film a sort of evolution for you? Did it come closer to comedy, or how did you handle it as a realistic piece?

GORDON:

It was realistic. There was a great deal of comedy in it. But that was characteristic, I think, of all of my films. That's the way I look at life I guess. In all of my lectures I'm always making jokes of some kind or another.

DESSERE:

What about Sol Siegel? How was he as a producer?

GORDON:

Oh, fine. Very good, sure.

DESSERE:

He helped you as much as he—?

GORDON:

I mean, he didn't interfere. He provided what was needed, and he was fine.

DESSERE:

Did you think at the time that the film was making some kind of statement about the world, that you were describing in terms of the garment world?

GORDON:

Not a very important—but there again, it was almost more about the frantic life-style of the garment business. I mean, operating on a shoestring and being made or broken by what happened at one showing of the new line, and that kind of thing. As a matter of fact, it was very much like the theater. I mean, you had an opening night, and the critics either panned you or they praised you. You were in for a run, or you were in for closing the show on Saturday night, you know?

DESSERE:

So basically this film was a good experience for you. Was it well received?

GORDON:

Yes, I think so. As a matter of fact, I had a funny experience here. I can't remember. Was it that the film? Yes, Howard Suber wanted to show it to his class, and I didn't want to go. I didn't remember it with that kind of respect that I had for [*Another Part of the*] *Forest*. But, oh, I talked to my son [Jon Gordon], and my son said he had never seen the film. "Why don't we go?" And I said okay. So five o'clock one afternoon, or something like that, we went to see the film.

DESSERE:

It was screened here in Melnitz [Hall] 1409?

GORDON:

Yeah. Much to my dismay, a Canadian short was going to be shown first. I said, "Oh, my God, this is going to be real avant-garde stuff. This is an old-fashioned picture, mine, and the students will hate it." Well, luckily for me, the Canadian short was a piece of crap. It was terrible. [laughter] My picture came on, and it didn't have any animated titles or anything like that, just cards and that sort of thing. Then it began, and it wasn't bad. And it kept getting, it seemed to me, better and better and better. I remember at the very end of the picture, it was kind of a poignant reconciliation between the lovers, and I kind of choked up and, I don't know, tears were down my face. The lights came on, and I was embarrassed for my son and I said, "Forgive me, I'm a slob." And he says, "What are you talking about slob? Look at me." Tears were streaming down his face too. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So that was—you knew you—

GORDON:

Yeah, I was agreeably surprised. The picture looked to me a lot better than I thought it was going to look. You know, it was in "glorious black and white."

DESSERE:

Well, it must have the look of the Fox films of the time, which is very nice, very nice films at that time. What about post-production also? Were you involved more?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, very much so. Again, the experience I had at Columbia [Pictures] was never really repeated. I don't recall any problems with the post-production there. Everything came out just as I wanted it to.

DESSERE:

Yeah. So after that you went to the other film, which was the *The Secret of Convict Lake*.

GORDON:

Yes. In between that—was it in between? Yes, I think it was in between. I was asked by Zanuck, and I was very flattered, to do some pickup shots on *Samson and Delilah*. Henry King, I think, was the director, but he was in Europe.

DESSERE:

I think you mean *David and Bathsheba*.

GORDON:

David and Bathsheba. What did I say, *Samson and Delilah*?

DESSERE:

Yes, it was still a biblical story. [laughter]

GORDON:

Right, yes. Yes, it was *David and Bathsheba*. So I did maybe two or three days of shooting on that, and then I remember I did some— Well, that was later. I did some test shooting for him too on actors. But that was later. Then the other picture came along. There was a screenplay. That was one that I collaborated on in the rewrite with Oscar Saul. There we had problems with the producer.

DESSERE:

I see, it was Frank Rosenberg.

GORDON:

Frank Rosenberg, yeah. Ultimately it was adjudicated by the boss himself.

DESSERE:

What problem was it?

GORDON:

Well, we wanted certain rewrites, and the producer didn't think it was necessary. He didn't want it. It was just an impossible situation in which neither side would give, so we said, "Well, let's let Zanuck adjudicate it." We brought it down to Zanuck, and he sided with Oscar and me. We did the rewriting that was necessary.

DESSERE:

I see that Victor Trivas, a man who is a very famous director and worked at Fox for a while—I mean, he was in Europe—worked on that film. Did you remember anything about him?

GORDON:

I remember the name. I think I have an image of the guy. I did not work with him. No, I don't remember Victor Trivas on it at all.

DESSERE:

It was a story by Anna Homger and Jack Pollexfen.

GORDON:

Wait a minute. Them I never met.

DESSERE:

In *The Secret of Convict Lake*.

GORDON:

No, I don't think I ever worked with Victor Trivas at all, no. I think that the screenplay was done, and he was someplace else.

DESSERE:

Ethel Barrymore was in this film.

GORDON:

Yeah, played a relatively small part.

DESSERE:

Was she a guest star or—?

GORDON:

Well, she was the grande dame of the theater, and we treated her with great respect.

DESSERE:

Could you at least approach her or was she—?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. But you approached her very gingerly, and she pretty much did what she wanted to do.

DESSERE:

And had also Ann Dvorak in this film.

GORDON:

Yes, yes.

DESSERE:

She was apparently a very good actress.

GORDON:

She was very good. It was she that did that breaking of the mirror thing that I talked about.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes. Oh, very good. Also, what about Gene Tierney?

GORDON:

Gene was a very, very warm, nice person. She was a person who had great personal problems. She had a seriously retarded child who was institutionalized, but she apparently had come to grips with it—you know, she made her peace with it. She wasn't secretive. She was very forthcoming, very nice to work with, very nice.

DESSERE:

What was the distance in terms of time between I_ Can Get It for You Wholesale and The Secret of Convict Lake?

GORDON:

Not very much. A couple of months maybe at most. I didn't have a good time on that picture because I didn't get along well with Glenn Ford. I found him very difficult to work with.

DESSERE:

Very uncooperative?

GORDON:

I felt so, yeah.

DESSERE:

Do you think it was because he was a star and he wanted to preserve a certain image instead of really acting?

GORDON:

I can't remember anything specific, but we didn't get along well at all.

DESSERE:

Yes. What was the theme of the film?

GORDON:

Again, it was just a story, a melodramatic story about an isolated community in which the men are all trapped somewhere off in the woods in the winter. Some escaped convicts stumble into the town, and there are only women in the town. The situation was the terrorization of the women. Finally the men come back, and there's the shoot-out. That's all.

DESSERE:

You had a pretty good cast here. I see that even smaller roles where—Cyril Cusack was in it. Do you remember him as a great Irish actor?

GORDON:

Very well. As a matter of fact, a very funny thing happened. It has nothing to do with this picture, but four years ago during the Olympic [Art] Festival, when the RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company] brought a couple of productions here, they were talking—. One of them was *Much Ado about Nothing*. The two stars, [Derek] Jacobi and Cusack, Cidi or whatever her first name is, it's a strange name [Sinead]—sat on the stage and just talked with the students. It was in the playhouse. It was back and forth, it was very warm and friendly, and they were telling of their experiences. You know, I was reminded of this just the other day seeing the production of *Much Ado* that we just did here. Among the things they talked about was the problem they had in trying to kill a laugh in *Much Ado*, where the enmity between the lovers, who really love one another, are attracted, but are fighting one another off—finally there is a reconciliation. At the end of this scene, he says, "I will do anything in the world for you." And she says, "Will you really?" He says, "Yes, what would you like?" She says, "Kill Claudio." [laughter] You know, after the romance, "Kill Claudio." They said they tried and tried to kill the laugh. I was sort of familiar with the play, and I remember—I was sitting about the fourth row—I said, "Well, why did you want to kill that laugh?" She turned to me very loftily and said, "Are you an academic?" [laughter] It was really kind of a put-down. I said, "I'm not quite sure whether academics regard me as one. I suppose perhaps I am. However, I did have the pleasure some thirty years ago of directing your father in his first Hollywood film." [laughter] So I was able to make a turnaround, a bouleversement.

DESSERE:

So Cyril Cusack wasn't there. He came to the Olympic Art Festival?

GORDON:

No, I don't think so.

DESSERE:

That was his daughter?

GORDON:

His daughter, yes, who was the star.

DESSERE:

Do you remember the actress Jeanette Nolan that you had in your cast? Do you remember her?

GORDON:

Very well, sure. Because her husband had played in *An Act of Murder* as the judge, as the final judge, yeah.

DESSERE:

Yeah, because she was Orson Welles's Lady Macbeth.

GORDON:

Lady Macbeth, yeah.

DESSERE:

What about young Barbara Bates? Do you remember her?

GORDON:

The name evokes a feeling as a very attractive girl, but I can't remember at all what she looks like now.

DESSERE:

You don't remember. [laughter] I suppose that it was at this time also that you received the bad news.

GORDON:

Very shortly thereafter, very shortly thereafter.

DESSERE:

The film was finished?

GORDON:

Yeah, completely finished. As a matter of fact, the test that I was speaking about—I was shooting a test. I forget who the actor was that they were interested in for something. I didn't know that I was going to be assigned to the picture. I was shooting some footage, and I got back to my office and I got a telephone call from my old friend the producer from Universal, Jerry Bresler. He said, "Your name was just named in the [House Committee on Un-American Activities] hearings."

DESSERE:

Was it something that came as a big shock to you?

GORDON:

In a kind of way, yes, because my name was named by Eddie [Edward] Dmytryk, who lied. What he testified to in a certain sense was true, but not the way he testified to it.

DESSERE:

What did he say exactly?

GORDON:

He said that he had been to Communist Party meetings with me, and he put it in a time when I wasn't even in Hollywood. I had never been to a Communist Party meeting with him, never.

DESSERE:

Were you affiliated with the Communist Party?

GORDON:

I had been, way, way back, yes.

DESSERE:

You mean in the thirties.

GORDON:

Yeah.

DESSERE:

But in the forties you had stopped your political interests and activities?

GORDON:

Completely. Well, you know, I was on the fringes during the war, when the United States and the Soviet Union were allies, but right after that is when I severed the association, in the forties.

DESSERE:

But at the time the communists were trying to reconcile the USSR with the United States, you were going to meetings and so forth?

GORDON:

Yes, but that was largely when I was in New York. I wasn't even in Hollywood at the time. Between 1943 and 1946 is when I was in New York.

DESSERE:

Before you received that piece of news, did you feel that there was already a sort of climate foreboding?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, for years. Since 1947, sure. Since the first Hollywood Ten.

DESSERE:

At the time you were working, and you didn't think that you would be actually put in cause by this particular—did you ever feel frightened?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, one recognized that the possibility was always there.

DESSERE:

It must have been a very—

GORDON:

Incroyable!

DESSERE:

Yes, incroyable climate. Also because, I mean, you didn't know who was your friend anymore, I suppose.

GORDON:

One was very cautious. Telephone calls—you know, you were very circumspect about everything that was political.

DESSERE:

Since 1947. And you had seen already the departures of friends.

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

For Europe, for instance. Did you know John Berry?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Sure.

DESSERE:

You never worked for him in the same studio, but you knew him socially?

GORDON:

No, I knew him. As a matter of fact, I remember Jack Berry from New York.

DESSERE:

I see. He was associated with the Theatre Union and the Group Theatre?

GORDON:

No, just around. He was not with either of those. But I knew him as a young actor in New York. Then I knew he was working with what was called the

Actors Lab out here. Many people whom I'd known from New York were associated with that. I'd never worked with them, but Morris Carnovsky and Roman Bohnen and a number of people from the Group worked with the Actors Lab out here. Jack, I think, worked with them as well.

DESSERE:

Did you ever know Joseph Losey?

GORDON:

Very well.

DESSERE:

Was he also associated with the same people as you?

GORDON:

No, but we were more or less contemporaries in New York. We both started directing around the same time. I knew Joe slightly in New York. We were near neighbors in 1948 out here. He lived across the street from me just a little up the way, out in the [San Fernando] Valley. So I knew Joe. And a very close friend and associate of Joe's named—oh, my God, he produced something that I was working on.

DESSERE:

You mean a film?

GORDON:

No, it was in New York, a play. He was a very close friend of his. But I knew Joe quite well.

DESSERE:

So you were aware he was already getting ready to go at the time?

GORDON:

I didn't really know until after it happened. Those kinds of things were not talked about very much. People just went. Because it was difficult. I know that in 1957 to '58, when I was already living in the East, I wanted to go to England.

My passport had expired, and they wouldn't renew my passport—as long after as that.

DESSERE:

When was that you said?

GORDON:

'Fifty-seven I think it was.

DESSERE:

So that went for a long time.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I was in exile for nine years.

1.18. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side Two (March 28, 1989)

DESSERE:

Last time we were talking about when you were at Twentieth Century-Fox. You were working on [screen] tests you said. That's when you received a phone call, is that right?

GORDON:

Yes, we had broken for lunch. I had gone back to my office, found a message there from a former friend with whom I had worked, Jerry Bresler, producer, who told me what he had just heard on the radio, which was that Edward Dmytryk, appearing before the committee, had mentioned that I had attended Communist Party meetings with him.

DESSERE:

He gave wrong dates apparently.

GORDON:

Well, yes. Actually, what he did was, whether inadvertently or—I can only think that it was inadvertent. His statements before the committee were untrue. He testified that we had attended Communist Party meetings together. We had never. As a matter of fact, the period that he specified, I

hadn't even been in California. I was living and working in the East, in New York, in the period from 1943 to '46, and that was the period that he had specified that we had attended meetings. The fact that he had good reason to suspect that I had at one point been a member of the Communist Party—that was correct. But his specific testimony as to our having attended meetings together was false. Totally incorrect.

DESSERE:

But tell me something. Were you affected by all the things that were happening at the time in Hollywood? Because that had started already earlier.

GORDON:

Oh, of course. From 1947 on one knew that the investigation was ongoing and that people were testifying and identifying people. It was only a matter of time, it seemed, before the searchlight would land on me. So that aspect of it did not come as a thunderbolt. One anticipated that somewhere along the line I would be identified as having at one point in the remote past actually been a member of the party. Which dated back to 1933, I think it was, but I had long since withdrawn and disassociated myself from that.

DESSERE:

Did you feel that not associating with the Communist Party was because times had changed or—?

GORDON:

The reason was precipitated really by the changes in policy. There had been a period during World War II when the Communist Party had changed its whole approach. It was no longer an underground kind of activity, but it was called the Communist Political Association at that time. But it was in I think 1947 or '48, when the policy changed again, that Earl Browder, who had been, as it were, the author of the Communist Political Association, the open party, was repudiated. As a matter of fact, a Frenchman named Jacques Duclos, was the one who more or less initiated the onslaught against the policy of the American party, and the policy was changed. It was at that time that I disassociated myself from it.

DESSERE:

Did you disassociate from it because you thought it had no relevance any longer?

GORDON:

I felt that the policy that Earl Browder had articulated was the one that made good political and social sense, with which I was completely in sympathy, and when that was repudiated, that disaffected me totally.

DESSERE:

Did you know, for instance, Lester Cole and John Howard Lawson? Were you close to them?

GORDON:

No. I knew them, but I was not close to either of them. As a matter of fact, my activity in the Communist Party was restricted to the times when I was living in New York and did not continue in the times that I was living in Los Angeles.

DESSERE:

But you seem to have been closer to Edward Dmytryk. I'm sure that must have been a blow to you.

GORDON:

Well, Edward Dmytryk was a person with whom I had worked as his dialogue director in a couple of pictures. So I knew him socially and personally and so on, but never in any kind of political activity.

DESSERE:

But you knew—did you play golf with him?

GORDON:

No. We did socialize to some degree. I don't believe that we ever played golf, but we visited.

DESSERE:

He was some sort of a friend. But he of course gave the names of a lot of people at the same time.

GORDON:

Dmytryk, as you know, had been convicted of contempt of Congress and had spent, I don't know, nine months or something in jail. When he came out, in the effort to rehabilitate himself in the industry, he made himself a so-called friendly witness to the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

DESSERE:

Those hearings where he appeared were public hearings? They had an audience and cameras and press?

GORDON:

Yes, I believe so. I'm not quite certain. Those occurred in Washington, I believe. Let me say, all of the information was made public in the press. Whether or not they were televised—I don't think they were televised. Whether or not there was any film record of them, I don't know.

DESSERE:

I've seen some newsreels about that in a documentary film about the legacy of the blacklist.

GORDON:

Well, let me say the earlier hearings, those that occurred, I think, in 1947—which was long before this, because the event that we are talking about, Dmytryk's having testified that I had been a member of the party, was four years later in 1951.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. Would you say that the earlier hearing—? How was the reaction in the community? People were suspicious? So there was a very bad atmosphere?

GORDON:

Are you speaking of '47?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

Well, in '47 it was a very different situation. It underwent some rapid changes. When the onslaught on the movie industry began in 1947, there was a widespread sentiment of resistance to it among people who had no political affiliations whatever. A lot of very, very prominent people were taking a position which was opposed to the sort of witch-hunt that was being conducted by the House committee. As a matter of fact, a delegation went back to Washington of very important Hollywood personalities—actors, directors, and so on—to testify against, to take a position against what was happening.

DESSERE:

That's when Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart went?

GORDON:

Yes, that's right. And actually, the tide—all of this happened very, very rapidly. The tide turned against the committee quite strongly as far as Hollywood was concerned, and actually it seemed to me that the press itself, generally speaking, was reflective of a general disapproval of what was going on. It looked as though what was happening was actually being, as it were, countered and defeated for a period, until an historic meeting, which was I believe late 1947 at the Waldorf-Astoria [Hotel], when all of the leaders of the industry were gathered in one room and resolved to cooperate with the demands that were being made by the House committee, which was not to employ anyone, to blacklist everyone who was not a cooperative witness.

DESSERE:

Okay. So there was a very bad climate, I suppose, where people were suspicious of each other, where there was a lot of tension. Or was it in the beginning taken lightly, until the Hollywood Ten were condemned?

GORDON:

The situation was never taken lightly. The legalities of what was happening were very much in question. However, no one ever really knew what the law was at that particular time. The Communist Party was a legal party. Membership in the party was not criminal until after the fact. It became in a

de facto sense criminal. So that the penalty was nothing other than the fact that you lost your livelihood, you lost your career. Because the industry collectively conspired, I think is the only word one can say, not to engage anyone who had been a member of the Communist Party, or was alleged to have been, and who refused to be a friendly witness to the investigations of the committee.

DESSERE:

Okay. Were you pressured to testify also?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Yes. A number of people, ranging from Darryl Zanuck, who was my employer at the time, to my agents—all of them urged me to cooperate and be a so-called friendly witness to the committee.

DESSERE:

And that was after Dmytryk had nominated you?

GORDON:

Yes. Once that was made public.

DESSERE:

Yes. And you were thoroughly opposed to that? How did you feel about it?

GORDON:

I think that virtually everyone was prepared to talk of their experience, because no one that I know of, and certainly not I, had ever done anything that was criminal in any way. But the crucial question always was who were you associated with—to name the names of the people who had been politically involved with you. This of course was made clear right in the very beginning, in 1947, in which the witnesses who had been subpoenaed were not permitted to say what they wanted to but were forced to answer yes or no as to their membership in the party and then to proceed from there to name all the associates whom they had had during the period of their membership.

DESSERE:

Since the Hollywood Ten were mostly writers, and a director in the case of Dmytryk, were there also agents?

GORDON:

I think that there was one agent who was involved at that time, but the rest of them were principally writers. There were a couple of actors as well, as you remember.

DESSERE:

Larry Parks.

GORDON:

Yes, that was one. And one or two directors, but principally there were writers in the first Hollywood Ten.

DESSERE:

You see, what is very interesting about this question is that people still think about that. It seems to have been a major blow to the industry. Because when I saw this documentary not too long ago— People suffered so much from that thing. A lot of them were not able to work as a consequence. So it seems to me that it must have been a very, very traumatic thing.

GORDON:

Of course it was, because one was confronted with the issue once one was named and subpoenaed to make a decision what one was going to do, with the understanding that if one failed to be a, quote, "friendly witness" or "cooperative witness," his career was ended.

DESSERE:

Because, for instance, in countries like France, the event was perceived totally differently. If that thing had happened to France, there would have been a big emotion about it. Here the fact that the heads of the studios were simply condemning people because of the public hearings seems to be like collaboration, as in the Second World War.

GORDON:

It was an outgrowth of the very same thing. The term "Iron Curtain" I think was coined by Winston Churchill in an address that he made in this country in 1946 or 1947. For some reason, I remember it occurred in a place called Fulton, Missouri, at which time the Cold War began in earnest, which was a complete turnaround from the alliance that had existed during World War II, in which the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States was that of allies against the Nazi powers, the fascist forces.

DESSERE:

I don't know if you remember this article that I brought you from the French encyclopedia. It was very interesting that they appreciated your work in conjunction with your suffering during this period because you had to stand prejudice.

GORDON:

Well, it was made very clear that unless one cooperated—Zanuck made this quite clear—that my career was in very, very good shape if I cooperated. I had at that time just made two films at Twentieth, and my relationship with Zanuck was, I think, very cordial and very good. But it was made very clear that unless I cooperated it was ended. If I did cooperate, then, as I said before, it was a very, very promising path to continue along the line that was in existence at that time.

DESSERE:

But that was definitely a threat to your integrity as a human being.

GORDON:

Well, one had to make a decision for oneself. It was a very heavy decision, having to do not only with the fact that you might expose others to the same kind of crisis that you were going through at the time, but the broader principle involved. So there were the two things involved. Ultimately, after a fairly lengthy period of wrestling, I, as others did, made a decision one way or the other. As a matter of fact, it was a period that lasted for about nine months, from the time that my name was introduced in Dmytryk's testimony till the time that I appeared before the committee and took the position which I did take.

DESSERE:

So you had to appear in front of the committee.

GORDON:

Oh, I was subpoenaed of course.

DESSERE:

I see. And what did they ask you? If you had been a communist?

GORDON:

I forget what the specific questions were, but that was the sense of it. Let me put it this way, that law in a sense was being created in the process. One did not know what the protections, if you want to call it that, of the Fifth Amendment were. There were many theories. As you know, the Hollywood Ten did not avail themselves of the constitutional protection of the Fifth Amendment, but based it on the basis of the First Amendment, that is to say, freedom of speech and freedom of thought. That did not protect them from being cited for contempt by the Congress and going to jail for it, because they refused to answer the questions that they were asked. It was quite clear that even though one would have preferred, perhaps, to stand on the basis of the First Amendment, it had already been proved in practice that that would not serve. The question as to what the Fifth Amendment—that is to say, the protection against being obliged to incriminate oneself—involved and what the legal technicalities of it were was something that was not at all clear. There hadn't been sufficient precedents established. The general conception was that if one opened up any particular area of inquiry, one could no longer withdraw from that position. In other words, that if one said, "Yes, I was a member of the Communist Party," you could not then withdraw from that. Or much subtler things. Even if you had acknowledged that you were a close associate of someone who had already been identified as a member of the Communist Party, you could not refuse to answer on the grounds that you would incriminate yourself. The interesting thing was that if a name of someone whom I privately knew had been a member of the Communist Party was introduced, and if I were asked whether or not I knew such a person, if I said that I did, then I would have opened up an avenue of inquiry from which I could not withdraw. On the other hand, the other aspect of the dilemma was

that if I refused to answer, on the grounds that to answer would incriminate me, in the process I was obviously incriminating him.

DESSERE:

It was really like torture in the Middle Ages.

GORDON:

Well, in a way. Let me say it wasn't that kind of torture of the Middle Ages. But one did not know at that time what one had to be very, very careful of saying for fear of being placed in the bind of either incriminating oneself or incriminating someone else or having made himself subject to prosecution for contempt of Congress, which was, of course, the charge on which the boys did go to jail four years earlier.

DESSERE:

What is very interesting—in this documentary they found out that of course Richard [M.] Nixon was a member of the committee. So was another man, whose name I unfortunately forget, but who was later found out to be a crook who tried to evade taxes.

GORDON:

Parnell Thomas was his name. As a matter of fact, he spent time at the same jail that I think Dmytryk and Adrian Scott had been in in Danbury, Connecticut.

DESSERE:

So, you know, history is also judging these men now.

GORDON:

Except that he was convicted of criminal activity, not for political thought or anything of that kind.

DESSERE:

But, you know, to be judged by people like that is kind of ironic.

GORDON:

Well, it was a bitter irony indeed.

DESSERE:

Yes, and the fact that also Ronald [W.] Reagan didn't hesitate to participate in this was also—

GORDON:

That we didn't know at the time. That is to say, things have been very recently revealed, that he had actually been working undercover as an informer for the committee or for the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], I'm not quite sure which. This has not been acknowledged by either Reagan or Nancy Reagan, but it is a charge which presumably is a true one, because no prosecutions for libel or slander have been raised against those people who have made that charge.

DESSERE:

So when you appeared before that committee, you must have been very nervous. It must have been a very painful moment.

GORDON:

Well, let me say, yes. The business of incriminating, even indirectly and almost as it were in a negative way, was something which was very much in everyone's mind. Actually, in my particular case, I knew what was coming up. I had arranged to sell my house several months in advance, because I knew that I was going to have to leave Los Angeles. And the period of escrow—oh, the date of the hearing was postponed several times. As it happened, I had to vacate the property, my house, about two days before the final date of the hearing occurred. I had three children at the time. An old friend of mine, who to the best of my knowledge had never been a member of the Communist Party, but perhaps his wife had been, invited us to stay with them for those couple of days.

DESSERE:

Is it okay to ask you who they are?

GORDON:

No, I won't tell you his name. I suddenly realized on the evening before the hearing that I might be asked where I am now living. Were I to have said "at

such and such a person's home," that would in that period, in that sort of almost paranoid kind of period, have made me fear that I might be involving and incriminating him in a way that I didn't want to do. At the very last moment I arranged to stay the night before by myself in a motel.

DESSERE:

And your family stayed—?

GORDON:

And my family stayed in my friend's home. So that were I asked my address, I could say that I was living in such and such a motel on Cahuenga Boulevard. As I recall, the question was never asked. But I think that that little episode—of course, as you can imagine, it was a pretty stressful night, not very much sleep by myself in this motel room. That is reflective of the general anxiety, the fear. One might call it paranoia to some degree, except that there was a basis for it in what was happening. And I think, as I said before, that little incident is interesting, not because of itself it's important, but to the degree that it does reflect that general state of mind of most people who were in jeopardy at the time.

1.19. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side One (March 28, 1989)

DESSERE:

So you appeared in front of a commission. It was public, was it?

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

And what happened before? What about the Directors Guild [of America]? What was happening? I suppose you were a member and attending meetings. What was the atmosphere? Because some people, I suppose, took very strong positions. Did you attend?

GORDON:

Yes, I did. I remember a particular meeting. As a matter of fact, I have a copy of a petition that was signed by a number of very prominent directors to call a

special meeting, because there was a movement to impeach Joe [Joseph L.] Mankiewicz, who at that time was the president of the guild. Because he was taking a "liberal" position, if you like, about this whole thing. There were forces within the guild, led principally by C. [Cecil] B. deMille and others, who felt that this was un-American in the temper of that particular time in history. There was a very heated meeting—I can't remember which hotel it was at that time—in which many, many people took strong positions, either pro deMille or against him.

DESSERE:

Was Elia Kazan in this meeting?

GORDON:

No, I don't think he was in Hollywood at the time.

DESSERE:

I see. But you had lost any contact with him ever since the days at Yale [University] when you went together?

GORDON:

No, no. I mean, we were both members of the Group Theatre together, and we had worked together. I had been a lighting designer on at least two plays that he directed, and so we had a kind of close association for quite a long period of time.

DESSERE:

Did you realize what position he took at the time?

GORDON:

Well, that was later. That happened, I think, when he made the public statement in which not only did he acknowledge having been a member of the Communist Party, but repudiated what the Communist Party stood for and urged everyone else who was in that position to make a public confession, if you will, of this participation.

DESSERE:

Well, you know that in France there was a very famous film historian named Georges Sadoul who was absolutely shocked by the end of *On the Waterfront*.

GORDON:

Yes. I think that was an indirect apologia for the position that Kazan took. I mean, it was a very well made film, a very effective film, but the thrust of it from a thematic point of view was one which I felt was very deplorable.

DESSERE:

Yes. So what happened to you after this meeting? Did it last long, this meeting? Were there other people?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I can't remember how many people were subpoenaed at that time, but it was a substantial number of them. The routine was fairly consistent. You were asked immediately, "Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" If you answered no and you had been, you were obviously perjuring yourself. If you said yes, then you were obliged to then answer all other questions, including who did you know as fellow members of the party, in which case, if you refused to answer, you were standing in contempt of Congress. So either you had to just give all the names they wanted of you or risk contempt of Congress or risk perjuring yourself. So from the very outset, you had to refuse to answer their questions on the grounds that to do so would be, shall we say, to place yourself in jeopardy of further prosecution of some sort.

DESSERE:

So you refused to answer.

GORDON:

So you refused to answer right from the very start, and that was the end of it. And then if you wanted to make any kind of statement, you were not permitted to do so and you were cut off. You had to answer yes or no, and that was it. Finally, you were excused, as it were.

DESSERE:

So that very day you realized that you had to leave?

GORDON:

The very next day, actually. I was all ready to go. I'd sold my house, as I said before. I made arrangements. I'd actually rented a home in Connecticut where I had planned to move. I was going to go back to the theater. I had, of course, had, first, about eight years of experience in New York and then another three years of experience between '43 and '46, the time which, incorrectly, untruthfully, [Edward] Dmytryk said he had attended meetings with me, because he was in California and I was in New York during that period of time. And to see whether or not I could reestablish a career in the theater.

DESSERE:

Had you still kept contacts with some people in New York?

GORDON:

No, not in any direct way. It was plunging in. I had given myself a kind of timetable. I said if I could not find employment within a year—and I figured I had enough money to survive for that period of time—I was just going to abandon the theater and go back to my home, original home, which was in Baltimore, and go to work in the family business, which I was not particularly interested in doing.

DESSERE:

Well, of course. What was the state of your family at this point? How many children did you have?

GORDON:

I had two younger brothers [Bert and Leo Gordon] and my father [Paul Gordon], and that was all. My mother [Eva K. Gordon] was dead by then.

DESSERE:

But I was talking about your personal family, your wife and children.

GORDON:

Oh. I had three children, one an infant [Susannah Gordon], who was perhaps about ten months old at that time, or a little less than that. And then I had a

ten-year-old son [Jon Gordon], or not quite ten at the time of the hearing, and one about seven [Jane Gordon].

DESSERE:

I see. Do you think your children were affected by that? Did you discuss that at home with them?

GORDON:

No. Not really, because the oldest of them was only nine at the time. Subsequently, of course, we have discussed it, but not at the time.

DESSERE:

Do you think they have felt affected, consequently, by this?

GORDON:

Well, in a way, yes, because first of all they were dislocated, taken from where they were and moved across the country and so on. We lived in Connecticut for almost ten years. During that time they certainly got well adjusted. As a matter of fact, when I came back to California, it was almost more of a yank for them than the initial one moving back to New York was.

DESSERE:

But do you know if even now they are asked about that period?

GORDON:

Oh, I don't think so. That's pretty much a dead issue, except for nosy people like you I [laughter]

DESSERE:

Okay. Well, you know, we have tried to write history. So now you went back to New York. So what happened?

GORDON:

I went back to New York. I think it was in September of the same year [1951], late September—I tried to reestablish connections and looked for work. I had been represented in Hollywood at that time by the William Morris Agency, who really weren't very interested at this point in trying to do anything for me.

But there was one person at the William Morris Agency who remembered me from before and who got me my very first job, which was about, oh, three and a half months after I got back. It seemed like forever. I didn't think that I was ever going to get employment. And the first producer for whom I worked, interestingly enough, at that time was George Schaefer.

DESSERE:

Oh, really! So George Schaefer was working in the theater at that time.

GORDON:

Yes, he was a producer for an outfit that was called the New York City Center, which I think was partially funded by the city of New York and was operating out of what was then the Shriners' place, the Mecca Temple, I think it was called. A huge theater, on Fifty-fourth Street I think it was. The first thing that I did was this play that wasn't exactly a "Broadway" production. Although it was in the New York Times Square area, Broadway area, it was a limited engagement. The plays were scheduled to play for two or three weeks—that was all. And that was it.

DESSERE:

Is that when you did *Anna Christie*?

GORDON:

Yes, *Anna Christie* was the first play.

DESSERE:

So in fact you were not out of work for too long.

GORDON:

It seemed endless. It seemed an eternity, but in point of fact it was only about four months, I guess, from the time that I got there to the time that I got my first job.

DESSERE:

So this theater was still an important theater?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, except as I said before, in a kind of way it was almost like an off-Broadway thing, but on a very large scale, not a small scale. I mean, that theater accommodated thirty-five hundred people. It was a huge auditorium.

DESSERE:

So this particular theater was producing important plays.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I mean, they were all revivals, actually. I did the first one in the winter of 1952, and then I did another play, and then I did another one for them in the spring of that year. Both of those productions were then picked up by commercial producers and moved to Broadway theaters. *Anna Christie* didn't last very long, but the second one, which was a revival of *The Male Animal*, had an extended run. It was, as it were, bought lock, stock, and barrel by John Golden and ran for I would say thirty weeks at the Music Box on Forty-fifth Street. It was very successful.

DESSERE:

Who was in *Anna Christie*?

GORDON:

Celeste Holm played Anna. And the man—Matt Burke was the character—was played by Kevin McCarthy.

DESSERE:

And who played the character of the old lady? I forget.

GORDON:

Her name was Grace Valentine.

DESSERE:

So did you enjoy working with Celeste Holm?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I worked again with Celeste Holm several years later in a little comedy called *His and Hers*. I enjoyed working with Celeste very much. She was an enormously talented actress.

DESSERE:

Did you feel that when you directed *Anna Christie*, it seemed to be a very good subject for you? I mean, considering your plays before—it was still a play about people who were working-class people.

GORDON:

Yes. You know, *Anna Christie* at that time already seemed to be a pretty old-fashioned play. As a matter of fact, the first act of *Anna Christie* was almost like a one-act play within itself, and then the rest of the play I think is a four-act play, if I remember correctly. You know, it was like a whole different play on the barge. The first was in the bar, when Anna first comes to New York expecting to find her father, who she believed was a sea captain, and it turned out that he was a skipper of a coal barge or something of that kind.

DESSERE:

Who played the father? Do you know?

GORDON:

Art Smith was his name. He had been formerly a member of the Group Theatre with me. A very good actor.

DESSERE:

Did you feel that you had some freedom to stage that play according to—?

GORDON:

Well, yes, except that there were very stringent restrictions on— Well, the money, of course. But you couldn't change anything in the script.

DESSERE:

Because it was a classic play.

GORDON:

It was a classic play, and that was a proviso that the widow of Eugene O'Neill, who was dead by that time, made—a proviso of allowing the rights for another production to be done.

DESSERE:

So I suppose you were glad to be back to work? Did that lead to something else immediately?

GORDON:

Yes, it did. Howard Lindsay produced and starred in a new play called *One Bright Day*, and the engagement was very shortly after the first thing.

DESSERE:

I couldn't find anything about that play. Who wrote it?

GORDON:

A man by the name of Sigmund [S.] Miller. Very solid play.

DESSERE:

What is it about?

GORDON:

Actually, it is a play in which the central character is a man who must chose between material self-interest and social responsibility.

DESSERE:

Was it a comedy?

GORDON:

No, no, it was a drama. It had comedy in it, though. Everything that I did either had comedy in it to begin with or comedy was brought into it to some degree, because I suppose that's the way I kind of look at life in the theater and so on. But basically it was a serious play. Howard Lindsay played the lead, a man who was the owner of a pharmaceutical company, who had one product that was their principal stock-in-trade. There was some question as to whether or not under certain circumstances there were contraindications, that it could be harmful to people who—I forget the details—had a kidney condition or something of that kind. And the question was whether or not a warning should be made on the label that under certain circumstances it couldn't be used, as we find now is standard practice. Or whether or not—the issue was not that clear-cut. He had a board of directors of this privately held corporation who were very much opposed to publishing that warning. That

was the issue that he had to resolve for himself. The stakes were that he might lose control of his company if he took a position that was contrary to what the board of directors wanted him to do. That was the basic conflict that had to be resolved.

DESSERE:

For what theater did you do that?

GORDON:

Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse were the producers. It was just an ordinary commercial production. You know, it did reasonably well. It wasn't a flop, but it wasn't a hit either. Howard Lindsay, as you know, was well known as an actor. He had been the star of *Life with Father* for years and years. So it was a very respectable production and did modestly well. I don't know if it ever recouped its production costs. It probably did, but it certainly wasn't what would be called a hit. Unfortunately, I think one of the things that militated against it was that somehow in theme it bore a remote resemblance to *An Enemy of the People* of Ibsen's, which had just been revived as adapted by Arthur Miller. In some respects, some of the critics compared *One Bright Day* unfavorably with *An Enemy of the People*, which obviously damaged it to some degree as far as popular response was concerned.

DESSERE:

Did it have any kind of, quote, "message," unquote?

GORDON:

Well, precisely that. I mean to say, the conflict of interest that existed in many situations between what was morally right and what was materially, shall we say, indiscrete or imprudent. I mean, that is the conflict we face many times in life.

DESSERE:

Yes. It took place in the twentieth century?

GORDON:

Yes, it was a contemporary play.

DESSERE:

And you got this job because they had seen your production of *Anna Christie*?

GORDON:

I think it was a combination of that as well as the accumulation of credits that I had in the theater prior to that time.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course. So you still saw people who remembered you.

GORDON:

Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

So New York hadn't changed too much?

GORDON:

Well, let me just say that the anarchy, if you like, of the New York theater, as opposed, let us say, to what was at that time a motion picture industry which consisted of seven studios—I mean, it's not like that today. Today, Hollywood is as anarchic as the Broadway theater was. But because, as I said before, of that—anarchy is the only word. I mean, there was no consolidation, there was no establishment, as such, in New York. [That anarchy] made it possible. Plus the fact that there was a very, very strong resistance in New York at that time to the whole blacklisting situation.

DESSERE:

I suppose that they were very unfavorable to that, and they supported you.

GORDON:

Yes, in a way. Although, there's no question of doubt that in some respects the influence of the Hollywood blacklist reached out. Because in certain instances, motion picture studios financed Broadway shows, and they then put some of the restrictions on that. In one particular instance I knew that this had happened, it, shall we say, cost me a job that I wanted very much. The star himself, whom I had known—and I can mention this name now, Henry Fonda,

and the play was *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*—had sent me the script and wanted to know whether I'd be interested in doing it. I read it and thought it was very interesting, and I did want to do it. At the last moment, he himself told me that the word had come—I think RKO [Radio Pictures], at the time was one of the principal backers, and they said, "No way." So that fell apart. Now, the interesting thing about it is that is one instance that I knew of. That there may have been other instances of that sort which precluded my getting certain assignments that would have been interesting to do, one can only speculate about. This is the only one, as I said before, that I knew of. But, for example, in the period when one is deciding who shall direct the play, it may very well have been a consideration. "Well, you can't hire Gordon," you know, for whatever reasons. It may have occurred. I don't know that it did. I only know this one instance.

DESSERE:

I'm just thinking about the ironies. That the film was made by Edward Dmytryk. GORDON; I had forgotten that.

DESSERE:

He directed the film version, so it's kind of interesting. So the people in New York knew about your situation, because it was public— Talked to your friends, I suppose.

GORDON:

Let's say one didn't attempt to publicize it if the issue came up. Obviously one is not going to deny the fact that I had been an unfriendly witness before the committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities]. As a matter of fact, I had both good and negative reactions to it. Actors, for example, whom I would just meet on the street sometimes would say—I remember in one particular instance a person who thanked me from the bottom of his heart for the position that I had taken. But there undoubtedly were people who deplored what I had done.

DESSERE:

Oh, really.

GORDON:

Oh, I am sure there must have been. I didn't encounter them.

DESSERE:

Do you think it would have been because you didn't cooperate with an, quote, unquote, "established American institution"?

GORDON:

Well, yes. I mean, let's say that what one might call the paranoia of the establishment with respect to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party and its presumed connection with the Soviet Union was not restricted to California.

DESSERE:

But there was a lot of tension at that time also with the Soviet Union—all the postwar situation.

GORDON:

Of course, that was the genesis of all of it. One of the things that is kind of interesting, going back to the forties, when the first Hollywood Ten came out—I would say that there were three interesting factors that occurred simultaneously starting shortly after the end of World War II. One was that the kind of economic boom that was a product of the war economy was over. There was not exactly a depression, but there was an enormous fall-off in box office receipts. I remember—I was then at that time under contract to UI, Universal International—sitting in a production meeting prior to—I forget which film we were talking about. In the production meeting that preceded the actual filming of the picture, in which the business manager or whatever—the executive there—and the director and the producer would sit, a whole parade. These were budget meeting kinds of things. Prior to that, Jim [James] Pratt, who was holding that job at UI, at that time, read a list of twenty films—that was around 1947, '48, I can't recall which—that Universal had made and released. Of those twenty, eighteen of them wound up in the red. Prior to that time, during the war years, nothing was not profitable. You couldn't release a picture that didn't make money.

DESSERE:

So of course there was a link between the witch-hunting, in fact, and the economy.

GORDON:

That was one thing. Another factor that was very important that contributed to the anxiety that pervaded the motion picture industry at that time was the freezing of currency of European countries, starting in England, in which you could not withdraw moneys that you had made. That was followed by other countries, but it started in England. You could use that money—that money was yours—by making another film in that country, and you could bring that film out and so on, but you could not take that actual capital out of the country. So that the financial returns on those films that had been released, say in England, were not available to the studios except to expend them in that country. So that put a crimp in the balance sheet of the studios. That was another thing that occurred simultaneously. And the third thing, a very important one I think, was the introduction of the coaxial cable for television, which now made available all over the country—or not all over the country, but at least on the West Coast—television programs that were produced in New York. Up until that time there weren't. I mean, television was a wasteland here for a period of time—let us say until roughly 1947, '48—in which the only thing of interest that emanated from here was the Rose Bowl. The other things were not available except on kinnies that came out later, Kinetoscopes, which of course were very poor in quality and that sort of thing. The coaxial cable, which of course made television much, much more popular—as a matter of fact, I recall that I didn't own a television set myself until 1948. Prior to that time, a couple of years before that time, I remember going to New York—I guess it was in 1946 or '47—and I was astonished to see all the television aerials as you came in on the train into Grand Central Station. It was not like that here at all. Television was a rarity here at that time, because there was nothing much to watch. So those three things combined to put a very, very serious crimp in the financial return of the motion picture business.

DESSERE:

The thing was, I suppose, also the separation from the theater by the Paramount decision of 1948. [*United States v. Paramount Pictures*]

GORDON:

That was another factor, the elimination of block booking and that sort of thing.

DESSERE:

Yes. I mean, everything was very artificial in the whole political situation. I think people see that now with the distance.

GORDON:

But the motion picture business in around 1946, early 1947, was in very bad financial shape.

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DESSERE:

We were talking about the industry's problems.

GORDON:

That situation, that economic pressure, made the motion picture industry feel very vulnerable to any kind of adverse public relations, which in turn, of course, made them susceptible to the pressures of the committee. That, I think, was a contributing factor to the meeting that I referred to earlier on, where the heads of studios meeting in New York at the Waldorf [-Astoria Hotel] decided that they would cooperate and blacklist everyone, because they felt extremely vulnerable from an economic point of view and feared any kind of adverse publicity that might emanate from the fact that they were not, the industry was not, cooperating with the House committee investigations. It was the onset of the McCarthy era, which followed almost immediately on its heels.

DESSERE:

So in New York, after a while, after you got those two plays, you felt quite comfortable. You thought that everything was starting again, and you were able again to establish yourself and find a decent lodging, I suppose.

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

You were living in Connecticut and commuting.

GORDON:

Commuting to New York. During that period of time, I can't remember how many plays I did, but in those nine years that I lived in the East I think I had done about eleven plays.

DESSERE:

Ten. [laughter]

GORDON:

Ten plays?

DESSERE:

That's what I have. You agreed to confirm.

GORDON:

Who's counting? I was reasonably busy.

DESSERE:

So after *One Bright Day*, you got another job on *The Male Animal*.

GORDON:

That was with George Schaefer again.

DESSERE:

Again. Also, he rehired you after *Anna Christie*.

GORDON:

Yes.

DESSERE:

The Male Animal is a comedy. I've seen the film made in the thirties. Was it dated? Did you find it a little dated at the time? Do you remember your reaction?

GORDON:

No, I didn't feel that it was dated. It was an interesting play. It was a comedy about something. That was something—a genre, if you want to call it that—that interested me very much, let's say in the general category, one might say, of *Born Yesterday*. Do you see what I mean? Having to do with considerations of academic freedom, etc.

DESSERE:

Did you get the casting that you wanted? Were you happy about it?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, as a matter of fact.

DESSERE:

I'm sorry, James Thurber wrote this play?

GORDON:

With Elliott Nugent, who also played the lead.

DESSERE:

He was also a director for a while, wasn't he?

GORDON:

Yes. Not very much in Hollywood, but he did one or two plays in New York. I had Martha Scott to play his wife. And the great coup was Bob [Robert] Preston, whom I had already worked with in Hollywood. He played opposite Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Gambles*, which I directed. Bob and I had a very good relationship. As a matter of fact, I worked with Bob in the theater I think, in all, four times. Three more plays after *The Male Animal*.

DESSERE:

Is it with him that you always used to tell us this anecdote when you were trying to elicit a performance? You said this little story about the Chinese food. Do you remember that?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Yes, I had forgotten it, but Bob reported it in an interview.

DESSERE:

I never forget what you say, you know. I remember that little story. You should tell it. [laughter]

GORDON:

I had completely forgotten it, except that it had appeared in some interview that Bob Preston had in I can't recall—. There was a line in the play about going out and eating chop suey or something. During the course of a rehearsal, as Bob reported it—I must honestly confess that I didn't remember it directly myself—there was no color in the way that he was saying the line. I said, "Bob, do you like chop suey?" And he says, "I've never tried it." And I said, "Well, that's what I thought." "Now, you make up your mind whether you like it or you detest it." Bob cited that as an example of interesting directing.

DESSERE:

So this type of play, *The Male Animal*, was in fashion because of the success of *Born Yesterday*. Would you say that?

GORDON:

No, I don't think that the relationship was that close. *Born Yesterday* had been done in 1945, and here we were in 1952. It was seven years earlier. But *Male Animal* was a revival. It had been done twelve years before and had been quite successful, and for good reason, because it is an extremely good play. It was very well received. It got glowing notices when it opened at the City Center. After its limited run of two or three weeks or whatever it was at City Center, one of the commercial producers, John Golden, bought it lock, stock, and barrel and installed it in the Music Box on Forty-fifth Street, one of the best legitimate houses.

DESSERE:

With your direction.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, and it played there for I would say seven or eight months.

DESSERE:

So you were back into the tracks. And were you offered something interesting at the time? Did you receive a lot of offers?

GORDON:

Yes, it was a pretty good period. I can't remember what was the very next one after that.

DESSERE:

According to my research, it's *See the Jaguar*.

GORDON:

I can't remember the exact chronology without looking it up.

DESSERE:

I have a little chronology. I was going to ask you if you were—

GORDON:

See the Jaguar I thought was a very, very interesting script written by [N.] Richard Nash. It was his first play. He wasn't yet the very successful author of *The Rain Maker*, which came later. It was a kind of a daring play. Actually, he wrote it in blank verse in the original script, and it was a very powerful play. Not a very ingratiating play, but—

DESSERE:

What was the subject? Do you remember?

GORDON:

The subject, if one had to sum it up in just one sentence, was deploring man's inhumanity to man.

DESSERE:

And John Garfield was in this?

GORDON:

No, John Garfield was not. James Dean was. That was his Broadway debut.

DESSERE:

Why do I have John Garfield in my notes? I know you worked with him.

GORDON:

Well, he was in the Group Theatre, you see. I'd actually worked with him once earlier in a play called *Peace on Earth* many years before. Then we worked together in the Group Theatre until he came out to Hollywood. But at that time he was out making films. At the time, he wasn't in the theater. He did come back, I think, for one play after that that Lee Strasberg directed, a revival of *Peer Gynt*.

DESSERE:

You've talked somewhere else about James Dean a lot, so I'm not going to ask you to repeat the same thing. I know you found out that he had been a student in the theater department here.

GORDON:

I don't think for very long.

DESSERE:

And he was kind of a difficult person to work with.

GORDON:

Well, in a way, but enormously rewarding at the same time. I mean, he had an extraordinarily rich talent and so on, but was a pretty unlucky kid, as his life subsequently demonstrated.

DESSERE:

Was he respectful of your opinions or was he systematically protesting?

GORDON:

Oh, no, not at all. It was only later, as a matter of fact, that that began to surface. According to the talk that was around Broadway—very shortly after *See the Jaguar*, he was in an adaptation of *The Immoralist* of Andre Gide. Herman Shumlin, who was a very distinguished director, had great trouble with him. Ultimately he, Herman, withdrew from the play, and Danny [Daniel]

Mann took it over. When it was presented, Danny was the director. But they apparently had very serious difficulties between the star and the director during the course of rehearsal.

DESSERE:

For whom did you do that play *See the Jaguar*?

GORDON:

The scene designer Lemuel Ayres was the producer.

DESSERE:

He was also a director for a while, a very short while, in Hollywood. He worked on the *Ziegfeld Follies*, on the MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] film.

GORDON:

Lem Ayres?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

Not as director?

DESSERE:

Apparently, yes.

GORDON:

Are you sure? Because Vincente Minnelli was a scene designer who became a director. I didn't know that Lem Ayres had ever worked in film.

DESSERE:

But he was on a very short segment. The whole film was Minnelli's work, but, I mean, I know he did for a while, because the film is very stylized also from the point of view of scene design. So I suppose for some sequences they brought in George Sidney and Lem. Also, he was the producer. So that play was more or less a return to a very serious topic?

GORDON:

Yes, and it was very unsuccessful, unfortunately.

DESSERE:

So James Dean was already well known in the theater.

GORDON:

No, no. This was his debut.

DESSERE:

He had only secondary parts at the time?

GORDON:

He had nothing in the New York theater, so far as I know. No one knew of him. Subsequent to that he did get a few jobs in television and then went into *The Immoralist*. And then was brought out to Hollywood. I forget, was it *Giant* that was his first film? *Rebel without a Cause*?

DESSERE:

No, it's *East of Eden*. But he had small parts in film. He was in a film before that, but very small parts. In a film by Douglas Sirk, whom I'm sure you know.

GORDON:

Well, not well, but I knew him.

DESSERE:

That was called *Has Anyone Seen My Gal*? It was a little comedy with musical things, and Gigi Perreau was in it. Also, he was in a film by Sam [Samuel] Fuller called *Fixed Bayonet*. He was also in a Paramount [Pictures] film with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis called *Sailor Beware*.

GORDON:

Well, no one knew of him at that time, because he was pretty anonymous.

DESSERE:

And that could even have happened after he worked for you.

GORDON:

When he came into my office at that particular time, I'd never heard of him.

DESSERE:

Those were very small parts. So the play was very unsuccessful and was done on a modest budget, no?

GORDON:

No, it was a large production, actually. A large cast and actually with two principal sets, one of which was rearranged so that it became several areas. It was really kind of cinematic. There was a period of flight and pursuit that went through the mountains. It was kind of stylized. The units were rearranged to be different locations in the mountains. It was a little bit like the very same thing we had years before in *Home of The Brave*, where there was a sequence—I guess it was three scenes—of a flight through the jungle. The same units were rearranged to be different areas as they were moving from the point of danger to where they would get on the boats and leave the island. Actually, what we did in that particular show, by the way, going way back. then, was influenced by my film experience, maintaining a certain directionality and even changing the aspect as the action became more climactic. So that what was a full set became narrower and taller in a kind of way as the people became victimized. By bringing in the framing from the side and elevating the framing at the top, we changed the aspect as we moved through these three phases, these three scenes of flight. As I said before, the choices that I made in that particular instance were strongly influenced by the experience I'd had in film.

DESSERE:

Of course. And also you probably had—I'm asking you this question. You probably used the set in a very expressionistic way.

GORDON:

Are you speaking of *Jaguar*?

DESSERE:

Yes. Because it seemed also that you had that in that play taking place in a boat. You had already used the set in—

GORDON:

Well, that was a little different. There I made a unit set out of what had been separate scenes in the script.

DESSERE:

I see. So there you—it seemed that obviously the set was bigger than the characters, and they were oppressed by the environment. That's what you wanted to convey, I suppose.

GORDON:

Well, not quite. Not in *See the Jaguar*, but in *Home of the Brave* that's what I was trying to do. In *See the Jaguar* we simply did that so that you didn't have to have enormous scene changes. Just to rearrange the units gave it a different configuration, so that they were still in the mountains, still fleeing and so on.

DESSERE:

So it was a very challenging project, and you could also do what you wanted. Who else was in the play besides James Dean?

GORDON:

John Arthur Kennedy was in it, and Constance Ford played the girl. And a man named Cameron Prudhomme played, in a kind of way, the villain. He was a very, very powerful actor. He's been dead for a number of years.

DESSERE:

So the play was not too successful?

GORDON:

No, it wasn't. It was a big flop. It was the worst failure that I had. Although it's a play which once, in the course of an interview, I said that if it were to be offered again, I would do it again. I remember getting a letter from the author, Dick [Richard] Nash, whom I hadn't seen in a while, who expressed his appreciation for my comments. He had read the interview.

DESSERE:

Have you ever considered doing it here?

GORDON:

I thought of doing it here at school. The only reason that I didn't was because of our population here. There were only three women in a huge cast of men, and it would have been very difficult to cast it adequately, particularly the role that Cameron Prudhomme played, which was the boss of this community. The title *See the Jaguar* derived from the kinds of signs one used to see on the road as you approached, let us say, a general store in remote regions of the badlands of the Dakotas or something of that sort, where it says "Five Miles Ahead Gas and the Menagerie of Wildlife," "*See the Jaguar*," and so on. When this boy is caught, this fascinating character that Dean played, he is placed in a cage, and they put on a sign "See the Man." It was a very, very interesting and powerful play, and it's never been published.

DESSERE:

Never?

GORDON:

Never been published.

DESSERE:

No. Because I read in the previous interview that you gave that it was written by Richard Nash, but I couldn't find anything.

GORDON:

No, it's not been published. I tried to find it one time. I have an old working script of it, beat up with revisions and stuff like that, but it was never published.

DESSERE:

So now I have another play on which I know absolutely nothing and you can tell me everything about called *Maggie*.

GORDON:

Maggie, unfortunately, didn't have a star. It was a very, very good musical, I think.

DESSERE:

Oh, it was a musical. Oh, your first one?

GORDON:

Yes. Well, I had worked in musicals, but never as the director. Based on Sir James [M.] Barrie's play *What Every Woman Knows*, a very famous play and very—what shall I say?—thematically, very avant-garde at the time when it was written back in the early years of this century. Sir James Barrie, whose play was just done by George Schaefer here. *The Admirable Crichton* was written by Sir James Barrie.

DESSERE:

But that was not the basis of *Maggie*.

GORDON:

No, *What Every Woman Knows*. It is what one might call a feminist play dating way back then.

DESSERE:

Did it take place in the beginning of this century?

GORDON:

Yes, yes. It was a period piece about this daughter in a household that had several brothers and a domineering father who was—the woman, who was more or less disregarded as just the woman, proved to be a powerhouse. She married a man and propelled him into political life and that sort of thing. But she was, as it were, the power behind the throne. It's a very, very charming play.

DESSERE:

You think that the actress who was the lead was—

GORDON:

She was really very good, but was not in any sense of the word a star. And I was guilty—

DESSERE:

Who was she? Do you remember her name?

GORDON:

Damn it, no, I cannot think of it now.

DESSERE:

Well, when it comes back to you you can tell me. [Betty Paul]

GORDON:

And I think that I made a serious mistake in allowing the production to become too heavy, too big for what was essentially a fragile story. I had a very, very talented designer named Raoul Pene DuBois. I let him go a little hog-wild on it, and things were a little over- scaled. I have to assume the responsibility for it. It had a really rich score by someone who had never really been heard of before, and the adaptation was quite good.

DESSERE:

What would you say was the major departure for you in directing a musical? Did you find any problems in presenting the songs?

GORDON:

A little.

DESSERE:

Did you feel that they interfered with the plot sometimes, or what was your goal?

GORDON:

Well, let me say, essentially what attracted me to the play was the fact that I thought that it was an exceptionally beautiful score and the theme of the play was one that interested me very much. There again, this was a musical about something. I spoke of a comedy, and this was a comedy, of course, as well. It was making, shall we say, a very progressive position with respect to women's

rights and so on in society. I felt that it shed some light on the early struggles for the vote and that sort of thing. So it was a combination of a number of factors. It was just a very, very superior work in its conception and execution. Unfortunately, it wasn't successful. Irene Bordoni was in it. Do you remember that name?

DESSERE:

Yes, I've heard of her. Yes, I've heard the name. Oh, she was the one who played Maggie?

GORDON:

No. She was a Frenchwoman. Despite the Italian name, I think she was a French actress.

DESSERE:

But I was curious about what type of problems you had to solve in going from singing to—because most directors of musicals, people who, like you, directed comedies and also directed serious plays—. Sometimes you say, "Well, musicals—" I feel that the music interferes with the plot. Would you share that opinion?

GORDON:

I think no. I think by that time, which was—I guess that must have been around 1954 to '55, something around that time. Let me say, we already had a history, going way back to *Oklahoma!*, where the nature of the musical had changed. It was no longer a thin story that was interspersed with little plums of a number. Here all of the songs really progressed, advanced the story. They were not just numbers separate from it. Now, again, it's not quite as clear-cut as that, but, no, I didn't find—one had to make certain adaptations. Songs had to be, as it were, delivered in a way, but they were not stopping the play for a number. The number was actually an advancement of the story.

DESSERE:

Who produced this play? Do you remember?

GORDON:

A man named John Fernally, who I think is dead. He was a protege of Oscar Hammerstein and also of Richard Rodgers, too. Actually, Oscar was very helpful. I mean, he gave good advice. He came to see us out of town and that sort of thing. Fernally had worked in the Rodgers and Hammerstein office for a long time as a subordinate executive there, or whatever, and this was his first venture as a producer.

DESSERE:

Very good. He had approached you because he had seen, he knew about your work?

GORDON:

Yes. I would think that maybe the sort of springboard was *Male Animal*, I guess.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, your success in *Male Animal*. So the commercial failure of *See the Jaguar* didn't hamper you?

GORDON:

Ah, not very much. Everybody has his ups and downs.

DESSERE:

Yes, of course. But since you say that *Maggie* didn't work too well, people didn't flock to see it—

GORDON:

No, it wasn't a hit. It wasn't quite the disaster "that *Jaguar* was, but it was not a success.

DESSERE:

The next play I have is *His and Hers*.

GORDON:

His and Hers was the one where I used two people I'd worked with before. Celeste Holm and Robert Preston played the leads in that one. That one worked quite well.

DESSERE:

Did they come to you with that particular play and say—?

GORDON:

Actually, no. What happened was this. It was written by, collaborated on by, a husband and wife, Fay and Michael Kanin. Michael wanted to direct himself. Mike had never really been a director. They had already been in rehearsal, and things were not going well. I don't know what the causes were, but it just wasn't going well. Michael himself called me and asked me whether I would take over. They were about a week in at the time, into rehearsal. Michael had always had eye problems and so on. He was not in the best of health, and that was a factor that entered into it. It was on that basis that I came in, saw what they had done so far, read the script, and I was very happy to do it.

DESSERE:

Was it a battle-of-the-sexes type of play?

GORDON:

It was a very funny idea, not exactly a battle of the sexes. The essential premise of the story was that there had been a team of collaborators—very much like Mike and Fay Kanin, I suppose—who had been very successful as playwrights working in collaboration, and now they were divorced. They had a common friend who had been their principal producer when they were successful playwrights. By a strange coincidence, the producer had just read a script from each of them that was the same story, [laughter] The question, in a certain sense, was who had custody of the idea in this divorce. The resolution of the dilemma was that they had to collaborate again, which brought about their reconciliation as husband and wife.

DESSERE:

It's very interesting. It sounds like *No Time for Comedy* a little bit. Who was in it?

GORDON:

Bob Preston and Celeste Holme played the leads. There was a Czechoslovakian actor—they were a team when they first came over, and I suddenly can't

remember his name. They had been a team when they first came to this country. Voxcovich and Volkoff? I don't know what their names were. A very, very deft comedian. A person who is quite well known—or who became well known—as a columnist and writer, named Heywood Broun—

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GORDON:

Woody Hale Broun, Heywood Broun's son, played a role in it [*His and Hers*].

DESSERE:

So *His and Hers*, do you feel like adding something about it in terms of sets or collaboration with other people?

GORDON:

No, it was a fairly conventional play. It was moderately successful. I mean, it wasn't a smash hit or anything, but it was reasonably successful.

DESSERE:

It was successful though. Okay, good. Shall we go to the next play?

GORDON:

If you like.

DESSERE:

Do you remember how it happened? Because—

GORDON:

What was the next one? Because I don't remember what happened next.

DESSERE:

Okay. I have here a play on which I know absolutely nothing. I have even a question mark next to it, which means that I know nothing. It's called *The Magic and the Loss*.

GORDON:

That was a very interesting play, again revolving around the woman question. In this case, women in the corporate world and some of their trials and tribulations. It also involved a domestic situation in which there was a divorced couple, played by Robert Preston and Uta Hagen, who played the leading woman's role.

DESSERE:

Was she very well known and established?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, quite well known.

DESSERE:

And also the famous drama coach that we've heard about?

GORDON:

Well, she wasn't that well known yet. I mean, she was known principally as an actress at that time. She had played Desdemona with Jose Ferrer, to whom she had been married, and Paul Robeson played Othello in that production. She was a very, very respected actress in New York at the time.

DESSERE:

Did she know about your past in the Theatre Group, and was she interested in that type of acting?

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

What was her acting technique? She's written books, you know, about that.

GORDON:

Not dissimilar from the things that one reads in *Respect for Acting*, her book. She sought truthful acting. If I were to say—as I often have to students—that the art of acting is not the art of lying, I think that she would be in accord with that position.

DESSERE:

She came from a different school, though, than Stanislavsky and [Lee] Strasberg.

GORDON:

Not that different really. The emphases may have been somewhat different, but basically she believed in truthful acting, as opposed to the simulation of experience. That is to say, when she was involved in moments that called for, shall we say, some intensity of emotion, she experienced that emotion. I mean, she was, if you like, an organic actor, as opposed to a simulator.

DESSERE:

Who wrote that play? What is the play about?

GORDON:

The play was written by a man named Julian Funt, who was a very, very successful radio and television writer. I think it may probably have been the only play he ever wrote. It was his first play, surely, and I don't believe that he wrote any plays subsequent to that. It was a play about personal interrelations, with the background of a woman's struggle in the corporate world, in which, let's say, women never got credit for their ideas and were treated in a somewhat subordinate way at the whim and caprice of the male executives.

DESSERE:

Was it a dramatic play?

GORDON:

Yes, it was essentially a drama, involving, again, a personal relationship between her estranged husband and herself and a lover and a fourteen-year-old boy, who was the son of this marriage, and some of the problems of juvenile dislocation in a broken marriage.

DESSERE:

Would you say that that theme was a popular theme at the time, the executive type of—?

GORDON:

No, not particularly. I think in that respect it was—not unique, to be sure, but certainly not routine.

DESSERE:

How did you encounter that play? Who offered it to you? Do you remember how it came your way?

GORDON:

The play was produced by Alexander [H.] Cohen, who was a big entrepreneur on Broadway for many years. He was the producer, and his wife—Hildy Parks I think was her name—was the writer of the Tony Award shows. In collaboration, as co-producer, the scene designer [Ralph Alswang], who had been—I guess it was his first Broadway job. I had encouraged the producer of *Home of the Brave* to engage him to design that show, and he was now going to design and be co-producer of *The Magic and the Loss*. I guess it was probably through that association—and, also, Julian Funt and Ralph were both neighbors of mine in Connecticut. We all lived more or less in the same area. We knew one another socially. Although I didn't know Julian particularly well, I did know Ralph very well. He was a near neighbor of mine, just down this country road from where I lived.

DESSERE:

Oh, was there a big theatrical community in Connecticut, would you say, that commuted to New York?

GORDON:

Yes, not necessarily the theater, but generally in the area of communications. There were a lot of people who were involved in advertising; people were involved in television and radio. Rod Serling was a neighbor; Richard Berg was a neighbor; Bob Weiskoff, who became a very successful film and television writer. There was a whole community of people who were involved, as I said before, in various aspects, people in the advertising field, in the publishing field. A sort of a chess partner of mine was a man who was the so-called humor editor of the *New Yorker* magazine. Max Shulman was a neighbor, and a number of people, well-known writers and so on, lived in that community.

DESSERE:

So at this point in your career you had no problem finding work and you were happy?

GORDON:

Yes, I was busy.

DESSERE:

You were offered different plays and you could choose from them?

GORDON:

To some degree. I mean, it's never a whole department store from which you can choose. Things didn't always coincide. In the theater, it's always a kind of precarious situation. Things are projected and then don't happen. The backing isn't forthcoming or whatever. It isn't as smooth sailing as though one were under a term contract to a studio.

DESSERE:

Was this play particularly successful? You didn't tell at which theater it was playing, if you remember. Was it on Broadway?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Yes, of course. I can't remember which theater it played in.

DESSERE:

But it was on Broadway, that you remember. Was it successful?

GORDON:

Again, moderately.

DESSERE:

Moderately, but not too expensive or challenging.

GORDON:

No, it was a one-set play. Not a very large cast. I think there were three, four, six, seven people in the play. That was all.

DESSERE:

It's the theme which had attracted you to this play?

GORDON:

Right, and a very, very intelligently written play. It was a good piece of work. It was a very respectable piece of work.

DESSERE:

What would you say are the problems you seem to—we've discussed, more or less, plays in which you had to change sets and you could play around with the action, and this was a one-set play.

GORDON:

From that point of view, it was a conventional play. It just happened to be a very good one, intelligent, but nothing that was sensational about it.

DESSERE:

After this was finished, you went on to another one?

GORDON:

I can't recall what was next.

DESSERE:

Champagne Complex.

GORDON:

Oh, that was a very light comedy, a very frivolous comedy. Donald Cook, who was a well-known leading man, older leading man in New York, played in it. And Polly Bergen—that was her first Broadway venture.

DESSERE:

You were going to see her again later in *Move Over, Darling*.

GORDON:

Yes, exactly.

DESSERE:

So, what was the play about? You say it is a fluffy type of comedy?

GORDON:

It was a very light little—sort of what used to be called a "drawing room comedy." It wasn't quite that. An eccentric girl—I don't know, like somebody who worked for Time-Life magazine in New York or something, who was a very, very bright young woman—was engaged to a very stuffy aristocrat. The only problem was that when this girl would take a sip of champagne, she would go off on kind of a champagne bender, in which she became a complete amnesiac and ecdysiast who never remembered what she did. This obviously created social problems. Donald Cook, who was a psychiatrist, was the uncle of her fiance, and she was persuaded by her fiance to see uncle whatever his name was, who also had been a champion figure skater. In the course of these therapy sessions to get her off the champagne kick and the problems it created—stripping in public—a relationship developed between them. So it became a kind of a triangle story.

DESSERE:

Timing, I suppose, was a very important thing.

GORDON:

Oh, yes.

DESSERE:

Because there was obviously no real content, but you had to keep a rhythm.

GORDON:

It was just sophisticated bright comedy written by a man named Leslie Stevens, who subsequently did a great deal in television and some film as well. It was a very well written, very deft, very amusing play. An entertaining play.

DESSERE:

I'm just wondering, now, if this man made the first film in Esperanto. Have you heard of that?

GORDON:

No, I didn't know that.

DESSERE:

There was a man who had the same name who made a film in Esperanto. It was an American film but in Esperanto. It was called *Incubus*, which was very popular in France at some point, because it was some kind of avant-garde film. I wonder if he was the same person.

GORDON:

I don't know.

DESSERE:

You don't know if he had any proclivity toward avant-garde types of pieces?

GORDON:

No, not at that time at least.

DESSERE:

Not at that time. Where did you do that? Did you say that Donald Cook produced it? So it was on Broadway?

GORDON:

No, no, he didn't produce it. He was the star in it.

DESSERE:

Was it a Broadway play also?

GORDON:

Yes. Who produced it? Oh, it was produced by a woman who had never produced before but who was able to arrange some backing, a young woman by the name of Gail Stein. And I don't know if she did anything after that.

DESSERE:

But she certainly got you interested in it.

GORDON:

I can't remember how it came about, but I read the script, and I found it quite charming and said yes.

DESSERE:

You know, you said something once about comedies. You seem to be doing a lot of comedies right now in this particular period. Every two, three plays is a comedy. You said that at some point they didn't want to give you comedies, because you were known as an intellectual.

GORDON:

Yes, as a serious fellow.

DESSERE:

Serious intellectual. You said something about comedies that I find particularly interesting. You said something like people enjoy comedies, they like them, but nobody really respects them. Because they consider them a little lowbrow or fluff. They don't take them seriously. The next play has also a very dramatic title. It's called *Deadfall*. Did you do that?

GORDON:

It was just a little melodrama.

DESSERE:

Is it by Cary Desmond? Is that the name of the author? Do you remember?

GORDON:

That name doesn't ring a bell.

DESSERE:

Well, that's the name I found. I'm not sure if it's accurate.

GORDON:

No, no, I can't remember that name. I remember the man, but I don't remember his name now.

DESSERE:

It was a melodrama.

GORDON:

That's all, yes. It had an element of twist. I don't remember too much about it.

DESSERE:

Do you remember the cast?

GORDON:

John Ireland played in it and Joanne Dru.

DESSERE:

Was it also a small play, one-set? Do you remember that?

GORDON:

No, it must have had more than one set, because there was a courtroom scene in the later part of the play. I think it must have been a two-set play, but I can't recall very much about it.

DESSERE:

What are the problems, usually, in a courtroom scene on the stage? Do you know in general what you had to solve and what you thought was—?

GORDON:

Well, let me say this was not done in realistic terms. For example, there wasn't a jury on stage. In a kind of way it was almost as though the audience were the jury. Or it was played as though they were. And this is a problem. As a matter of fact, *His and Hers* had a courtroom scene in it as well.

DESSERE:

But was it more crowded in *His and Hers*?

GORDON:

The two plays were so very different, and it was handled in a different way. In *His and Hers* it was a little bit more conventional in the general design, which, incidentally, had already been done before I was brought onto that one, so I had no hand in the design of it.

DESSERE:

What was the reception of that play?

GORDON:

So-so. Not very good.

DESSERE:

Would you say that for you it was just a little routine play or—?

GORDON:

Well, let me put it this way. To be a professional is not only a description of a degree of expertise in your work, it also means that's how you make your living. If one is so imprudent in his youth as to take unto himself a wife and to beget offspring, one has responsibilities! And one can't always pick and choose. That is to say, because it's the way you make your living, you take the best job that's available when you need a job. And not all of the plays or scripts make your heart leap up with exaltation. This was in that category. My heart did not leap up. I needed the job, and there it was. And I did it.
[laughter]

DESSERE:

I have another play, also, which is very mysterious. It's called *The Lovers*.

GORDON:

The Lovers was a play by Leslie Stevens again. This was a very serious period piece set in the Middle Ages. The central theme was *le droit du seigneur*. It was not very successful, and I had great difficulty with that. I became ill and I did not actually finish it, although it was practically done. We were out of town when I had to withdraw. I had to go to the hospital. It wasn't successful at all. I never even saw the opening because I was in the hospital.

DESSERE:

You were in the hospital, so you couldn't finish it.

GORDON:

I left it when we were in Chicago.

DESSERE:

You were in Chicago. Oh, you mean you were already touring with it.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, we were on the road before coming to New York.

DESSERE:

So the principle of putting a play on the road means that you prepare for the New York opening. That's what it means?

GORDON:

Yes, prior to opening in New York.

DESSERE:

I see. After a certain amount of rehearsals, let's say—?

GORDON:

I mean, you're playing on the road. Many shows in those days opened out of town and then came to New York, and frequently underwent a good deal of revision while on the road. Sometimes cast replacements. That play, incidentally, had Joanne Woodward in it playing the female lead.

DESSERE:

Do you think costume or period pieces are usually more of a problem?

GORDON:

Well, obviously that involves a greater degree of production expense, in terms very frequently of setting, as well as of costume.

DESSERE:

But in terms of the psychology of the characters?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, in a way. Stevens subsequently wrote a very, very interesting play that was never done. The central figure of it was Christopher Marlowe, you know, the contemporary of Shakespeare who wrote—

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, who wrote Dr. Faustus.

GORDON:

Right. It was a very, very interesting concept, and I was very interested in doing it. As a matter of fact, I would have liked to do it here, but there again only one woman in a large-cast play. It was a period piece based on the theme that Marlowe was not killed in the brawl in the tavern, which is what history tells us, but rather it was a political assassination that was engineered by Elizabeth and some of her figures in the government. That he was an underground Catholic at the time. That was the basis of the play. It was a very interesting idea and a very well written play, but as I said before, it was never produced.

DESSERE:

When you did the medieval play did you have a lot of action, duels or things like that, on the stage? Or was it more an internalized type of comedy?

GORDON:

I don't recall that it had very much in terms of that kind of physical conflict, but I did a great deal of research into the period. One of the principal books that I read was *The Waning of the Middle Ages* by a man named [Johan] Huizinga. One of the things that I came across in that book had to do with bells, church bells, and what they signified in the life of the people at the time, whether they were bells of celebration, bells of alarm, and so forth. It had to do with the whole concept that the background was feudal. I liked the Marlowe script, but it was never done.

DESSERE:

Oh, really.

GORDON:

By the same author. In a kind of way, it was like a romantic melodrama set in this period. I'm speaking now of *The Lovers*. That one did not succeed. As a matter of fact, when I withdrew from the play, I think Arthur Penn came in to finish it up just for a week or so. Whatever were the problems were not solved from the point of view of popular response.

DESSERE:

I see. Was it a play with a lot of extras?

GORDON:

It was a reasonably large cast.

DESSERE:

Let me ask you something. Have you ever been tempted to direct an opera? Because this play sounds very operatic.

GORDON:

Yes. I never had the offer to do an opera. I would have liked to. I was interested in it. At one time there was some talk and nothing happened. So I never received an offer to do it. I would have liked to do it.

DESSERE:

You said that you got sick at that time. Was it a major thing?

GORDON:

Actually, it turned out after a great deal of diagnosis to be a strange kind of pneumonia. Fortunately for me. I mean, they didn't know what it was. I had already had a coronary incident in the past.

DESSERE:

When was that?

GORDON:

It was in 1953. They thought perhaps this was a recurrence of that, and they thought it was kidneys, and whatever, until finally they diagnosed what it was. I spent about five days in the hospital. Once they discovered that it was pneumonia, it was responsive to some kind of antibiotic, and I was miraculously healed in less than a day.

DESSERE:

It shows also that you probably worked a lot at that time. You were under a lot of stress. I suppose you were very hardworking.

GORDON:

Yes, I think that that may have been a contributing factor. It was very strange, because I was really severely immobilized. It just started with a pain, and I was just really doubled up, like I couldn't move. It was very mysterious. I had a whole parade of specialists coming in to look at me. Nobody knew what it was. Actually, I think the reason they had the trouble with the diagnosis is when they first took X-rays I was so doubled over that they couldn't get a good picture. It was only after I was sedated that a subsequent X-ray revealed that there was this—I don't know what they call it—low lobar pneumonia that they discovered. Then, as I said before, the healing process was magical. I mean, it was very, very swift.

DESSERE:

Have you always been an avid smoker? I've always known you smoking.

GORDON:

Oh, there were periods when I didn't. As a matter of fact, that heart attack that I spoke of followed a period of ten months when I didn't smoke and gained thirty pounds and had a heart attack. The doctor said, "I never thought that I would prescribe this, but your weight is more life-threatening than your smoking. If you have to smoke in order to lose weight, go ahead."

DESSERE:

Which you liked to hear.

GORDON:

At that time I was about sixty pounds heavier than I am now.

DESSERE:

Really? It's hard to imagine.

GORDON:

I was bigger, I was a lot bigger at the time. You know, I keep shrinking. If I live long enough, I'll disappear.

DESSERE:

But I suppose also all this pain was brought by all the things you had been through.

GORDON:

Well, it may have been a contributing factor. Sure, it was a period of great stress always.

DESSERE:

Always? Especially also when you had to start all over again. Although you were successful, you paid the price.

GORDON:

Well, yes, as a matter of fact I remember—I guess it was in 1958—that after several years in which I could not get my passport renewed because of the political thing, I finally got it. I went to England and saw Carl Foreman again, who was very helpful to me, to try to get work there.

DESSERE:

When was that?

GORDON:

I think it was 1958. There were several near chances, but once again the blacklist reached over. There was a man named O'Brien who was producing films in Ireland, and there was the possibility of a film in Ireland that I was very interested in. But he was getting backing from RKO [Radio Pictures], I think it was, and they said, "No, you can't use him."

DESSERE:

So still in 1958 this thing was going on. It was not forgotten?

GORDON:

And still reached out. It was beginning to, I guess, wither away a little.

DESSERE:

Yes, because everybody would have thought that at that time all of this was forgotten.

GORDON:

No. It wasn't quite as virulent as it had been, it wasn't in the headlines, but it still persisted.

1.22. TAPE NUMBER: XI, Side Two (March 29, 1989)

DESSERE:

We extensively discussed your plays when you were in New York, but there is one we haven't discussed at all. It's *The Tender Trap*. I'm going to ask you how this project came into your hand and if you enjoyed doing it and everything. Because it is a quite well known play which you directed again here at UCLA.

GORDON:

I thought it was a very amusing play written by two men, both of whom were primarily and best known for their prose writing rather than for their dramatic writing. Max Shulman had done some dramatic writing. As a matter of fact, he worked closely with [Thomas] Heggen, who wrote *Mister Roberts*, I believe. Was it *Mister Roberts*? Yes. And Robert Paul Smith, who was known for several humorous books, but not for any dramatic writing at all. Both of these men were what I think my daughter would call male chauvinist pigs. They wrote a play which was really reflective of their own attitudes and perhaps unconsciously made them and that point of view more or less the butt of the joke. That is to say, the story has to do with a man who is something of a jerk. I mean, charming—who is in New York, who has come from Indianapolis, and is working somewhere in the corporate world. He's unmarried and doing well financially. He has a parade of women who come to his apartment and want to do everything for him. They bring him presents, they want to clean his apartment, they want to cook him dinner. At one point someone says, "What do you see in this guy?" What it comes down to is that he is single. In a sense the play in great measure is about the plight of very capable women, and these are capable women. One's a buyer for a big department store, another works on a magazine like *Time* or *Life*, another one is a musician in the philharmonic, another works for the United Nations as part of a delegation from India. But his main attraction is that he is unmarried. The play, as I said before, has something to say about the plight of the single woman in New York, as it happened, at that particular time. It's a very amusing play, but it does have a message which speaks of the general social inequalities that exist

on the gender level in our society. There are subplots as well, but that is essentially the main thrust of the play. As I said earlier, it's the kind of play that interests me because it's a comedy about something, not merely about an anecdote. Do you see? How it came about I don't know. I mean, the script was sent to me. It may well have been that Max Shulman, who was the coauthor of it—he was a neighbor of mine. I knew him slightly. It was only subsequent to that that I got to know him really well. Knowing some of my work, he sent me the script to read. I was very entertained from the very first line of the script. Incidentally, actually the opening of the play reveals a very, very attractive bachelor pad in New York. You see this beautiful place, and then you discover a young man and a young woman more or less in a prone position on a kind of a bed—not a bed, a sofa—in this living room in a deep embrace, out of which they pull with the first line of the play. The girl says, "Mmm-mmm!" And when I read it, it made me chuckle. I said to myself, "Gee, it's too bad we're not doing that in film, because I know exactly how I would handle that opening to get that little laugh." You know, you'd pan sweeping over this very, very attractive apartment, starting perhaps with the picture window overlooking the Queensboro Bridge on the East Side of New York, and then look all over the place, and then discover them, right? I said to myself, "I wonder whether or not in the theater I can't make the audience pan for me." I utilized a number of elements in terms of compositional principles, in terms of light, in terms of level, in terms of various considerations that one uses. And even to some degree making a little bit of a cheat in the way the light came up, so that we read from left to right, as we do—when we look at a billboard, we read from left to right. It's been my observation that audiences, when a curtain goes up, tend to read the stage from left to right in the same way. So I put all kinds of accents on the audience's left side, the elevations, steps down, this huge picture window, and the interesting cutout of the bridge in the background—utilizing all the elements of convergence of line to draw the attention there—and placed my people way down on the audience's right. I said, "Well, if it doesn't work, it still is perfectly useful and good in terms of composition." But I thought it might work. Much to my delight, on opening night, when we opened in the Longacre Theatre in New York—there was a little pass door to the backstage at the extreme right hand corner of the auditorium. I peeked through that, and I saw that precisely what I had hoped would [happen] happened for about 95 percent of the audience, except for

the people who were sitting way, way down at the right corner of the auditorium, who were close to where the people were. The rest of the audience did exactly what I wanted. I could see their eyes as though they, all of them, were one single camera, and it got precisely the effect that I wanted. The reason I mention it is not because—you know, it was a very minor triumph for me, but it was part of the experience that I had of translating both my film experience to the theater and my theater experience into film.

DESSERE:

That's very exciting. Did you use that device again when you directed the play here at UCLA?

GORDON:

Yes, I did. The interesting thing is I'm absolutely convinced—although obviously I didn't make the experiment; it would have been too costly—that had the set been mirror-image reversed, it would not have worked. I'm convinced of that.

DESSERE:

So this is the satisfaction of the director when something he tries really works.

GORDON:

That is correct. As I say, it is nothing of major consequence, but it was something that did give me a great deal of gratification.

DESSERE:

So this play was a creation. You are the one who created that play.

GORDON:

No, no. I mean, that play was created by the two men who wrote it. But as far as the production was concerned—

DESSERE:

That's what I meant. So you were now getting original material?

GORDON:

All the time. With the exception of a couple of revivals that I did, and of course *The Male Animal*, everything that I did was a brand-new play.

DESSERE:

Yes, we didn't say that yesterday. Who were your stars in that play?

GORDON:

Robert Preston again, who's my favorite actor in the world. A man who was really known as a comic in sort of musical revues, named Ronnie Graham, played the jerky guy. Robert Preston played the friend, the good guy, with whom ultimately we sympathize. I mean, we sympathize with the jerk in a kind of way, but we identify with his friend, who represented, as it were, the basic point of view of the play. Although that was dominantly expressed through the role of the woman, Kim Hunter, who had played in *Stella* in the original [A] *Streetcar* [*Named Desire*]. She played the violinist in the symphony, who was the most sympathetic character, who was the one ultimately who rejected the jerk. There is an extremely interesting speech that she has at one point when she's asked, "Why do you fall head over heels for this fellow, who is a nice guy but really sort of a worthless kind of person?" She has a speech which begins by saying, "Have you any idea what it's like for a thirty-year-old woman, unmarried, in New York?" She begins to detail what the options are and concludes with "When a very nice kid like this comes along, blah, blah, blah, blah, you go for it." It's a very poignant speech, but does make a comment about contemporary society, the values of contemporary society in the fifties. Things have changed to a very considerable degree since that time.

DESSERE:

Oh, you think the play is a little dated now?

GORDON:

Well, to some degree, yes, but not totally. It's still a very, very amusing play. When we did it here—the summer before last I think it was—the audience response was fine, splendid, got all the right laughs and so on.

DESSERE:

And you were able to make the young kids who acted understand?

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, obviously they all were younger than the parts should have been, but in a sense it worked. I think that audiences who come to college and university theater know that older parts are not going to be—I mean, we don't have thirty-five-year-old undergraduates very much.

DESSERE:

Did this play come to you with the actors included?

GORDON:

No. Just the script alone, and then we went to work and did it right from the beginning. Nothing was precast. It's not like Hollywood, where a project often initiates with a package of stars, and then you go from there. No, it didn't work that way.

DESSERE:

This is a question I remember asking you in private when I was in one of your classes: I think you must appreciate to be able to choose the actors and actresses in the play, and, more particularly, I think it gives you more freedom.

GORDON:

Well, yes. I mean, obviously you have certain concepts. Certain images spontaneously arise when you read a script of types of personality. You would like to be able to approximate that with good actors if you had that option available to you. But under certain circumstances you don't, and that's true in the theater as well. I mean, you can't make a generalization of theater versus film. There's variation in both cases.

DESSERE:

Why did you choose Kim Hunter? It seems to be a major departure from the role of Stella, for which she was famous.

GORDON:

First of all, because I think that she was a very charismatic kind of person, just personally a very intelligent woman and an excellent actress. She seemed

very, very right for that part. She carried a certain kind of maturity in her persona which was wholly suitable.

DESSERE:

Well, you of course know that she plays Lady Monkey in *Planet of the Apes*?

GORDON:

Well, that was long afterwards. Of course, I've seen her in other plays since then, in some of which I wasn't as thrilled with her work as I was in some of her earlier things. For example, *Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*. She played one of the principal roles in that, which I saw. I think that she played in New York, but I saw it in a company playing out here. That was a tour after the New York run. There she played with a certain kind of brittleness, which is frequently characteristic of certain acting in New York on a particular level—I don't want to make sweeping generalizations about it—which I'm not too fond of unless it happens to be a play which demands that particular style of acting. But she's a fine actress and was wholly suitable for this particular role in the play.

DESSERE:

You kept your notes and your files, I suppose, when you did the play again at UCLA?

GORDON:

I don't recall having referred to them, because I remembered quite vividly, and certain changes had to be made in terms of casting and so forth. But basically I really did just a reproduction of what I had done before. There were no startling new changes. The basic set was designed with a similar configuration. There were minor changes to be sure, but, no, I don't recall—I probably do have an old workbook from it somewhere around, but I didn't have any need to refer to it.

DESSERE:

Was it only one set in the whole play?

GORDON:

Single-set play, yes.

DESSERE:

Do you feel that those plays are easier to handle usually, or do you think that there are very specific problems to single-set plays?

GORDON:

Let me say that if you have a single-set play, obviously there are problems of having a sufficient degree of visual variety over a full-length play, you know, two and a half hours, which the change of settings makes far, far easier. I remember, for instance, doing another play here, an original play by Oliver Hailey [*Triptych*], which was a single-set play. As the playwright described the setting, it was just a living room in a large old house. He described the setting in terms of a central archway upstage, off one side of which was the entrance, presumably to the house. And on the left a stairway leading upstairs, and, also, presumably downstage of the stairs, which were against the back wall, access to the rest of the house, dining room, kitchen, etc. In studying the play I made a tally, and I can't remember the exact numbers, but in the course of the three acts—I think it was a three-act play—I think that it came to about 175 entrances and exits from this room. And while there was some variation—upstage you could go offstage right or you could go offstage left—I said, "My God, with that central archway as the only access to the room, we'd wear a trench in the stage of people walking back and forth." I said, "One of the things I must—" And this is in answer, specifically, to the question of problems of a one-set play. To get visual variety. To maximize, as much as reasonably possible, access to the central playing space. By the time we got through with the design of the set, there were five ways of getting in and out of that room, as well as what the dramatist had indicated, which gave me the opportunity to achieve a far, far greater degree of visual variety than I would have had had I followed the description of the set as written by the dramatist.

DESSERE:

Usually do you find it useful to take into account the indications that the dramatist puts in the play? Or do you usually take liberties when you feel it is necessary?

GORDON:

Let me say, I read what the playwright has written and try to envision what he has in mind, but in no way do I feel bound by that. Let me put it this way, that even though in many instances I have great respect for the dramatist as a dramatist, he is not necessarily as good a stage director as I am. I don't feel obligated to follow his staging ideas except to the degree that in some particular instances they bear on the central thematic thrust and dramatic thrust of the play, in which case I don't arbitrarily throw them out. But very often I find that for whatever reasons, perhaps just the thing that I was speaking of, the importance of getting a degree of visual variety, which the playwright may not have had in mind—and apropos of that—just put a little thumbtack there. I want to come back to another concept. Neither by custom nor by law is the director obliged to follow meticulously the descriptions in terms of action, in terms of staging, of the dramatist. Even though he is so obliged—by custom and possibly even from an ethical point of view, as well as a legal one, one cannot violate the script. One cannot change the script without the dramatist's permission. That is to say, the actual text, the dialogue itself. So from that point of view, that's a fairly standard practice. What I wanted to say apropos of my comment that the dramatist may not be as effective a stage director as the director may be—. A former student of ours, who was once the teaching assistant in here for us in the play writing department, has been very successful on television in particular, although he also had a play produced here locally. His name is Steve Brown. When I last saw him, which was about, oh, eight months ago—he dropped in to see me. He told me that he was now working at Universal International, MCA [Music Corporation of America], in charge of developing new projects, presumably one or more of which he might be the executive producer of, and that sort of thing. He was principally a playwright—that was his program. During the time that he was here, he once did what we call a noon miracle—that is to say, an informal presentation within an hour on Friday at noon. That's why they have that name. Which is wholly autonomous. I mean, there is no faculty supervision. The person who does it is wholly on his own, and he gets no academic credit nor discredit for what comes out. He neither gets the help nor the interference of faculty advisers. He did a portion of *Jacques Brel [Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris]* and did it very effectively indeed. In the course of the conversation—I knew, of course, that he had engaged a number of writers and sometimes even directors. I said, "Have you ever thought of directing

some of these yourself?" He says, "No, no, I don't regard myself as a good director." I said, "On the basis of the one thing of yours that I saw, you showed a very considerable flair and sense of directing." He says, "Yes, but even when I write my plays, I hear them more than I see them." I think that this may be true of a number of dramatists, which I think is further justification of the liberties in terms of staging choice which may depart from what the dramatist himself has visualized that I was referring to a moment ago.

DESSERE:

Do you also visualize the plays in terms of lighting when you first read them? What part does lighting play for you?

GORDON:

A very, very important part. As a matter of fact, there was a period in New York when I was with the Group Theatre—it started when I was with the Group Theatre—when actually I was the lighting designer for about seven or eight of the plays and one or two outside of the Group as well. Lighting is something which I have a great interest in. Even though when I was a student at Yale [University] I never took a course in lighting, I always finagled to get on lighting crews rather than sitting in the costume room sewing costumes, which did not interest me. I was always very interested in lighting. I read some of the books and observed very carefully. When I had the opportunity to do some lighting, I leaped at the chance and undertook that.

DESSERE:

At what stage do you think about the lighting when you read a play usually?

GORDON:

I would imagine this is true of most directors as well, but I can't speak for them. What happens when I read a play is that spontaneously images begin to appear in my mind. Sometimes when reading a play, I'll even at the very start, as I read this description, maybe make a rough ground plan of what the dramatist has described, so that I have my bearings. But these do not occur serially. They come sporadically and quite separately. That is to say, certain moments will immediately evoke an image, sometimes often a crucial moment in the play, an important moment in the play. And then as one

continues to study the play, one begins to fill in in one's envisionment of it the spaces in between these. Lighting with respect to mood, yes. I mean, certain things occur to one I think right away. You know, that this should be a very bright, lively scene, and this one should have a brooding quality. Whether you translate that into wattages or gelatin colors or how many units, this only comes, at least to me, far later. One gets images first and then tries to find the technical means to execute them.

DESSERE:

I asked you about modifying the text of the play. It seems that in film it is more permitted than in the theater. Would you say that is true?

GORDON:

Yes, I think that certainly is true. Simply speaking in terms of the hard facts of life, bottom-line department, a screenwriter sells his script to a studio, a playwright merely rents his script to a producer, retaining all of the proprietary interest of the creation. In another words, he leases to the producer the right to produce his play. Now, if I buy a house, I can renovate it any which way I like, including structurally, in terms of decor. But if I rent your house, I may not make those changes without your okay. And while that's a rather gross analogy in a sense, that is the fact of the difference between, let us say, the liberties that a director, producer, whatever, may take with a screenplay, which is now his property, as opposed to the way things work in the theater.

DESSERE:

Because I know you like to rewrite things that you didn't like.

GORDON:

Yes, but that in the theater is not done without the agreement and collaboration of the dramatist.

DESSERE:

And of course if the dramatist is dead, you do it even less.

GORDON:

Well, let me say it depends. I know that for myself, for example, I have far, far more punctilious respect for a script if it's written in English—I mean to say if it's originally in the English language. But, for example, in doing a translation into English—when I did *Rhinoceros* when [Eugene] Ionesco was here with us, the only script in English—

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GORDON:

When we were doing *Rhinoceros* here, the only English translation was written by an Englishman. Much of the language was ineffective and in certain instances didn't make sense. In certain cases, for example, he bowdlerized some of [Eugene] Ionesco's language. There's one point in the play, for example, in which the central figure, Berenger, sees something which surprises him very much. In the English translation he said, "That's bloody awful!" or something like that. The reply was, "Don't be vulgar." Apart from the fact that it's British rather than American, I said, "I wonder what Ionesco said there in French." At this moment of shocked surprise, what Ionesco had written was, "Mille fois merde!" [laughter] And he said, "That's bloody awful!" The reply, "Don't be vulgar," you know, made no sense! So naturally I felt quite free to retranslate that.. That was the one vulgar expression in our production, because, shocked by what he saw, he cried, "Holy shit!" That is what I wrote, which was certainly far more appropriate. Now, conversely, sometimes the translator was too faithful to Ionesco. The last line of the play, when Berenger is being beset by the rhinoceroses to proselytize and become a rhinoceros, because that's what public opinion was requiring, the last line is, "Je ne capitule pas." He translated it as "I will not capitulate." Which in English—I mean in American—was a very, very infirm last line. It was a very literal translation of what Ionesco had written. In that particular case he was being too literal. The way I had staged the play, which was a little different than Ionesco had written, he is building a barricade. He is moving all of the furniture, and the last thing is a big sofa to barricade the door. The last line as we had it was, "I won't give in! I won't give in!" Which is certainly far, far more effective than "I will not capitulate!" Do you see what I mean? So that when one is working on a translation, it seems to me that one has the privilege of being far, far more—what shall I say?—flexible to get the spirit perhaps of

what the playwright intended in another language, if one can read the other language. As it happens, I can read French fairly well. As a matter of fact, when I was preparing the script, I had the French version side by side with the English version during all my preparation and went page by page with both of them. Then one can take the liberty with the translation that one cannot with the original.

DESSERE:

This has always been a problem—this problem of translation—because there is the translation and then the adaptation for what works best on the stage.

GORDON:

Yes, particularly in the case of elements which are humorous, that have comedy value, the difference between the two languages can make a great deal of difference. One wit said that the Americans and the British are divided by a common language. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So you directed *Rhinoceros* here at UCLA? Do you remember when that was?

GORDON:

Oh, I guess it was about seven years ago. I still have a memento of it.

DESSERE:

So it was very successful?

GORDON:

Yes, it was quite successful, yes.

DESSERE:

Would you say it was your most successful play at school?

GORDON:

No, I don't think so. I think a play called *Thunder Rock* was the most successful one, at least in my judgment. I was most pleased with my work. Now, actually, *Rhinoceros* had professional actors in it playing the leading roles. Of course, in the first part of the play, in act one of the play, there's a whole

population. It was supplemented by a number of students—I must have had about twenty or so students in the play as well—but the principal roles were played by professionals, [Actors] Equity members.

DESSERE:

So it was more challenging I suppose?

GORDON:

Well, let me put it, somewhat easier than attempting to do it all with students.

DESSERE:

I suppose the greatest problem you would encounter is finding plays which can be played by people that age.

GORDON:

Right, in many respects. We've done a number of things which—not only I, all of the faculty are continuously confronted with the problem of trying to cast older roles with students. In many instances they are played very, very well, but still it's a little different than what one does professionally. One casts more suitably.

DESSERE:

Professionally you would never give an older part to a younger person?

GORDON:

Well, let me say to some degree one does. There have been many instances in which this has been true. In the Group Theatre it was continuously true. As a matter of fact, I myself in *Golden Boy*, not at the beginning but later on, as a replacement during the course of the run, I played—I was then just about thirty I guess, not quite. I was about—let's see, that was in 1937. I was about twenty-eight years old at the time. I was playing a sixty-five-year-old man with a foreign accent and that sort of thing. So that in the theater very often one plays character roles which in terms of age or background may be at some distance from what the actor natively is. But we do that to some degree. In the Group Theatre, as I say, which was an institutionalized theater with a permanent company, we did it more than was normally done on Broadway,

where casting to type was far more the rule. In other words, what we did in the Group was frequently exceptional from that point of view.

DESSERE:

What do you think of the principle of casting to type in general?

GORDON:

Well, let me say, it's a very good idea unless one has—as the Group Theatre was, as other institutionalized theaters have been—permanent companies, in which, shall we say, a common approach to the work perhaps is of at least as great importance as, let us say, casting strictly to type would be. But all things being equal, one tries to cast people in roles for which they're suitable.

DESSERE:

It seems that actors do not like that too much. You know, that they get tired of—

GORDON:

Of what? Just playing the same type all the time?

DESSERE:

Yes.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, the challenge of different kinds of roles. Let me put it that sometimes actors are a little worried about doing something that they haven't done before, let us say, playing comedy when they've never done comedy and they've always been doing melodrama or heavy drama or whatever it is. Yet, in the majority of cases—like famous comedians always want to play Hamlet! You know?

DESSERE:

Yes. Did you see Stanley Kramer said something I wanted to share with you? He said that comedians—and he was referring to his film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*—they have a tragic aspect to them. Have you felt that way, too?

GORDON:

Well, I don't know what that means, or what he meant. I feel that if an actor is a talented actor and knows his craft, as well as having the temperament of an artist, he can do anything, provided he is given the appropriate guidance and so forth.

DESSERE:

The Tender Trap was a big success, I suppose?

GORDON:

What could be a big success here at school? You play it for eight performances over a two-week period and that's it. But the audience response was excellent.

DESSERE:

And on Broadway it was definitely a big success?

GORDON:

Yes, it was quite a success on Broadway. It did have a bearing, because I think it was on the basis of that play that Ross Hunter said, "This is the man whom I want to direct *Pillow Talk*." That was my reentry into Hollywood.

DESSERE:

Yes. They made a film of *The Tender Trap*. I'm surprised that they didn't ask you to do it.

GORDON:

I think that Charles Walters, who did direct it, was under contract with MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer], who made the film. It's interesting. Several plays that I directed on Broadway were made into films which I never did. There were several films that I made that were based on plays that I had never directed in the theater. But I never did both on the same material.

DESSERE:

Do you remember which theater did *The Tender Trap*?

GORDON:

It was the Longacre Theatre in New York.

DESSERE:

Which is on Broadway in New York?

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, when you say it's on Broadway, all of the theaters are on the side streets. Longacre was, I think, on Forty-seventh Street just west of Broadway.

DESSERE:

We have already discussed the other plays you did after that, *Champagne Complex* that fall and *The Lovers*. So that was of course a big success, and you didn't have problems finding any other things to do after that?

GORDON:

Which?

DESSERE:

I mean after *The Tender Trap*.

GORDON:

Let me put it that you're always looking for work. There's a phrase on Broadway. When an actor is not doing anything at the moment, we say that we are "between engagements." We hope that we're between. We know the one we finished, but we don't know yet the other half of the sandwich.

DESSERE:

Does this sentence which has been coined about Hollywood, "You're as good as your last success"—? Do you think it works the same way on Broadway?

GORDON:

Yes, I think that this is true in great measure. If there's a body of work—it gets more true in the case of people who do not have an accumulation of credits, in other words someone who is just beginning. If he begins with something which isn't very good, he has nothing to counteract that in terms of prior experience. But sometimes a failure will be overlooked because there have been successes prior to that time.

DESSERE:

So Ross Hunter came to see *The Tender Trap*?

GORDON:

Yes. I didn't know him at the time. It was only subsequently that I found out that it was on the basis of *The Tender Trap*—. And I think maybe one or two other things, too, comedies, in which he felt that what he saw in that work would be suitable for the film that he had planned to make.

DESSERE:

Did he know that you had been blacklisted?

GORDON:

Oh, I'm sure.

DESSERE:

But he never talked to you about it?

GORDON:

Well, no, because by that time that was nine years later. The heat had dissipated, and it was no longer quite as ironclad as it formerly had been. I'm speaking of the blacklist.

DESSERE:

A man who came to see you here—his name is Victor Navasky. Have you heard of him?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I know the book [*Naming Names*], yes.

DESSERE:

He said in this book that even eight years later it was still a very active thing.

GORDON:

It was, but as I said before, it was far more porous. It wasn't the ironclad barrier that it had been before.

DESSERE:

But didn't the people who wanted to employ you at the time ask you to maybe appear in front of somebody?

GORDON:

Well, yes, one went through a certain kind of routine.

DESSERE:

I see. It was much less formal, but you had to—they were still around, those witch-hunters?

GORDON:

Yes, to some degree one would have to go through a ritual of purgation or whatever. But by that time [there were] constraints on two levels. One [was] in terms of principle. The principle with respect to one's constitutional right of political conviction, which was a battleground in 1951, was no longer a battleground. Things had changed. It was in a sense a lost cause. So from the point of view of abandoning principle, it was not as pressing as it was at the time when positions that one took might affect the course of events. That was number one. And number two, by that time there were no names that one could name that had not been named over and over again. The worst that one could do—if it were publicized, it would create just a renewing of a somewhat painful experience that had been traumatizing at the outset,

DESSERE:

Yes, of course.

GORDON:

Do you see what I mean? It still is something. Yes, that was a very, very disturbing experience, that one could rationalize, as I have just done, nine years later—something that one would not have done nine years earlier. Still, one's own instincts were perhaps revolted by what was necessary in order to survive.

DESSERE:

So when they asked you to come back to Hollywood, you were asked by Universal International and Ross Hunter. How did that happen? You had also to move back here. You were in Connecticut, well established in the theater. How did it happen exactly? Did he write you?

GORDON:

No, no, it didn't come about in that way. I can't remember exactly the sequence of events. The process I think was probably initiated by the agents who represented me. Ed [one of the agents] suggested that the time had come in which etc., and that things could be "arranged," and so forth. In a sense, my contact with Ross Hunter was subsequent, really, to my being so-called cleared. It was more or less simultaneous, but it was not that I spoke to Ross Hunter first and then proceeded.

DESSERE:

So some people wanted you back apparently.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. There were a number of instances, as I said before, in which I had been approached and things looked like they were going to happen, and then the old bugaboo intervened! That had occurred both in the theater and in film. I mentioned that when I was in London, or shortly before, there was an interest on the part of a producer who was going to do a film. He was an Irishman who was going to do it in Dublin and it was all arranged, until RKO [Radio Pictures], who was financing the project, said no.

DESSERE:

So you were still more or less haunted by this thing that if you in some way "cooperated," you could come back.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, that was always, you know, the promise dangled in front of me. At a certain point one said, "Well, here I am now forty-nine years old, and I have been, as it were ostracized during the whole of my forties," which is a very productive period in people's life as far as film is concerned. One has to take another look at one's life and say, "What am I going to do for the rest of my life?" I enjoyed film work and felt that I had capabilities and so forth. I wanted

to return to film, and I felt that it was time. That what I was doing may have done some damage to my own sense of what was right and wrong, but would not be damaging to anyone else.

DESSERE:

So they sent you the script? Universal sent you the script in Connecticut and then you moved?

GORDON:

No, I was out here at the time.

DESSERE:

Already. Because I suppose you could have gone on on Broadway as successfully as you were.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, to some degree. Although, again, it's always a very hazardous situation. I think that you said before that the last play, *The Lovers*, was not successful. Do you see what I mean? One didn't know what was coming up next at the time.

DESSERE:

So you took a trip to Hollywood, you talked with these people, and then you moved back?

GORDON:

Yes, I didn't move back until after, but I was out here in that case.

DESSERE:

Something that I forgot to ask you about your years in New York is when you moved back, what kind of changes did you notice in the theater, would you say, in broad terms?

GORDON:

Broadway? Nothing appreciable. Some of the changes, for example, which one sees now with the development to a very extensive degree of regional theater had not yet made their mark fully. The off-Broadway scene was not yet a

phenomenon that was significant. In other words, Broadway was still the source, as it were, of the principal product of theater, as opposed now to being more of a receptacle. I mean, things come from elsewhere to Broadway, principally from England, but from other sources as well. From Louisville, Kentucky, from the Mark Taper Forum, from regional theaters in Seattle or Minneapolis. Things come to Broadway from elsewhere, as opposed to what it was in the old days, when things started in Broadway and went elsewhere. Do you see what I mean? But that was not yet fully developed, or had not evolved to that degree, when I went back in 1951.

DESSERE:

Very good. So you moved back to Hollywood after, you know, arrangements with the producers. They wanted you to do what they wanted, unfortunately. And then *Pillow Talk* came, produced by Ross Hunter. Ross Hunter is very well known for these particular films that he engineered and that people like you directed or the luscious melodramas of Douglas Sirk. I suppose *Pillow Talk* was a very pleasurable experience. You were back, you were able to work, and also it was a comedy.

GORDON:

Which I enjoyed very much.

DESSERE:

Yes, and it's one of your most famous films.

GORDON:

Yes. I mean, it's not one in which I take as much pride as I do in certain others, but still it was very successful. As a matter of fact, I guess it was *A Touch of Mink* that I was invited to do, and I said, "It's the same story! I don't want to do it over again! The critics will say, 'My God, he's just repeating himself,' and there would be negative critical response to it." Of course, the opposite happened. It actually almost catapulted off of *Pillow Talk* and became an even greater financial success than *Pillow Talk* was. It was a very bad judgment on my part in that regard.

DESSERE:

You've already discussed in the SMU [Southern Methodist University] interview many details about film. I want to ask you something, though. You shot this film in Cinemascope and color, and it was your first dealing with large frames.

GORDON:

Yes, it was the first in that aspect, and I think it was the first film I ever made in color.

DESSERE:

Yes, also. Do you remember any specific problems that were caused by using the wide screen?

GORDON:

No, not really. I think that the only problem came when they began to show them on television. You see, there you don't have that wide proportion any longer. Very often in order not to have people free-floating in space, you staged it so that there was greater space between the actors. You know what I mean? Then very often when you did it on television, when it was, you know, transferred for television, the backs of people's heads were cut off in certain places. I think it was compositionally very unattractive from that point of view. I remember certain shots in *Pillow Talk* where compressing it in a lateral dimension caused that cutting off of the back. There was a crowding to the edge of the frame and too much space in the middle. One would not have composed that way. Then later on, in the finders, we had those interior lines for subsequent television production.

DESSERE:

I suppose at that point the collaboration with the cinematographer was very important in terms precisely—

GORDON:

I think it's always important, but there were certain differences that one had to accommodate by virtue of the wide screen. Very often one doesn't want people free-floating with a large space around them unless that background is dramatically significant.

DESSERE:

Yes. So even from the different points of view that you wanted to go into, and what you wanted to show, that didn't cause you major problems?

GORDON:

Oh, no. I mean, one can adapt to that. From the point of view just of visual composition, I think that before we had that thing to deal with, let us say in the case of a film like *Another Part of the Forest*, that visually I much, much prefer that.

DESSERE:

Yes, because of the depth of field.

GORDON:

Depth of field was one thing, as well as the general composition within the frame, which was the conventional one, the three-by-four kind of dimension.

DESSERE:

Yes. You didn't find the Cinemascope image a little flat?

GORDON:

It tended to be. In a film like *Pillow Talk* the depth of focus was not of very great importance, as I felt it was dramatically in a picture like *Forest*.

DESSERE:

Another thing I wanted to ask you about *Pillow Talk*—I want you to tell the lovely anecdote about the cat. [laughter]

GORDON:

That came about in a very, very bizarre way. There was toward the end of the picture, when the tables had been turned—and that had been something which to me was more interesting, because the first screenplay that I had given me had no what I call third act. That is to say, he was trying to make the girl—he swindled her, as it were, and she fell for him and then discovered his deception, and there was a rift. Then all there was was that they encountered one another at a party or something like that. And he looked at her close up,

and she looked at him close up, and they were back together again. It was really just a wrapping-up of the story. I said, "There is something very wrong about that. There needs to be a table-turning kind of development." Working from those elements that were the basic story premises—that she was an interior decorator, and the fact that his bachelor pad was a den of seduction with all kinds of very amusing things, the bed that with a push of a button unfolded and various other kinds of things—the lights went off, the doors locked by remote control. In order to get her back, he engaged her to redecorate this fabulous apartment that he had, and she says, "All right, I'll do it." And she made a chamber of horrors out of the thing, like a Moroccan whorehouse kind of decor, which he did not see until it was all done. He saw it, and he was horrified at what he saw. And in a raging fury he went over to her apartment, where she was still asleep early one morning, pulled her out of bed—it was only a few blocks away—and carried her wrapped in a blanket over to his apartment to rub her nose in this monstrosity that she had created.

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DESSERE:

So he carries her to the apartment.

GORDON:

Yes, but before that, just whimsically—electric blankets were relatively new at that time, and I said to the propman, "Get me an electric blanket." When he pulls her out, the cord and the plug would whip around and add a little excitement, visual excitement, to the thing. It worked very nicely—the cord flew around. Then he walked her down the hall, and the usual thing—the neighbor looks in amazement. I said, "Oh, I know what I'll do. As he gets into the elevator, let the door close with the plug still outside the door." I started something, and I have to now make use of it. That worked very nicely. They had to open the door again. The elevator operator, Jenkins—I said, "Pick up the plug and play 'Where am I supposed to plug this in?'" Just nothing, just a little flash. That was done. Then he's walking down the street, and I said, "Geez, I got this thing started, I better see if I can make use of it." So as he was walking down the street, I said, "Wouldn't it be fun if I could get a cat who would follow the plug that's dragging, you know, the extension cord, on the

sidewalk?" Like when a cat will follow a ball of yarn and fight with it and so on. That was to prove rather difficult, but we did get it. We tricked it by putting a little catnip or something between the prongs of the plug. So we finally got the cat to do the thing. Then there's this brownstone house, and they go up. He's carrying her up into the old apartment. Naturally, there was dialogue that was going on. I'm attending only to the actors. I'm not looking. It wasn't until dailies, when I saw it in dailies the next day, that I saw that the cat had followed them up the steps and into the house. I said, "Gosh, I've got to play that off in some way." I said, "What if the cat follows them into this terrible monstrosity that she had created and is terrified and arches its back and flees!" There was an element there, an umbrella stand that had a gargoyle on it. I said, "That's what you'll see, and I'll need to cut to the cat." To make the cat respond as I wanted it to was very difficult, but ultimately we did it in a way that sounds a little cruel but really wasn't, except momentarily. I mean, there was no injury to the animal. We gave the cat a conditioning—the door opened and the cat got some meat as it came into the apartment. Having habituated the cat to that response three or four times, then when the cat came in in the actual take, there was a dog right under the camera, and the cat arched its back and fled. But it all started right from that silly, whimsical notion that I had at the beginning of the electric blanket. [laughter] Fortunately, we were shooting in sequence. Had I not, I don't know what I would have done. [laughter]

DESSERE:

This anecdote shows that you have to be inventive at every step, and you have also to improvise a little bit. What do you feel about improvisation? It's been so much in fashion.

GORDON:

Well, of course, the work is never done sitting in your study with the script. The work is done in the working with the people, so a certain improvisatory freedom which does not violate the main thrust in story terms or character terms is something that one always should be free to do. But the greatest difficulty that one has in creation, whether it be in writing a script or in executing it, in either theatric or filmic terms, has to do with identifying what the problem is. To understand, to be able to define for yourself, what is the

problem, what is the difficulty. Once you are able to formulate that clearly, you will find that a number of ideas immediately come to mind. The first ones that you get you probably don't use, because usually they are very hackneyed. I mean, they occur to you first because you've seen them before. You say, "All right, I'll put a thumbtack in that, and worse comes to worse, I'll come back to it. Meanwhile, I'll see if I can't find something which is perhaps a little more inventive, a little fresher." As I said before, the thing initiates really with identifying the problem. I think that that is an important thing to remember for you as a filmmaker. What is the problem? To try to identify that accurately and clearly for yourself. You will find almost immediately certain ideas that might be solutions to the problem will occur to you. Very often the first one may not be the best, but you have that to fall back on if you must. Meanwhile, you look for something which is more interesting.

DESSERE:

So this means that you prepared everything very thoroughly, but sometimes you had to adjust the little things.

GORDON:

Constantly, constantly. Even in the theater, where, for example, you are not on film right away. As I once had to explain to Florence Eldridge, when I said, Monday of the first day of shooting at ten o'clock in the morning was opening for that much of the picture. That, of course, is not true in the theater. Which is one of the great appeals of working in the theater, the process of rehearsal—the whole phenomenon of rehearsal, which can be viewed from several points of view. There the language thing—I find it frequently clarifies things for students today when I talk about the terms for rehearsal which exist in French and in German. What is the word in French for rehearsal? *Repetition*. *Repetier* is "to repeat." What is the word in German? "Probe," *proben*. That there are two very different concepts that don't necessarily describe, these accidents of language, what goes on in Berlin and what goes on in Paris, you know. But the concept of probe is far, far more interesting and provocative and stimulating than that of mere repetition, unless what you're rehearsing is merely the formation of the band between the halves of the football game. There repetition is precisely what you want. But if you are doing drama, probe is more productive as a concept. One is

always, as I said before—let me put it this way, I believe in preparing meticulously what ought to happen and being ready to abandon it instantly when something better occurs or when it doesn't work out quite as you had envisioned it. I would say not occasionally but in the majority of instances, what ultimately appears either on the screen or in the theater is at variance with what you had preplanned, except in certain cases, like the design of the set, which cannot be altered that readily. But in terms of performance and in terms of physical activity, it's continuously somewhat different than what was in your workbook in your preplanning stage.

DESSERE:

What do you feel about rehearsing in film as opposed to the theater?

GORDON:

I've only had one experience in which meaningful rehearsal [occurred], rehearsal that really meant something other than mere drilling to know the lines and the business and so on. That was in *Cyrano [de Bergerac]*, where we did have about eight days of rehearsal with the principal actors and with the sets, which made it possible for us to complete that film in that phenomenally short shooting schedule of twenty-one days. And it certainly doesn't look like twenty-one days, which would not have been possible had we not had the rehearsal. That plus the fact that Jose [Ferrer], of course, had played the role on Broadway. There was that running start on it, even though certain modifications had to be made, I mean to bring it to scale for film as opposed to the broader performance that the theater frequently required. Other than that, I never really had meaningful rehearsal. That is to say, many people who haven't a theater background don't really know how to rehearse or how to make use of the rehearsal time. They cannot bring themselves up to concert pitch, as it were, to the starting line, for whatever reason. I mean, it's a variety of reasons which make that impossible until bzzzzzz—rolling, speed. We did a little rehearsing in *Pillow Talk*, for example, but it didn't mean very much. One of the things that I find myself saying to students in comparing and contrasting working in the theater and working in film is that the phenomenon— Even in big-budget, long-shooting-schedule films, the actuality is virtually that your first rehearsal for film is your dress rehearsal, as opposed to the dress rehearsal coming at the end of or at the middle of the fourth week of

rehearsal. Up until that time you are experimenting, you are exploring, you are probing, not merely repeating and drilling. That is one of the things that has always been an element of great appeal to me in working in the theater. It's not the glamour of Broadway or going to Sardi's or that sort of thing, but rather the great gratification that comes from the good rehearsal process, that process of growth as opposed to merely drill. Spiritual agriculture, you might say, which you don't have really in quite the same way in film. This is not to suggest that actors and directors don't think about their work with the same degree of meticulousness, and in this great depth, as one does in the theater, but one does not have the opportunity really to develop it in the collaborative work which is the nature of a good rehearsal process in the theater. That was one thing that I always missed when working in film.

DESSERE:

I would imagine in film sometimes the stars are more insecure maybe than in a play, because they are sometimes less trained than, let's say, a legitimate actor, and I would imagine that the rehearsal would help them.

GORDON:

Well, let me put it that in some respects it's not a matter so much of insecurity; it's just a different way of working. You're working fragmentarily. The technical demands on the actor are very, very different in the theater and in the film. These are, as I say, the technical demands. In some respects, the work from the actor's point of view in the theater is easier because you've had the long rehearsal period. On the other hand, it is more difficult, because you have to memorize a whole play. On the other hand, in some respects, it is easier in the theater, because you don't have to hit a mark right on the button to be in focus, and not look down to make sure, which the actor in film has to do as part of the technical responsibilities of his job, as well as working out of continuity, which the actor in film has to do, and which the actor in the theater is not obliged to do. So there are difficulties that vary from medium to medium. Which is harder and which is easier, it would be difficult to say. In what respects? It seems to me that working out of continuity, from the director's point of view too, in determining, let us say, the level of intensity, of emotional intensity—one of the problems that I always had for myself in directing films is that, even though objectively speaking this is nonsense, the

shot that you are making at a particular moment for me used to be the most important part of the film, the most important moment in the picture. But it isn't. And very often one can waste too much time in just bringing to the peak of perfection, if you like, something which is on the screen for forty-one seconds or less even. He should have gotten up a little earlier or whatever. It's not that important. You need that time for the scenes which are the really important scenes. But the phenomenon does occur. The shot that you are making tends to be for you the most important moment in the film.

DESSERE:

Pillow Talk was a great success—five Academy Award nominations.

GORDON:

Not me! [laughter]

DESSERE:

But the film was a huge success. Were you on contract only for that film, or did you already sign for another film after this with Ross Hunter?

GORDON:

I was not under contract to the studio at that time, as I had been in the period from 1946 to '49, when I was under term contract to Universal [Pictures]. Or as I had been earlier to Columbia [Pictures Industries]. It was picture to picture. But actually, Ross gave me a picture to do right after *Pillow Talk*.

DESSERE:

So you got along with him very well?

GORDON:

Oh, very well.

DESSERE:

What type of man was he as a producer?

GORDON:

Let me say, in many respects, extremely good. He did not interfere except in an area in which he had a wonderful degree of expertise and sense of style.

That is to say, with respect to decor, with respect to costume, with respect to those visual aspects that—his productions always had, if you want to call it, a touch of class. In that respect, it seems to me he made an extremely valuable contribution to the work. And also casting. He had very good ideas, and he had good connections. He was a very, very constructive force in the making of the films. One could say, as one wrongly talks about auteur, that there was his stamp on his films in most respects for those who had, shall we say, a sophisticated eye and a great deal of familiarity with the product, as you have about films. I mean, you remember details about films that I have made that I don't remember! [laughter] But the concept of auteur with respect to directors seems to me silly. It flatters the critic and does not really have very much bearing in a good way on the work. What I mean is, it makes the critic feel good to say, "Ah, yes, I could see that's the Howard Hawks stamp or that's the William Wyler stamp on the film." That's not the most important thing. I feel that the director should not be between the audience and the story to the degree of saying, "Ah, yes, that's a real Hitchcock touch." No, to be involved in the melodrama is more important than auteurship. I don't mind that, incidentally, in a producer—that he has good taste and so forth.

DESSERE:

You think it enhanced what you did?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, there's no question or doubt about it. The picture had a good look about it. For that kind of picture it had a nice glossy look. I don't remember whether he produced it or if someone else produced—what was it called? Doris Day was in it and Rex Harrison, kind of a melodrama. *Midnight Lace*, that Davey [David] Miller directed. I don't know if Ross did it.

DESSERE:

The style was very much his, yes, if I remember the film. It reminded me a little bit in some ways of the next film that you made, *Portrait in Black*. Would you agree with that?

GORDON:

What, *Midnight Lace*? I think that from certain points of view *Midnight Lace* was a better picture than *Portrait in Black*, I think. That is to say, in terms of real—not in terms of story particularly, although it was a very good story, but in terms of the demands that it made as far as acting was concerned. I thought that Doris was sensational in that picture. In that picture and in the Hitchcock picture, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. I mean, she had emotional reservoirs which no one ever gave her credit for before. The terror that she experienced in *Midnight Lace*, it seems to me, was terrifying to us in the audience. It was, I thought, a sterling performance, as it was in the other, which had other emotional elements beyond terror, that kind of terror. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* her terror was for her child; in *Midnight Lace* it was the terror for her own jeopardy.

DESSERE:

Yes, yes, I remember. I saw that film a long time ago. It seems, though, that one could say that maybe Doris Day and Lana Turner could be interchangeable in the two films, you know, the blond woman, except that of course Lana Turner was more of a queen bee in your film.

GORDON:

Yes. Of course, she was actually the manipulator. She was the person who was very directly involved in all of the deceptions and the chicanery and the conspiracy, if you like. I think, for example—and I may be wrong about this—I can't speak for audiences generally. I don't think that one had the same empathetic bonding with her. Part of it was because she was going to get what was coming to her, as opposed to the victimization of Doris Day. So that one's emotional connection with those two characters was far, far deeper in both of the Doris Day pictures than it was with Lana in mine.

DESSERE:

Do you think it has to do with a star-quality personality?

GORDON:

I think that's part of it, but I think it's largely the story as well.

DESSERE:

Oh, I see. Do you think that Lana Turner was much more of a traditional star than Doris Day? For instance, do you think you worked better with Doris Day than with Lana Turner?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, I do, and I think that Doris deep down was a far, far better actor than Lana was.

DESSERE:

But obviously Lana Turner was able to—

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I don't mean to say that she wasn't good, but I think that Doris was really a more resourceful actress, not merely the star that Lana tended to be.

DESSERE:

In *Portrait in Black* you had also very good production values, but you came back to a more standard screen format.

GORDON:

Yes, I think that was—I forgot. I don't really remember that. Yes, I think that that was more conventional. And you know something? I cannot remember—at that time I envisioned *Portrait in Black* in black and white. I'm not sure, I think it was probably in color.

DESSERE:

It's in Eastmancolor.

GORDON:

Yes, it is in color. But the picture in my memory is in black and white in a way.

DESSERE:

I think you had a very interesting cast in *Portrait in Black*.

GORDON:

With Tony?

DESSERE:

Yes, I know you liked Anthony Quinn, and you really discussed him in the other interview. And you also discussed Lana Turner in detail, so I'm not going to ask you about that again. But I was interested about Anna May Wong. Because she was such a famous star. She made one of the early Technicolor films.

GORDON:

Well, I didn't know about the Technicolor, but I remember her from way, way back when I was a boy. She was a lovely lady. As a matter of fact, she gave me a wonderful gift at the end of the film, which was a nest of black iron ashtrays, you know, identical, smaller size, and so on, which had some ideograms in it, which she told me was her name in Chinese characters.

DESSERE:

You know that she was also in this famous [Josef von] Sternberg picture *Shanghai Express*.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, of course.

DESSERE:

So I was going to ask you about her.

GORDON:

She didn't have very much to do as far as real acting was concerned.

DESSERE:

I know, she had a small part.

GORDON:

And in the small part she simply had to be, as it were, sinister, which of course she did with great style.

DESSERE:

Richard Basehart was in it also. I want to ask you about him. Do you remember him?

GORDON:

Yes, sure.

DESSERE:

How was your relationship?

GORDON:

Good, except that Basehart was—he had come from the theater, but it seemed to me that in working with him I found him to be an extremely tense actor.

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DESSERE:

We were talking about Richard Basehart in *Portrait in Black*.

GORDON:

Actually, I think he did a very, very good job, but I was rather surprised to discover the degree of tension that he seemed to be working under. That was the only time that I worked with him, so I can't generalize really. But this seemed to be a problem which I had never been aware of, having seen him both in the theater—I remember him particularly on Broadway in a play called *The Hasty Heart*, in which he was splendid. He played a Scottish soldier, as I recall, and it was an outstanding performance, generally regarded as one of the most outstanding and striking ones of the whole season. I don't know if he got any awards for it, but he deserved it.

DESSERE:

You had also Virginia Grey, who did a little comeback for you in that film. Do you remember her? She had a small part. She was playing Cob O'Brien.

GORDON:

I don't remember the name of the character, but I do remember her, of course.

DESSERE:

It's here under my eyes, so that's why I can remember. Did you enjoy—?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, very much. I mean, she was lovely to work with.

DESSERE:

And John Saxon?

GORDON:

John Saxon. I had known him from before. As a matter of fact, I directed John Saxon on Broadway in a play at one time.

DESSERE:

Do you remember which play?

GORDON:

The one called Sophie.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, we talked about that.

GORDON:

John was in that play. So I knew John quite well and enjoyed working with him.

DESSERE:

You know, the film now represents a lot of things that Ross Hunter puts in his films. If we compare it with *Imitation of Life*, which was made before by Douglas Sirk—Lana Turner and Sandra Dee were in it.

GORDON:

And the daughter of an agent, Paul Kohner. What was her name?

DESSERE:

Yes, Susan Kohner, who did a very, very good job it seems to me, and then somehow she disappeared. You know she played Freud's wife in the John Huston film [*Freud*].

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes, that's right. That's right, yes.

DESSERE:

She was an excellent actress.

GORDON:

Very, very good, and I thought outstandingly good in that one. Is that the one we're talking about?

DESSERE:

Yes, we are talking about *Imitation of Life*, yes. She was playing the daughter of a black woman. I was going to ask you—was the Ross Hunter unit like a little family? Was he always working with the same people? It seems that you had—

GORDON:

No, I don't think that was true particularly as far as actors are concerned. He worked with Doris [Day] on a couple of pictures I guess, and others. But it wasn't a stock company in any sense of the word, except to the degree that there were at that time actors who were under contract. Not so much as earlier. I mean, for example, in that [period], '46 to '50, when I was at Universal [Pictures], they had a large stable, if you like, of contract players, and very often the casting was determined by that. I don't think that this was true in that later period.

DESSERE:

It seems that you were so much a part of this, and also Douglas Sirk worked with you. Did you talk to the other directors? Did you meet socially?

GORDON:

Not particularly. As a matter of fact, Sirk was not on the lot when I came on the lot at that particular time. As a matter of fact, I think that I was given the office that he had occupied. While I had met him perhaps once or twice, we had never really had very much in the way of interchange of ideas or experiences or anything of that sort.

DESSERE:

What is your overall feeling about the film, about *Portrait in Black*, in terms of the subject? Did you particularly like that film? It was more of a melodrama or—?

GORDON:

It certainly was not one of my favorite films, but that doesn't mean that one doesn't work just as hard and try to invest in it as fully as one can. As a matter of fact, I was very surprised one time. I guess it was on the set when we were making *Boys' Night Out* that—I don't remember his name—one of the editorial staff of *Cahiers du Cinema* came and visited on the set, I was very surprised to hear him say that that was his favorite of my films. Because he saw it as film noire, and they were very much into that at that time. So that while it was, as I said before, not my favorite film at all, apparently it was his.

DESSERE:

So after that the next film is *Boys' Night Out*. You changed studios there, and you went to MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer].

GORDON:

Well, again, I was not under contract. Those all were individual picture by picture.

DESSERE:

And Martin Ransohoff was the producer.

GORDON:

Yes, that was his first film. He had been a producer of commercials on a very, very high scale, operating principally up until that time in New York.

DESSERE:

I forgot to tell you something. Before we get more into *Boys' Night Out*—*Pillow Talk* is very often represented as a typical film of the fifties and regarded of course as a classic now. But what is your feeling about that? Did you have any hint that it would become such an important film?

GORDON:

No, not really, not really.

DESSERE:

Because I'm sure that a lot of people come to you and tell you, "Well, you directed *Pillow Talk*—"

GORDON:

Yes. Let me say, in terms of the films that I've made, I have far, far greater pride, as far as my own work is concerned, in other films.

DESSERE:

Really. I know that you prefer *Another Part of the Forest* definitely. Those are the films that we students are supposed to study and take seriously. We are not eligible to enjoy *Pillow Talk*. [laughter]

GORDON:

Oh, you're entitled to. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Boys' Night Out was also a very interesting film. I remember seeing it when I was in France. It was well liked. You seem to have dealt with totally different things in that. You were at MGM also? What was the difference for you between MGM and Universal? Did you feel something different?

GORDON:

Well, actually, when you are on the soundstage, you don't know what studio you are in. To me it doesn't really mean very much. Actually, at that time MGM was becoming a kind of a rental studio. In other words, there were independent projects. One did not feel like in the old days when L. [Louis] B. Mayer was the czar and everything came from him. It wasn't like that at Metro at the time. The same thing later on in another film that I made. Again, it could have been any studio.

DESSERE:

Yes. How was working with Martin Ransohoff? How was he as a personality? Do you feel like discussing him?

GORDON:

Oh, let me say an enormously enterprising guy, a true entrepreneur, with great energy, vitality. I enjoyed him very much. He was a wheeler-dealer of exceptional skill. It was almost as though the telephone were part of his anatomy! [laughter] He was always on the telephone all over the world.

DESSERE:

I am asking you this because he has a bad reputation because of what happened between him and Roman Polanski over *The Fearless Vampire Killers*.

GORDON:

Oh, I don't know that. [laughter]

DESSERE:

I was wondering if you knew that comedy that Polanski made, which was a horror film and starred his wife, Sharon Tate.

GORDON:

That was later, wasn't it? Yes, because *Boys' Night Out* was Marty's first film.

DESSERE:

Yes, I know. And also because this film was distributed in a totally different version here than in Europe. There were a lot of cuts here, so there was a big feud about that thing.

GORDON:

I really don't know any of those details. I have never seen the film at all. Actually, I can understand without knowing anything about the film. Marty was pretty high-handed in a kind of way. He regarded himself as the proprietor of the product and could do whatever he wanted, and so forth and so on. In my particular case it never proved to be an obstacle, but he was the kind of man who I would say would have no hesitancy in trampling on the sensitivity of an artist like Polanski.

DESSERE:

That's very interesting. Did you enjoy making that film?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, very much. I did even from the very beginning. In a way we had trouble with the censorship people at the beginning.

DESSERE:

Well, the subject was kind of delicate, because it was not the twin-bed type of subject.

GORDON:

No. Actually, it was a funny idea. The germ of it was like a little dirty joke, but we developed it into rather a good screenplay. They felt that it was immoral that four guys should get together and have a common mistress because they couldn't afford it individually. I remember a series of meetings with the people from whatever office it was, the [Eric A.] Johnston office [Motion Picture Association of America], or whatever the office was at that particular time.

DESSERE:

The censorship office?

GORDON:

Yes, the censorship office, in which I said, "This is a very moral picture, because it is really ridiculing the men! It is not saying that this is the way to do it. It's against the very things that you're opposed to. That is what is dramatized. It is portraying men as having eyes that are bigger than their libido." [laughter]

DESSERE:

You had also a very good cast. I'm not going to ask you too many details about them, because you have already discussed your work with Kim Novak. I think the film was successful.

GORDON:

Oh, yes. I don't know how much money it made, but it was well received. Several audiences that I saw the picture with had the comic response that we wanted. They laughed a lot, and it was really a very good cast.

DESSERE:

Well, obviously your position in Hollywood was quite comfortable, because you had had two hits in a row. I know that *Portrait in Black* was also very successful, in addition to *Pillow Talk*.

GORDON:

It was fun. We developed the screenplay practically from scratch. I mean, I was working as a collaborator—I mean as a writer—even though the regulations of the guilds didn't permit me to get screen credit.

DESSERE:

Oh, you mean you worked—

GORDON:

From the very beginning. Through several writers, as a matter of fact. There was a parade of writers that we had in developing it, from developing the initial story, ultimately to the Ephrons [Henry and Phoebe Ephron], the husband and wife team, who did a version, and then they were replaced by someone else, and then finally replaced by someone else. So it was a parade of writers on the thing.

DESSERE:

Tell me something. We're in the sixties now, beginning of the sixties. It was also the time of the director-producer. I was wondering, were you tempted by that aspect, in which you would see on credits, you know, a producer-director production?

GORDON:

Let me say that the opportunities did exist for that, and I never wanted them, even though I recognized that there would be certain career value in the name. But I honestly felt that I could never really function as well, that directing was for me a full-time job. I wanted to make my choices in terms of the material, in terms of the story, and have someone else say, "No, we can't afford it." Rather than split myself down the middle, because that was something that I had no inclination toward. I didn't want to have my creative imagination, if you like, stifled by another half of my brain saying, "No, this is impractical." I'd rather do it and have someone else say, "We have to find another way." I remember, for example, in the picture I made sometime

earlier at Universal, *Woman in Hiding*, with Ida Lupino, we had a very, very interesting concept—Oscar Saul, who did the screenplay, and I working together. This was a melodrama, but with character elements. This woman whose father had died presumably in an accident, but we know that it was in effect a murder—after the funeral the killer seduces or attempts to seduce this woman. I wanted the scene in the graveyard, in the cemetery. We had envisioned the thing, and it would have been a very, very striking scene. But the producer said, "We can't afford it." So we had to find another way of doing it, which was far less spectacular, but which worked in its own terms. I didn't want to have to be the person to say, "Oh, no, let's not try to develop the scene in the graveyard. It's another set, and it's a big set, and it's going to be too expensive to have it in the rain and all of that kind of thing." That is where the split between the director and the producer—that almost schizophrenic kind of phenomenon—was something that I never wanted to be involved in. Deal making was not my forte at all. Temperamentally and in terms of expertise it's not what I do.

DESSERE:

I imagine that in terms of creative decisions that would have interested you more.

GORDON:

Yes, but still I might have made ultimately the same decision. I can't remember who was the producer of that film, *Woman in Hiding*. But the point I'm trying to make is that I preferred not to have to inhibit my imagination or my ideas by considerations of fiscal practicality and that sort of thing, but rather would have someone who knew more about it.

DESSERE:

Michael Kraike.

GORDON:

Oh, Mike Kraike, yes, yes.

DESSERE:

You think the creativity was linked with the money automatically?

GORDON:

Largely. There were very, very few instances—there were some, and sometimes very minor, in which the producer either arbitrarily or for whatever reason did something, overruled, even when the picture was being cut, that I very much disapproved of, whether it be in terms of taste or in terms of effectiveness. There was one thing about the final shot of *Cyrano [de Bergerac]* that Stanley [Kramer] did that still offends me in a way, not because of personality or anything of that sort, but because I just don't think it's as good as it could have been the way I shot it. Working with the producer of *Texas Across the River* [Harry Keller], I had enormous conflict with that producer, who incidentally was also a director, and who did things to my cut that I thought were terrible.

DESSERE:

But did you have right of first cut?

GORDON:

In that one, yes, but not in *Cyrano*. That right was established later.

DESSERE:

But with *Boys' Night Out* did you have it?

GORDON:

I don't think that that was legislated yet. I'm not sure about that, but it didn't matter in any case. I mean, for all practical purposes I did have first cut.

DESSERE:

What about *Pillow Talk*?

GORDON:

It never was a problem really. I don't think that I legally had the right to the first cut, but Ross and I saw eye to eye pretty well.

DESSERE:

And with Martin Ransohoff also?

GORDON:

Pretty much, yes.

DESSERE:

That's good to know.

GORDON:

I think that the only real conflict I had on an ongoing basis that went beyond a single cut, as in the case of *Cyrano*, was with Harry Keller. That was a painful experience.

DESSERE:

It was in what film?

GORDON:

Texas Across the River.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, yes, we'll talk about that more in detail when we reach that film.

GORDON:

If we must. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Oh, of course we are interested in those things. I wanted to ask you one more question. It's about profit participation. Did your agent tell you you should ask for that? I know Lana Turner had that.

GORDON:

Did she?

DESSERE:

Yes, I read this.

GORDON:

I didn't know that. I had none in most of the films. Presumably we did have in *Cyrano*, but there were never any profits. In one or two others, but nothing ever yielded anything, with the exception of a picture which I really wasn't too

keen on making at the beginning, but then once I got into it, for the most part I enjoyed it. And that was *The Impossible Years*. That has paid off to an extraordinary degree in terms of profit participation, the only one in my experience.

DESSERE:

But since *Pillow Talk* and *Portrait in Black* were such great successes—

GORDON:

No, I had no profit participation in them.

DESSERE:

Unfortunately. Okay. Let's move on to the next film, *For Love or Money*. You don't like that film too much. I've read that somewhere.

GORDON:

It was all right.

DESSERE:

You didn't like it on site or was it later on that you didn't like it?

GORDON:

It was a silly film, essentially, but it was fun to do. Kirk [Douglas] and I sometimes didn't get along as well as we might have. I loved working with Mitzi Gaynor. She was just a doll to work with. But Kirk and I had some conflicts along the way.

DESSERE:

What did you disagree about with him? Your vision of the film?

GORDON:

Oh, about everything. [laughter] We were both pretty stubborn fellows, I guess.

DESSERE:

Do you think that he was insecure about making a comedy?

GORDON:

I think he might have been. Yes, that was I think part of it. Because he had never, so far as I knew, done an out-and-out comedy before.

DESSERE:

Did you like the script?

GORDON:

Again, it was all right.

DESSERE:

Who decided that you could be the director? Was it the producer? Did already Kirk Douglas have money invested in that project?

GORDON:

No, I don't think that Kirk did. [tape recorder off]

DESSERE:

You think he had some money?

GORDON:

No, I don't think he did. I doubt it very much.

DESSERE:

You went back to Universal?

GORDON:

Yes, I made more pictures at Universal than I think all others combined, or as many.

DESSERE:

Was Universal in the hands of MCA [Music Corporation of America]?

GORDON:

Yes, it was.

DESSERE:

Were there big changes for you?

GORDON:

Well, yes, from when I first started at Universal, which was in 1946. By 1955 there were enormous changes.

DESSERE:

What type of studio was it? Would you say it was more anonymous than maybe MGM or [Twentieth Century-]Fox [Film Corporation]?

GORDON:

Well, it didn't have the same continuity. It originally had been Universal, then was Universal International, and then it was MCA.

DESSERE:

So a lot of new people each time?

GORDON:

Always, sure.

DESSERE:

And did they know who you were?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I think so.

DESSERE:

So to finish with *Love or Money*. Do you have anything to say about your actors? What about Gig Young?

GORDON:

Oh, Gig was delightful in it. He was very easy to work with.

DESSERE:

And Julie Newmar and William Bendix.

GORDON:

Oh, Bill Bendix was one of my favorite human beings in the world. I loved him. I'd used him before, going way back.

DESSERE:

In the early films.

GORDON:

Yes, and I always enjoyed him. As a matter of fact, he had an important part in *The Web*, and then I used him again in *Boys' Night Out*. He played a bartender. What did he do in this one?

DESSERE:

He played the part of Joe Vogel. You remember that? He was the security chief of Thelma Ritter's hotel chain.

GORDON:

Oh. Bill was always a delight to work with.

DESSERE:

And Thelma Ritter?

GORDON:

Well, Thelma Ritter I used about five times! [laughter] Ever since I first saw her, long before I knew her, which was in *Miracle on 34th Street*, I fell madly in love with Thelma.

DESSERE:

Yes. Was she much the same way in real life as she was on the screen?

GORDON:

She was very straight. She was very different, but there was always something that was very real about her and down-to-earth. I used her in *Move Over, Darling*. I used her in *Pillow Talk*. I used her in this film. She was always there when you needed her.

DESSERE:

And Julie Newmar, who was quite a beautiful woman.

GORDON:

A beautiful woman. She was really more of a dancer than an actress, actually. She was okay. I mean, it was not thrilling to work with her at all, but she was very good.

DESSERE:

Did you find that that was a problem, to work with somebody who had that type of training?

GORDON:

Oh, no, not really.

DESSERE:

But I suppose since the training was different that eliciting performance was—

GORDON:

Well, the demands were not that exacting in that role. You know, Mitzi's was the principal role, of course. She was just extraordinarily good to work with. Then there was a girl who I loved very much, and I can't remember her name.

DESSERE:

Is it Leslie Parrish?

GORDON:

Leslie Parrish, who was very nice to work with as well.

DESSERE:

Because she was very talented, and you liked her?

GORDON:

Oh, I think so.

1.26. TAPE NUMBER: XIII, Side Two (March 30, 1989)

DESSERE:

Your next project was *Move Over, Darling*, and you did it at Twentieth Century-Fox. So you left Universal and went back to Twentieth again?

GORDON:

Yes, well, during that whole period I was not under contract with any particular studio, as I had been earlier on. Everything was on a project-by-project basis, and you went where the work was.

DESSERE:

The story of *Move Over, Darling* is rather well known, because it had originally started as a remake with Marilyn Monroe, Cyd Charisse, Phil Silvers, and Dean Martin. As a matter of fact, they had reproduced the house of George Cukor on the set. Did you use the same set?

GORDON:

Largely. We modified it to some degree, but basically there was a great deal of it that was "salvaged," in a sense. So that with some modifications, that was basically the set, yes.

DESSERE:

Did you ever look at the footage that was actually shot by George Cukor?

GORDON:

I'm not sure that I saw all of it, but I don't know how much actually there had been before the project was abandoned. But I did look at a certain amount of it, yes.

DESSERE:

And what was your reaction? Did you see the famous swimming pool scene with Marilyn Monroe?

GORDON:

Yes, but that was not actually in our adaptation of the story. That was the shooting script that Cukor actually made. And so that was not in our film.

DESSERE:

I suspect also that Doris Day took over the role. She was a totally different personality.

GORDON:

Exactly.

DESSERE:

It was a remake of a famous 19—

GORDON:

My Favorite Wife, wasn't it?

DESSERE:

Did you see any objection about doing a remake? What was your attitude? Because the film *My Favorite Wife* is still shown.

GORDON:

No. Again, let me say, brand-new projects are more exciting. I don't recall that I looked at the old *My Favorite Wife*. I had seen it many, many years before. There were a few things about it that I remembered, particularly a kind of a fantasy sequence in which I think it was Cary Grant fantasized about what the Tarzan-like figure on the island, the island the wife was washed ashore on—. But actually we did not follow any of that too closely, although perhaps in that particular sequence, I think that what we had bore some resemblance to it. However, we had a great deal of new material that was not at all in the original.

DESSERE:

Was it a good experience for you? Did you enjoy that?

GORDON:

Yes, I did. I had worked with several people who were in our production in other areas. From that point of view, the familiarity that I had with several of the actors and actresses with—I had worked with Doris, I had worked with [James] Garner, I'd worked with Thelma Ritter. There were others as well. Offhand they don't come to mind.

DESSERE:

Well, you had Chuck Connors.

GORDON:

He was new for me.

DESSERE:

How was he?

GORDON:

He's a fun guy, and he did quite, quite well. Oh, I had worked with Polly Bergen in the theater, too, so as I said before, it was like old-home week in a sense.

DESSERE:

What did you like specifically about this particular comedy? Is there anything that you can remember that struck you? Did you find that the comedy was close to *Pillow Talk*, and that you had now an established reputation as a comedy director and it was maybe a little limiting for you?

GORDON:

Not really. I never thought about that kind of thing, although perhaps people who engaged me did. One interesting thing—at least interesting to me about that—was that in the initial stages in making the adaptation, the scenario out of which the screenplay would develop, which varied in some respects from the original, the deal was set up in a certain way so that there was going to be a hiatus of about a month which would not count against the total commitment of time. In other words, I was going to give them, as it were, four weeks roughly for nothing, for free, because the schedule, the starting schedule, was for some reason—other contractual commitments—deferred. They wanted to get started right away, and I was involved in the initial talks with the producer and the two writers who were on it. I think that I was to work for about four weeks and then take a four-week hiatus and then continue, so that the original contract, which perhaps was for twenty-six weeks, would not have that overage of four weeks at a substantial salary, which would cost the studio a certain amount of money. When it came to the

end of the initial period, just before I was to take the break, the suspension more or less, the writers and the producer—the writers I think were the initiators—felt that it would have been very harmful if I weren't there. And so the employment actually was continuous. What was amusing to me in a way was that Marty [Martin] Melcher, who was then Doris's husband, as well as her manager, and who was listed as associate producer on the project, came to me one day and said, "You know, Mike, you are going to go over by four weeks." I don't know what my pro rata thing was. Maybe it was \$3,000 a week. "It would be a very good gesture and establish goodwill with the studio if you would waive that." [laughter] I was rather shocked when he said that to me. I said, "Well, let me think it over. I want to discuss it with my agent." He said, "No, no, don't bring the agents into it." Because he knew what the agent's response would be. I said, "Well, let me think it over, and I'll give you my answer tomorrow." Of course, I spoke with my agent, and my agent said, "If you agree to this, I will never represent you again as long as you live," which reinforced my feelings about the outrageousness of his request, even though I would have done it myself, because I wanted to do the picture. I felt that the story was developing well and the cast was good and it was going to be a fun picture to do. In any case, he reinforced my feelings that it was a very, very unreasonable and really outrageous request that Melcher was making of me. So when he came to my office the following day, he said, "Well, Mike, did you think it over?" You know, very happily. "Yes, I gave it very, very careful consideration, Marty, and the conclusion that I came to was to tell you to go fuck yourself." [laughter] Rather than his being angry at that response, he broke into a big grin and said, "Well, you can't shoot a guy for trying." What I found interesting about it was that had he been able to do that, that would have represented for him as a business manager, as an agent, whatever he was, as it were, a creative accomplishment. That would be comparable to the charge that I get out of doing something which is imaginative and creative, a sequence which I think is very interesting in film. That was his creative fulfillment, had he been able to bring it about, because there was no personal gain in it for him other than that sense of accomplishment—you know, I swindled the guy, I made a great deal. That was characteristic of Marty Melcher. He was that kind of a person.

DESSERE:

I've read that Aaron Rosenberg was the producer. Was that a fruitful collaboration?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, Aaron was a wonderful guy. As you know, he was an all-American football player, had been at USC [University of Southern California], not at UCLA, a number of years before, and he was a very straight-shooting guy and intelligent and vigorous. He had not had extensive experience as a producer at that time, although he had done several things, including, I think, one rather big one that Mark Robson directed on a train in Nazi Germany. I forget the name of the film. I think Frank Sinatra was in that film.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes, it's *Von Ryan's Express*.

GORDON:

That's right. So he had had some experience as a film producer. But he was an extremely intelligent man and wonderful to work with.

DESSERE:

And you liked that story.

GORDON:

We said that *My Favorite Wife* goes back to *Enoch Arden*, an old nineteenth-century novel.

DESSERE:

So did you feel that Fox was very helpful as a studio?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, it was a very good studio to work for at the time, although Darryl [F.] Zanuck was no longer there. It still had a drive to do good work, to do whatever it was that they did effectively and well. For me, I think, one of the highlights of the experience was a sequence that I devised which was consistent with the premises of the story. Which is that the woman had been on a desert island for ten years and then came back to this country. During the time of her absence, automobiles had developed in a number of ways,

mechanical advances, the convertible, for example, push button windows and doors, and that sort of thing. We devised a sequence in which Doris Day, who is fleeing from her estranged husband, who was pursuing her, jumped in a car that she was completely unfamiliar with (it happened to be a convertible), got caught in the car wash, and pushed the wrong buttons. That developed into a scene which to me was a very, very wild sequence, one could say almost farcical in its nature. However, I feel something which I think is ignored by a number of people, actors, writers, directors—farce is something which can be arbitrary and trivial and false and you just do it for laughs, without recognizing the important thing? while the predicaments of the characters in the farce we view as ludicrous, as absurd, to the characters they are life and death in their consequences. In other words, if I am in a farce sequence where I have lost my pants in a ladies' Turkish bath, to the audience it's absolutely absurd, it's just silly, but to me it is a hideous nightmare if I am in that situation. The point that I'm trying to make is that in developing that sequence in the car wash, which was very, very broad physical comedy—she's pushing the wrong buttons and all these horrible things of being soaked with water and doused with soapsuds and a big roller coming down with the top down, because she has pushed the wrong buttons for the windows and so forth. We worked on that sequence with meticulous care so that it was inevitable that she got caught in the car wash, that she didn't deliberately go into the car wash, but because of traffic and—we shot at a car wash down on Pico Boulevard and maybe Beverly Glen [Boulevard]. We arranged the traffic in such a way that there was no possible escape for her except to get caught in the car wash. She's in the line, and the thing is taking her, and so on. The entire sequence was worked out as though it were—what shall I say?—the highest drama, and because of that it was very funny. I remember that Doris—she was really an incredibly conscientious kind of actress. Of course, I had a double there for her, but she would not allow the double to do it. There were several incidents, a couple of them in that picture, where Doris insisted on doing the thing herself. The noise was terrible. We couldn't obviously use any track. We'd have to obliterate it on just the mechanics of the car wash. But we did make a scratch track. There was a mike on her and so on. We made one big cheat. The big rolling brush is usually at the beginning of the sequence of the car wash, and because that had a kind of climactic element in it, we put it last. That was the cheat that we made. When we heard it in dailies, the track was nothing but noise, noise, noise. But at one

point, when this roller was coming down, Doris, in a very plaintive voice I could hear on her track, said, "Oh, my hair." [laughter] It came through faintly on the track. It was that kind of involvement on her part that was characteristic, it seems to me, of her responsibility and conscientiousness and commitment as an actress.

DESSERE:

Was that line in the script?

GORDON:

No, she improvised that. Then, of course, the sequence that followed involved a certain amount of engineering really, because at the very end when Garner caught up with her and opened the door, a flood came out of the car that knocked him down, that literally did, and swept him up against the retaining wall. Now, in order to accomplish that, I don't know how many tons of water were involved. First of all we had to put a lining in the car so that it would hold the water, so that it wouldn't leak out. It's non-reality. It couldn't exactly happen, but it seemed quite plausible in the circumstances of what we had seen before. When he opened the thing, it actually did, it came down and the rush knocked him down and swept him up against the wall. That was, of course, the conclusion of the sequence.

DESSERE:

Did you shoot that sequence in the studio?

GORDON:

Yes, yes, we did. We had looked at the car wash, and of course we shot the beginning of it at the actual car wash when she was getting caught in an inextricable chain of circumstances that brought her into it. But the actual shooting of that particular part was done at the studio, including that last shot of the water flooding out of the car when the door was open.

DESSERE:

Did you shoot that with a special-effects team?

GORDON:

No, not that I recall. Special effects were involved in the structuring of the car so that it would retain the water.

DESSERE:

How did you shoot this scene? Did you shoot it multi-camera?

GORDON:

No. That was just one camera. Sometimes we shot things with multi-camera. I remember in *Woman in Hiding*, for example, when a car had to go over a bridge and plunge into the water, I had three or four cameras on it, including one which was sped up, so that we had it in slow motion and so on. But for that kind of thing, where, for example, you are going to destroy the set, something going up in flames, then obviously you are going to have one take, so you better put a few cameras on it.

DESSERE:

So you did this scene several times, I suppose, because you had to get a master shot and close-ups. Do you remember that?

GORDON:

I don't. What you say about the close-ups—we didn't shoot the whole scene several times. We may have punched in some close-ups. I don't recall that we had more than one camera on it, though. We may have. It's possible. It makes sense to do it that way, but I don't remember it happening that way.

DESSERE:

Let me ask you something about the writers. Did you cooperate very well with the writers?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. Hal Kanter, and I suddenly can't remember the other fellow—

DESSERE:

Jack Sher.

GORDON:

Jack Sher, yes. They were a team, and we worked together. The three of us worked, it seemed to me, very harmoniously.

DESSERE:

I believe that Jack Sher became also a director later, if I'm not mistaken.

GORDON:

I don't recall that Jack Sher did, but I think that Hal Kanter did, particularly in television.

DESSERE:

Yes, he did. So back to Universal. *A Very Special Favor* is your next film. I'm interested in this one because of—

GORDON:

Leslie Caron and Charles Boyer? That's one that I didn't really want to make. I didn't think it was a very good story, and I felt a sense of somehow distaste about it too in a way. I don't know whether I talked about this before.

DESSERE:

If you have I'll tell you.

GORDON:

All right. I think as I look back at it now, a faintly amusing incident occurred. What had happened—I can't recall just what it was. My agent reported to me what he regarded as a somewhat disturbing remark that had been made about me at Universal, where I had worked a great deal. In the course, I suppose, of the years there were a number of incidents where I didn't want to do a picture. I talked about that?

DESSERE:

You've talked about this. It's all there.

GORDON:

Then let's forget about it.

DESSERE:

So let me ask you, just for fun, how were Leslie Caron and Charles Boyer?

GORDON:

Very nice to work with, especially Boyer. He was wonderfully, wonderfully cooperative, except that Charles—incidentally, I think that this was not too long after the tragic suicide, I believe, of his son, and yet he plunged himself into the work with total commitment. But one of the things that I remember about Boyer was that he preferred the left side of his face. He didn't like to be photographed from the right side. I always take that into consideration for a variety of reasons, because usually the actor knows what is better for him, even though sometimes it's far less important from the point of view of the director than it is from the point of view of the actor's own ego. I did cooperate and try to set up the shots so that it would favor his better side. Except we had one sequence where Walter Slezak had to drive him from the airport in his car, and Walter was the driver. They had a colloquy between them during the course of the drive. Well, inevitably Walter had to be in the driver seat, and Boyer was in the passenger seat. If he looked at him, it was the wrong side. There was no way of avoiding it. And Boyer became virtually a contortionist to be able to carry on this conversation without revealing his unfavorable side to the camera. But he was a wonderful man. I got to know him quite well during the several weeks that we worked together and found him very, very intelligent and urbane and considerably more than merely the matinee idol which he had originally been.

DESSERE:

Was it hard to transform Leslie Caron into a spinster?

GORDON:

Not really, because it wasn't the conventional image of the spinster in terms of mannerisms, but in terms of her tasks as a psychiatrist or whatever it was, or psychotherapist, just dedicated to her work.

DESSERE:

This film was very well received. I see here that it was called "a glossy directorial and scripting effort that makes no pretensions to seriousness."

GORDON:

Well, again, it's an anecdotal picture. It's not a thematic picture.

DESSERE:

But obviously your style was recognized. They liked here the cab driver performance of Larry Storch, and they also enjoyed the switchboard operator played by Nita Talbot, who nearly faints when Rock Hudson passes by.

GORDON:

Yes, she was a very charming actress to work with, very good sense of humor, good sense of comedy.

DESSERE:

I suppose Rock Hudson was very comfortable at this point.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes, at that point. Whatever anxieties he had about playing comedy earlier were well overcome by this time.

DESSERE:

So you enjoyed this film. This film was good.

GORDON:

Oh, it was fun to do.

DESSERE:

So now I have an indication that you went back to the theater to make a play called *The Family Way*.

GORDON:

Yes. Not to be confused with a picture that came out, a British film, subsequently with the same title. It had nothing to do with that at all. That play did not succeed on Broadway.

DESSERE:

What was the play about?

GORDON:

It was actually the play of a woman—I can't remember whether she was a widow or a divorcee—with a young kid. It was just about human relationships—the problem of a woman raising a boy by herself. It was a very, very warm and charming comedy. Ben Starr, who wrote the play, also wrote the screenplay of *Texas Across the River*. I think that Ben is really a very, very talented writer. Even though he worked a great deal, he's never had any great accolades as a writer, but he's a very, very good screenwriter and playwright.

DESSERE:

Did you feel for you that it was time to go back to the theater at this point?

GORDON:

No. At the particular time I had some open time. I had gone back on a couple of occasions. In one particular instance, there was a play which someone had sent to me that I felt was rather interesting. I was going to go back, and I did go back actually, in a way more or less on approval. I didn't know the producers or the author, and they didn't know me. I went back and read the play and had a week of conferences with them, particularly with the playwright, about the play. I thought that it had great promise. But one of the producers struck me as a very hysterical kind of person, and I felt very, very uncomfortable about him. After the week I was there on approval—I was auditioning in a sense for the producers—I was about to return to California, and he said, "Well, okay, blah, blah, blah, we'll make the deal." I said, "Wait a minute. You brought me here on trial, and that's a two-way street. That's a reciprocating phenomenon, if you like, and I'm not prepared to say yes at this point. I want to give it a great deal of thought, and I will, and I will call you from California tomorrow"—or whatever it was, the following day—"and let you know." As I was on the plane thinking about the situation and thinking about this particular person, who was one of two producers, but in a sense was the dominant one—

1.27. TAPE NUMBER: XIV, Side One (March 30, 1989)

DESSERE:

You were on the plane thinking?

GORDON:

On the plane the thought that occurred to me was that I felt very, very insecure about placing my destiny, if you like, in the hands of this man who I felt was a very, very unstable individual. I decided I didn't want to do it. I remember thinking at the time that I'd be willing to make a bet that the director who started that play would not be the one who brought it into New York, even though I thought that the script was very well written, very charming. The person who was going to play the lead, the woman, was an actress whom I admired enormously named Sandy Dennis, who I thought would be wonderful in the part, and she ultimately was. The play was called *Any Wednesday*. I thought that the writer was very good, and I liked the other producer, but I did not trust this person. When I finally got back, I said, "No, I'm not going to place my career in the hands of a person who I feel is irresponsible." Actually, my prediction really, really was borne out, not only as I had envisioned it at the time—I thought the director would be replaced. I think it was the third or fourth director who brought that play ultimately into New York. The first director was replaced, and the second director was replaced, and perhaps it was the third director who brought it in. And another producer was brought in on it along the way. The whole thing seemed to me like a very shaky enterprise that I decided that I didn't want any part of. When I spoke to him on the phone, I said, "Thank you very much, but I don't think I want to do it."

DESSERE:

The Family Way—do you remember who was in it?

GORDON:

Collin Wilcox was in it, and for some damn reason I can't remember the name of the male.

DESSERE:

There was also Jack Kelly.

GORDON:

Jack Kelly and Collin Wilcox played the leads.

DESSERE:

Yes, and there was also a girl, but you don't remember her name?

GORDON:

Oh, another woman?

DESSERE:

Yes, you said that she was a very good actress.

GORDON:

Yes, let's see. I can't remember her name. Oh, Fritzie [Burr].

DESSERE:

So this play was not a success?

GORDON:

No. It was a very kind of sad thing. Because the play before we brought it into New York had no important names, they had no advance box office. The reception I particularly recall in Philadelphia— That may have been the only out of town opening that we had. We played for about two weeks, and it was wonderfully received. It was a very warm play and very much like Ben Starr, who is a very, very sweet human being, without any of the superficial gloss and sophistication, super-sophistication, that is normally associated with Broadway. From that point of view, its prospects at the hands of the daily critics in New York were unpromising in a way. The fact that there was no advance box office and the play depended wholly on the nature of the reviews—and they were not good. They weren't terrible, but they were not good, and the play closed very, very swiftly. It was too bad. Again, the opening night blase New Yorkers. This was too naive a play, if you like, almost perhaps the kind of thing that would be associated with sitcoms on television, and did not seem like the kind of Broadway fare that did well.

DESSERE:

So it was not in fashion.

GORDON:

Exactly, but it was a very, very warm play. I'm trying to remember the name of the other woman, who was a splendid character actress. Fritzie was her first

name, and I can't remember her last name. This goes back a number of years. It was in the fifties, wasn't it?

DESSERE:

No, it's 1965. We're already well into the sixties.

GORDON:

Of course, in the sixties.

DESSERE:

So is it Ben Starr who decided that you would make *Texas Across the River*? I suppose that was a major challenge.

GORDON:

No, I think that Ben Starr was brought on to the picture at ray suggestion on the basis of his writing and personal acquaintance and having worked together.

DESSERE:

Yes, and apparently John Gay also wrote for this film.

GORDON:

I never worked with him. I knew him slightly. But he had probably done the original screenplay. As often happens in Hollywood, another writer's brought on, and Gay could have been in Patagonia as far as I ever saw him. Unlike the experience that we had with *Boys' Night Out*, in which there was a succession of writers and I worked with all of them.

DESSERE:

I suppose it was challenging for you to do a western.

GORDON:

Well, it was a send-up of a western, really. Actually, the whole genre of the picture was a lampoon of the western, in which we had I thought some very funny ideas that worked out. You had a confrontation between a kind of a gun-slinging cowboy and an aristocrat from Spain played by Alain Delon. The shoot-out kind of thing to Delon was absurd. Why do we have to walk like

this? He wanted to do it as a duel—we take ten paces and turn and fire and so forth. That's not the way we did it in America. There were a number of things of that kind that we had fun with. I think that actually, both in story terms and the film itself, it's a very amusing film.

DESSERE:

You know the French title of it is *Texas nous voila*. I suppose that doing a western was also something challenging. It seems it is the dream of a lot of directors. Especially you had done comedies and more intimate type of films.

GORDON:

Well, let me say, what we were doing was to lampoon the cliches that we associated with the westerns, including the concluding gag, which was the great catastrophe of this community, when oil gushed up out of the earth and "ruined" the whole town, with of course no envisionment in that period of the wealth that this represented. As a matter of fact, I hated the title. We had a much, much better title, which really was next to the last line of the script, which was *Give It Back to the Indians*. And the old chief's reply: "Who wants it?" That was the title that we wanted, and the sales department said, "No, 'Texas' is a money-maker in a title." Universal [Pictures] had had several pictures that had "Texas" in the title, and they all did well. The determination of a title is always in the sales department, the promotional department.

DESSERE:

So how was Alain Delon? You told me once that he was very courageous and cooperative.

GORDON:

Frighteningly so. I mean, he would do hazardous things, very hazardous things, some on horseback and some in duel fighting and so on. Where we wanted to use a double, Alain insisted on doing everything himself. One was always fearful that an accident would occur that would disrupt the shooting schedule or whatever, but he insisted on doing it. Happily, he was a very athletic young man at the time, and he did everything splendidly. I mean to say, leaping onto running horses and falling off of horses. In a very funny sequence, he had an epee and was dueling with a cavalry officer who had this heavy saber. It was a

tough sequence to do. As we had this very complex sword play and duel—the epee was being chopped off piece by piece in the encounter with the saber, and the pieces were flying, and so it was really a very hazardous kind of situation. We were afraid that something might hurt Alain, not only in interest of the shooting schedule, but in interest of the guy!

DESSERE:

When you had to deal with this strong action sequence, did you feel you were still a director or an engineer?

GORDON:

Well, a combination of both. In film you were always concerned with engineering technicalities, whether it be in the car wash or in a dueling scene.

DESSERE:

But what do you think of those technical things in general? They were a part of that particular genre, but for a director is it particularly challenging? Or is it more interesting to do the psychological part?

GORDON:

Well, let's say both are interesting. In other words, to try to direct a cattle stampede is a very, very difficult kind of thing to do and very, very different than trying to direct a person in a moment of profound grief or terror. But it's part of the job. In film sometimes you have to develop a choreography of, say, automobiles. That's a different kind of directing—call it staging rather than directing—but that of course is part of the work and can be a very challenging and interesting part of the work to make it work well.

DESSERE:

Would you say that you would draw storyboards or draw little things in order to choreograph these sequences or design them? Did you ever use that technique? Particularly I was thinking about this sequence, which was obviously an elaborate trick.

GORDON:

In that particular film I don't recall any storyboards to speak of. From time to time I did use an art director developing a storyboard, but never, never fully. I

mean, just a little moment here or a little moment there. I never used them as extensively as some directors have used them.

DESSERE:

Did you get to know Alain Delon closely?

GORDON:

During the period, as one does with a leading actor, yes, I got to know him quite well, although certain things that were subsequently revealed in news stories about his connections with the mob or whatever was the great scandal that happened with the wife of a big government functionary, I knew nothing of that. That he was a man of enormous personal charm and attractiveness as far as women were concerned was quite obvious. He was a fine leading man from that point of view. But I knew him as a very capable actor, as a very audacious, courageous actor, and a very, very expert one in everything that he did. With a good sense of humor. He understood the comic values very well, even though he didn't have any intimate knowledge of them. I think his performance in that show was extremely good.

DESSERE:

Well, you had some interesting people in your cast. Peter Graves?

GORDON:

Yes. At that time he hadn't yet become quite the celebrity that he later became, but he was a person of great presence. Actually, he was the second man, who is put down all the time. He was the stuffed-shirt character that was always played by the people who played with Cary Grant. And very, very good.

DESSERE:

Also, you had somebody—I don't know if you remember her. Tina Marquand.

GORDON:

Tina Marquand, who was married to, or who was the daughter of, Jean-Pierre Aumont, yes. She was very inexperienced but worked very hard. She was a little difficult to work with because she was not an experienced actress.

DESSERE:

But cooperative with you.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, to the degree that it was possible for her. She did fine in the last analysis, but that was not like working with Alain Delon.

DESSERE:

Well, I'm not going to discuss Dean Martin, because you've already talked about him.

GORDON:

Yes, that was not an enjoyable experience.

DESSERE:

But also I wanted to ask you—yesterday we had a little discussion about editing and the control of the director on the first cut. You told me that you didn't have a very pleasant relationship with a producer, Harry Keller. Was he the same Harry Keller who was also a director and previously a film editor?

GORDON:

Yes. I didn't know about him as a film editor particularly, but I knew him as a director. He was a member of the [Directors] Guild [of America]. I don't know whether we pursued this fully when we talked about it earlier. The regulations protecting the director had evolved very favorably for the directors since I began a number of years ago back in 1942. I don't know whether I told you the story of I guess the first film that I ever made, in which the producer, after looking at the first cut—I had nothing to do with it. I was already on another picture. I think I talked about that.

DESSERE:

Yes, I believe so.

GORDON:

By the time that we did *Texas*, the legislation had been developed more favorably for the director, in which the director did have total control over first cut, but not who that first cut would be shown to. In other words, the property was then the property of the studio, and then they could do anything

that they wanted to with it, which of course has created a number of controversies, some of which have been highly publicized, in which a director says, "I don't want my name on the film," and that kind of thing. Something of that sort, not crucially, but just in the matter of detail, a certain repetitiveness that he wanted to include in it that I thought was not good and certain cuts that he made. But the point was that he was not obliged even to show my cut to the front office people, and so far as I know they never saw my cut and only saw his. I don't think that anyone would be as disturbed by some of the changes that he made as I was, but I was disturbed by it.

DESSERE:

Because he didn't respect a certain logic that you had imparted in shooting?

GORDON:

Not so much that as a matter of taste. I mean certain gags. He wanted to repeat them, and I didn't. I felt that it was heavy-handed, and I wanted a certain kind of unusual, subtle humor in the thing. One of the things, for example, was that we had the Indians—and we actually had a coach—talking in whatever, Apache dialect, and we had subtitles in English. Later on in the film we had the Indians talk in English with subtitles in hieroglyphics, [laughter] That kind of switch, like the switch in the story itself that the discovery of oil was a catastrophe and not a blessing.

DESSERE:

You know it seems that at this point—this is a thought that is coming to me—that the studios wanted to take risks and give you really projects which included comedy but at the same time a lot of action. So you had, as it were, the old studio system functioning as it had let's say ten years earlier.

GORDON:

I don't think that by that time there was any problem in that area. By which I mean, the play is a comedy involving action, as most comedies do. A lot of it was physical. Dean Martin gets shot in the behind with an arrow that's meant for someone else, that kind of thing, [laughter] While there was a great deal of physical action in the western, there was—again, I was no longer identified as a serious director doing only drama, because I had done a good deal of

comedy by that time. What I hadn't done up until that time was to shoot a western, which did involve cattle drives and stampedes and shootouts on horseback and that kind of thing. But, again, the fact that one hasn't done that particular thing doesn't mean that you can't do it.

DESSERE:

But you see that, for instance, when George Cukor made *Heller in Pink Tights*. I don't know if you've seen that film. That was his first western. He got that very late in his career, and he was very happy about that particular project. He said, well, for him, who had directed comedy, this was kind of an honor—to deal with such an all-American genre.

GORDON:

As far as I was concerned, I enjoyed the challenge of that film very much and enjoyed the film. With the possible exception of the fact that Dean Martin was not a committed actor. If you wanted to improve it, to do another take, he didn't want to bother. It was not rewarding to work with him. But there were a number of interesting things. As I said before, your past experiences in certain instances—the theater and film feed reciprocally one another—did in my own experience. There was an interesting problem in the script that there didn't seem to be any effective way of solving. Late in the film, quite late in the film, there was a sequence in which a kind of narrative exposition had to be delivered. That kind of thing, which is quite acceptable early in the picture, is a bad idea late in the picture. The question was how one could do it to make it in a sense interesting. Three people were involved. The girl, Rosemary Forsythe, and Dean and Alain were all in the sequence. They had to describe things that happened out of camera range. I said I remembered something in the experience I'd had in *The Male Animal*—the way it was written—which was very, very interesting in a husband and wife conflict. The husband in that play was a professor and in a certain sense one could say a somewhat absent-minded professor. That comedy came from the fact that the dialogue as written was slightly out of sync. That is to say, he didn't answer the question that the wife had just asked but the question that was asked before that, and comedy came from that incongruity and misunderstanding. I said, by golly, we can use it to spice up what otherwise was a kind of a pedestrian passage in the film, which was simply an expositional, narrative back-tell. And that's the way

we wrote it. The answers were always not to the question which had just been posed but to the one before it, and the misunderstanding which came from that. I attempted to develop a staging choreography that carried that out, so that there was a kind of a complex almost do-si-do going on. Do you know what I mean? It worked out in a kind of entertaining way, getting the necessary exposition conveyed to the audience at the same time in an amusing rather than merely a utilitarian fashion.

DESSERE:

It seems that this project had some very challenging sides, because you remember vividly about it.

GORDON:

Oh, I enjoyed the picture very much, except for the problems with the leading man.

DESSERE:

Harry Keller.

GORDON:

No, no. During the course of the shooting, Keller never interfered. It was only in the cutting room later.

DESSERE:

Tell me something. Do you go to see your films when they are finished, as a rule? Do you usually?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, always. I mean, not often, not many times, but I've seen them with audiences in the theater.

DESSERE:

You go to see them when people are watching them to see the reaction?

GORDON:

Oh, of course. Because that's the experience that one has in the theater all the time. It is particularly valuable in the case of comedy. Because in the theater—

for example, in the course particularly of a pre-opening tryout out of town—you are continuously making modifications on the basis of audience response. Transposition of lines or the addition of a kind of a handle before the line or different physical action or an inflection or something. You know that there is a comic germ there, but the first time it didn't get the laugh you anticipated, so you experiment with it. That is one of the advantages, particularly but not restricted to comedy, that the person who has been a stage director has as an advantage over the person who has only worked in film, because you don't have that opportunity to experiment, the trial and error, the structuring of a joke that makes it snap, crackle, and pop, not merely be faintly amusing.

DESSERE:

Well, also, I remember seeing you here when you were attending a performance of *Generations*. After that you can talk to the actor, I suppose, to tell them, "Well, you were low on energy at this point. "

GORDON:

Or whatever. That is certainly true. That is what one does in the course of a rehearsal, but even more importantly when you have an out-of-town tryout where you're getting the audience response and discovering whether or not it is indeed fulfilling what your expectations were.

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DESSERE:

After that you made *The Impossible Years*. It was at MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer], and it was one of these subjects that you seem to like also—a conflict of generations.

GORDON:

Oh, to some degree. I mean, there again the play was a little domestic comedy, and its thematic significance was insignificant.

DESSERE:

Oh, yes? You think it was a very light subject?

GORDON:

Yes, and incidentally—I don't know if you had asked me about it. Someone asked recently with respect to participations—that is the one film that I had which really paid off, I mean, not enormously, but I think that probably in subsequent reruns it at least equaled what I had made initially on the thing. My experience had led me to believe that never mind what subsequent residuals are going to bring in, that what you are going to make is what you make up front, and that's going to be it. In the case of *The Impossible Years*, much to my astonishment, it paid off very handsomely in subsequent years. I'm still getting checks every now and then for *The Impossible Years*. Of course, the checks are now for \$223 or something like that, but they still keep coming in.

DESSERE:

Oh, you mean they come because the film is shown on television, for instance?

GORDON:

Shown on television, shown in foreign countries, I don't know. I don't know where the residuals come from. They give you a whole long list, but who pays attention to it. The thing has probably been shown in 113 countries.

DESSERE:

Did you particularly enjoy this film? It was an adaptation of a play by Groucho Marx's son.

GORDON:

Yes. It was kind of interesting in a way. The Ephrons, Phoebe and Henry Ephron, had written a play called *Take Her She's Mine*. That was made into a film that wasn't really very good. *The Impossible Years* was not a very good play and made a much better film for some reason. I was familiar with both of them. I can't remember who directed—I knew him, but I can't remember who it was who directed *Take Her She's Mine*. It was made at Twentieth [Century-Fox Film Corporation] and did not come out very well. A very nice guy. I can't remember who directed it.

DESSERE:

I don't know.

GORDON:

But it didn't make a very good film at all. *The Impossible Years* proved to be a very successful film which came from a less good play. *Take Her She's Mine* I thought was a very good stage play.

DESSERE:

Lawrence Weingarten was the producer.

GORDON:

Larry Weingarten, yes

DESSERE:

He was probably old.

GORDON:

Yes, he was, but not in any sense of the word infirm. I mean, he was very much in command and knew his business very well and was very, very helpful as a producer. I liked him very much. As a matter of fact, he wrote, and I wasn't supposed to see it—when I was in the process of being promoted here, I was asked to give the names of references. I phoned him and asked whether he would mind if I included his name. He said of course not. Then he send me a blind carbon copy of what he wrote, and I was embarrassed it was so adulatory.

DESSERE:

Also, he definitely enjoyed working with you.

GORDON:

Apparently. He wrote a wonderful letter.

DESSERE:

A good relationship. Also, you worked with a very good cinematographer on this film called William Daniels.

GORDON:

I had worked with Bill Daniels once before in *Woman in Hiding* and loved Bill. He had a very interesting career. He had been [Greta] Garbo's cameraman and others and then apparently had an alcohol problem and was out of the business for a fairly long period of time. He came back—he overcame it through Alcoholics Anonymous—and the first picture that he made on his return was directed by Jules Dassin. Mark Hellinger produced it. It was shot in New York.

DESSERE:

Was it *Night Is the City*?

GORDON:

Something like that.

DESSERE:

It was a film noire in which I believe Yvonne de Carlo had a small part.

GORDON:

I can't recall too much about it, but that was his first picture. *Woman in Hiding* was the second picture. I think I mentioned in earlier conversations two things that I remember vividly about Bill Daniels. I choke up as I think about it. The first one was that we finished one day's shooting, and we had to go into a sequence that was a very difficult sequence that we had to shoot on *Woman in Hiding*. This was a chase sequence between the villain pursuing the girl and the good guy pursuing the villain. It was going to be shot in catwalks over a factory. The conclusion of the sequence is that the villain falls to his death in the factory that he had stolen from the girl. We were shooting it in the catwalks way up high at the top of the soundstage. It was no more than a quarter of a page in the script, and they had given me a schedule of a half of a day. I had worked that sequence out and realized two things. One was that it was going to take about thirty setups to cover it adequately, and it was like at least two and a half, three days of work really that was required. Plus the fact that operationally it was going to be very difficult, because we had to be working on a boom with big platforms for the lighting. At the conclusion of the preceding day's shooting, before we were to go into the sequence, as always happens, the cameraman, his gaffer, and the best boy go down to the

new set and you give them the basic setup as to what you are going to start with, so that they can start early in the morning. We already had arranged the structuring. We had to rearrange them, the design. They weren't the way the catwalks normally are up there, but we arranged them and designed them for our purposes. There were Bill and I and the head men of the crew. I said, "Well, the basic sequence will go from left to right, and it's going to be this and that." In the middle of it, I said, "How in the hell am I ever going to get this sequence in the can?" Bill turned to me and said, "One shot at a time, Mickey, one shot at a time." It was the most wonderful thought, because very often you look at a sequence of a battle scene or whatever and you say, "My God, how are we ever going to do it?" "One shot at a time" was the most important lesson that I ever learned as a film director, and it came from the wisdom of Bill Daniels, who had been in it. The other thing that I remember about Bill in particular—remember, I think I told you that we wanted the sequence to be shot in the graveyard in the rain and we had to abandon it.

DESSERE:

Yes, we talked about it.

GORDON:

In its place we had the scene, the same scene, played after the funeral as they returned to this house. I said to Bill, "We're not going to have a sequence that would have been very, very exciting." As a matter of fact, we had a storyboard on that sequence, I recall, in the cemetery, which we never shot. I said, "Bill, when they come back after the funeral, I want this to be the loneliest, emptiest feeling that we can possibly create." I remember that when we saw it in dailies, tears came to my eyes. He had shot it so beautifully. Bill was a great artist. And he did not have much opportunity for artistry in *The Impossible Years*, which was essentially domestic. In *Woman in Hiding* we had a lot of stuff that was a visual challenge—exterior stuff. I mentioned about the car plunging through the railing. That kind of thing. And a very strange sequence in which a woman was drowned. There was a superstition that if you fired a cannon ball—you know, it had a kind of period feeling—across the river, the body would come to the surface. To shoot that sequence of the cannon and the cannon ball skipping across the water—he caught it magnificently. Bill was really a wonderful cinematographer. Those resources were not particularly

called for in *The Impossible Years*, but he was always wonderful to work with, very cooperative and very creative.

DESSERE:

Would you say that *The Impossible Years* was more theatrical in its—?

GORDON:

No, it was a movie. You open it up always and it's not the play. I had the experience on a number of occasions—I don't know if we have spoken of this before—of having to adapt a stage play to the screen. *Another Part of the Forest* was a very, very good example of it. The starting point is "What would the playwright have included if the playwright had not been constricted by the limitations of the medium?" They talk about this lynching narratively in the theater. Well, you have a movie, so you shoot it, and it makes a very exciting sequence film[wise].

DESSERE:

What I find interesting in the theme of this film it's that it's very quote, unquote, "sixties," in the sense that it seems that the film market of this is starting to aim maybe at teenagers, and also conflict of generations. Of course, in the sixties there were a lot of independent productions which were sensational teenager films—Roger Corman and all this. This seems that a major studio is really going into these generation-type problems, trying to combine established stars with newcomers.

GORDON:

What's her name, who is now a talk show hostess?

DESSERE:

You mean she's in the film? Are you talking about Ozzie Nelson?

GORDON:

No, no, I'm talking about Cindy—

DESSERE:

Was she in this film?

GORDON:

Yes, in *The Impossible Years*. It was her first and one of the few films that she made. She was borrowed from Twentieth, who had her under contract.

DESSERE:

She was the lead in this film?

GORDON:

She was the leading kid, the older girl.

DESSERE:

Oh, you mean Christina Ferrare? She has a show now.

GORDON:

She has a talk show that emanates from New York. This is since she was married to the man who developed the automobile.

DESSERE:

John De Lorean.

GORDON:

De Lorean, yeah. She was a seventeen-year-old kid at the time, very, very bright and beautiful at the time. She's not nearly as attractive now as she was at that time. Very inexperienced actress but extremely bright and able to pick up. All she had made up until that time were a few test scenes at Twentieth Century-Fox. She was just right for the film and had great charm and photographic appeal as well.

DESSERE:

Were they trying to make a Sandra Dee of her, would you say?

GORDON:

No, she was a very different type. She wasn't the doll baby that Sandra Dee was. She was developing into a femme fatale, but not yet, although in her mind in a sense she was.

DESSERE:

What about Lola Albright?

GORDON:

Oh, very, very good. Very good to work with. Very expert. She was a very good actress. But of course the prize was David [Niven].

DESSERE:

Yes, I know how much you like to work with him. You thought that he was a wonderful man. The film was very successful? It was very interesting?

GORDON:

It never got any accolades, critical accolades, but as far as popular appeal is concerned, it was apparently successful beyond my wildest expectations.

DESSERE:

Do you remember any particular problems that you encountered in this film? Some shooting scenes?

GORDON:

Well, the only problem really was Ozzie, who couldn't remember his name. He had to work from cue cards all the time.

DESSERE:

All the time! So you had to put them outside camera range. Well, do you remember any story about the music and the title song, anything like that? Because I've read something about it. That it was written by the singing group the Tokens and sung by another group, the Cowsills.

GORDON:

Oh yes. I don't remember the details about it, but I do remember that they were at the top of the chart, the Cowsills. But by the time the film was released, nobody remembered them anymore! [laughter] But that's one of the things as far as the music business is concerned: while some of them will remain on top of the chart for a long period of time, the turnover is extremely rapid. From the time that we decided to have them sing the title song and the time of release, they were just the snows of yesteryear. [laughter]

DESSERE:

How did you see the evolution of the film industry at this point? The themes are so different from the early things that you already worked on in the fifties and forties.

GORDON:

Well, at that particular time MGM was still a studio. It was in the process of evolving into what, for lack of a better phrase—I may have used it before—was MGM rental studios, in which everything was an independent production. It wasn't quite that yet, but it was moving in that direction. Most of the productions were independent productions, but with many of the producers being the historic personnel of MGM. So that one didn't have the same relationship, shall we say, to the front office as a few years before, in the early fifties, when I was working with Darryl [F.] Zanuck, who was the head man. One did not have that experience there. So there was a greater degree, if you want to call it, of autonomy. In the case of Darryl Zanuck, that was not necessarily a virtue, because Darryl

GORDON:

Well, that was not the first one. The first one was *The Web*.

DESSERE:

The Web was the first one. So *The Web*, were you happy with that screenplay?

GORDON:

No, not at all. When I first was given the screenplay I said, "Well, it needs a great deal of work." I talked with the producer and I understood that we were going to do quite an extensive rewrite. And then much to my dismay—I was working on it, you know, making notes and so on. I got a call from him one day, and he said, "Well, are you ready to go?" I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You know we start shooting on Monday." I said, "What script?" He said, "The script you have." I said, "Not me, I'm not going to shoot that was a brilliant filmmaker. He really was, unlike certain other studio heads, who were not.

DESSERE:

But do you feel that you were getting the big treatment still at the time? That you could use the resources of a very, very good studio? There was no difference?

GORDON:

No, no. I mean, obviously budgetary considerations are always important, always have been. The practices varied from studio to studio—that is to say, the pre-production and the involvement of the director in the pre-production on the basis of budgetary concerns. It was most demanding at Universal. That's where you really had to sit for sometimes two full days with the producer and the business manager, whatever his title was. Department by department would come in with their budgets. Then they would say, "Do you have to have eighty people in the restaurant? Can't you do it with forty?" That sort of thing. And considerations of costumes and of how many walls there should be in the set. That kind of thing was most exhaustive at Universal, less so at Fox, less so at MGM. The business department took care of it, and you went with whatever the budgetary constraints were. You protested sometimes on shooting schedules, always asking for more time than they would give you, even asking for more time than you thought you needed, because you knew you would be chopped down anyway.

DESSERE:

Just to finish with *The Impossible Years*, Chad Everett was in it. Do you remember him?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, sure.

DESSERE:

He's now a drama coach in Hollywood.

GORDON:

I didn't know that, but he was a very capable actor. Sure, he was fine.

DESSERE:

So now we have to speak about your last film, *How Do I Love Thee*? I know you don't like it. [laughter]

GORDON:

It was a pity, too, in a way, because it didn't come out well. It was difficult working. We shot in Miami in the middle of summer. The thing that I said about Dean Martin on other occasions was certainly true of Jackie Gleason as well. Difficult to work with.

DESSERE:

The producers didn't seem to care too much about the film, no?

GORDON:

Well, everybody cares. You knock your brains out preparing it.

DESSERE:

You said that it was a little long. At some point you found it was too long sometimes?

GORDON:

The film itself? I don't recall that.

DESSERE:

But you mentioned that you were not happy with it at all.

GORDON:

No, the shooting was difficult, and Gleason was difficult to work with. But again, you work as hard as you can. Was it in that film or was it in the other film where I had a sequence—I guess it might have been in *Move Over, Darling*. But here, too, I had something with cars and developed a complex choreography kind of thing. It was not uninteresting, but it wasn't working under the same circumstances as working in the studios of Hollywood.

DESSERE:

I see here that it was an ABC Cinerama production.

GORDON:

That was when Metro was in the other situation. It was made at MGM? it was made there. The offices during preparation were back at MGM, but it was an independent production.

DESSERE:

Would you say that you were receiving less offers at the time, choices that you had to do? Were you excited about that particular project originally? Did you like it?

GORDON:

Not particularly.

DESSERE:

Did you choose it because there was nothing better at the time?

GORDON:

Exactly. There's an old cliché that I haven't heard in recent years in which one would speak of a "potboiler." Do you know the phrase? It meant a work that is of lesser significance but which one did in order to make one's living. That doesn't mean, incidentally, that you don't work quite as hard. Sometimes you have to work even harder on those things.

DESSERE:

We were talking about the actress who was in your play *The Family Way*, Wasn't her name Fritzie Burr? She was in that film?

GORDON:

Yes, she was, of course. She had been in the play, and because she was so very good in the play I wanted her in this film, and she was very good.

DESSERE:

Rosemary Forsyth was there also. She was also in *Texas Across the River*. Did you enjoy working with her?

GORDON:

Rosemary was not as capable. Something had happened to her in the intervening years. She was still good, but I don't quite know what it was. I almost had a feeling that she might have had a drinking problem.

DESSERE:

I see. This film was also from a play by Peter de Vries.

GORDON:

Not a play. It was based on a novel, *Let Me Count the Ways*.

DESSERE:

Was the novel particularly striking and successful at the time?

GORDON:

Well, Peter de Vries was an excellent humorist in his writing and a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine—shorter pieces. A man with a unique kind of humor in a kind of way that S. J. Perelman was unique in his genre. A very, very deft writer. Very urbane, very witty and capable. I am afraid that what we ultimately turned out wasn't really representative in the best sense of what Peter had written. De Vries was not a dramatist. There's a very important difference, in a curious way, between droll humor in narrative prose and comedy in either theater or film. The thing that evokes a pleasant smile when you read can be deadly in the theater. You need to get laughs. The material which in narrative prose I found very entertaining and very bright didn't necessarily translate itself with maximum effectiveness into film. So a whole screenplay was written—for example, there was a character, a young English professor, in the play who was regarded as an enormously stimulating teacher by the students, but it wasn't dramatized. In a way it was in literary terms. That is to say, he was one, for example, who was sufficiently "iconoclastic" to dare to say that not all of Shakespeare is equally great. That was the most radical thing that he ever said. But in prose he was talking about the whole business of the iambic pentameters and the verse. He said, "I can talk in iambic pentameters," and he proceeded to do so. In prose it's very entertaining, but in theatrical terms it doesn't quite work that well, do you know?

DESSERE:

Yes. It seems that this script blended several genres—action, comedy, humor. Maybe the blending of genres was an obstacle for real development of the story. Did you think that way or am I mistaken?

GORDON:

No, no, not really, because the adaptation of either prose material or plays into films is an operation that is done very, very frequently. There's nothing startling about that. As a matter of fact, with respect to what I was saying about the English professor, I remember that that sequence bothered me because he was a stimulating professor only by reputation. There was nothing dramatized about it. I don't know if I talked about that with SMU [Southern Methodist University]—about incorporating something that I remembered from my own experiences as a student and a professor of philosophy. I used that in the film. I subsequently, twenty years ago, went back to see that professor before we made the film, because I had to be in the East anyway. I thought I would incorporate a visit to Baltimore and attend my fortieth college reunion. Next month I'm going to my sixtieth college reunion! I wrote to him and told him—I didn't know even if he was still alive, but I had my secretary look up the name in the Baltimore telephone book, and sure enough there was that name. I undertook to write him a letter. I said, "You won't remember me as I remember you, of course, however, blah, blah, blah, I would like—if you have time or are so disposed—to pay my respects when I'm going to be in Baltimore for a weekend." And I said, "Incidentally, it might be of interest for you to know that I used material from your class on scientific method in the screenplay." I talked about that. I had a very amusing meeting when I did meet him, because he wrote back and said yes he remembered me, because I'd been more or less like a TA [teaching assistant] for him, and he said he was very interested in knowing what I had used in the screenplay. At the very end—it was characteristic, he was a very humorous guy—he said, "I think it's only fair to tell you that I intend to sue you for plagiarism!" [laughter]

1.29. TAPE NUMBER: XV, Side One (March 30, 1989)

DESSERE:

So you were saying—what was the end of this visit with the professor?

GORDON:

I wrote this letter. A week later I got a reply from him in which he said he would be very pleased to see me. He said Sunday afternoon at two o'clock. "We'll have sherry and conversation." I had mentioned that I had used some of his material. [tape recorder off] At the end of his letter he was very curious as to what I had used from his class that I had referred to. He said, "I think that it's only fair to warn you that I intend to sue you for plagiarism!" [laughter]

DESSERE:

It's a wonderful story. So now, no more film offers happened?

GORDON:

There was something which happened after that. I got a call while I was in Miami from Carlo Ponti about a film that he was interested in being involved in. It was going to be shot in Italy, and without going into the—an American named Albert Band who had been living in Rome for a number of years was going to be the producer of it. They had the start of the story, and we began talking about it and working on it. The whole project sounded—I mean, the prospect of shooting the film at Cinecitta was very interesting to me. I had never been to Italy, and I wanted very much to go. So the project developed. But ultimately what happened at that particular time—we were in Rome and we were doing some adaptations. We were looking for locations and so forth and so on. Metro[Goldwyn-Mayer], MGM, was the principal financial backer of the thing, and at that time there was a turnaround. A man who had been an important executive at CBS, I think it was, James [T.] Aubrey, took over at MGM. And they canceled a lot of projects, including a major one that Fred Zinnemann was involved in, "Taipei" or "Taiwan" or something like that that ultimately was never made. Several projects were canceled, including this one. So while I spent about four months in Rome, the picture ultimately collapsed.

DESSERE:

Did you like Cinecitta? Was it an interesting place?

GORDON:

I never really worked at Cinecitta at all, as a matter of fact. Ponti had his own offices down near the Capodoglio, and that's where we did some work. But I never even got on the lot at Cinecitta.

DESSERE:

I want to ask you about the unfinished projects you never really completed. The library has a copy of a screenplay of a film that you were supposed to direct, but you told me you never did, called "The Smash Master Caper." It was supposed to be made at [Twentieth Century-]Fox [Film Corporation]. Any memories about this?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. It was a very, very funny idea that we then developed. I believe, as a matter of fact, I had Ben Starr involved in it too. The idea basically was about industrial espionage.

DESSERE:

Was it a comedy?

GORDON:

Yes, because what we did was industrial espionage in the toy business and all of the corporate manipulations and insecurities and so on. It became in a kind of way very, very melodramatic. The comedy came from the gravity of that, not involved with munitions or armaments or things of that kind, but with toys, you see. Which had a very substantial basis in fact, because in the course of our research, we were able to make a contact with the Mattel toy people. We went through their place, and the security was like the Pentagon down there. You had to have a badge, but that badge, the blue badge, couldn't get you into that. There you needed a red badge or whatever it was. I think it developed into a very amusing screenplay, because it involved something which has become more or less routine now, but which wasn't then, which was toys which were robotic toys and which ultimately took on a life of their own. This was long before *E.T.*: [*The Extraterrestrial*] and that kind of special-effects stuff. The whole story developed around that kind of thing. So it was a melodrama which was comic simply because of its materials. That is a very, very significant aspect of comedy very often—a disproportion, an incongruity, between the concern and what the object of the concern is. In other words, that's what made Carole Lombard such a magnificent farceur—farceuse, I should say, if I'm going to speak French—as well as a very, very powerful dramatic actress, which she played the same way. But it was about a broken

fingernail, not about the life and death of her children. Like in *My Man Godfrey*, when the silly debutante had to plead with this down-and-outer, this homeless person, to be a prize in the scavenger hunt. It was as though this was the only doctor in Vienna who could save her child! [laughter] She played it with that degree of seriousness. The comedy came not because she made funny faces or wiggled her behind when she walked, but because of the grotesque incongruity between the stimulus and the response.

DESSERE:

Who was the producer involved in this "Smashmaster Caper"? Do you remember anybody involved?

GORDON:

Well, we never got to the point of actors at all. I can't remember. It might have been Rosenberg, but I'm not sure.

DESSERE:

It was at Fox.

GORDON:

It probably was Aaron Rosenberg

DESSERE:

Do you remember if this was going to involve a lot of special effects?

GORDON:

Yes, and that was one of the reasons why it was abandoned, because it looked like it was going to be grotesquely expensive.

DESSERE:

Yes, I can imagine. Do you remember any other projects you were involved in which didn't work out in terms of film projects?

GORDON:

Not really, except that there was a screenplay called "The Piano Sport" that was never made that Metro had and that I wanted to do. It was a gentle thing, but I thought written with great taste. I just felt it was a lovely story, maybe a

little too rarified. It involved a pianist and Vivaldi and a lot of stuff which is not necessarily of popular appeal, but it was written with great deftness and skill. I wanted that script, and it was going to be made. Alan Schneider, the famous stage director, was brought in on it. I had known Alan from way before. He had been a stage manager for me many, many years before in New York. He came into my office. I forget what I was preparing at the time. I remember this was before this last film. Because he had never made films, he wanted whatever kind of advice I could give him. I talked to him about the processes and how it worked in the studios, as well as certain concepts in respect to both the similarities and the differences between the media. But: that was abandoned, too. Meanwhile, I wanted it, and I kept nudging my agent. At one particular point the agent said to me—I mean, I had said to him, "What about that? Have you been talking to them at MGM? I'd like to do this film." He said, "Well, I did talk with Jim Aubrey about it. Do you want to hear what he said? You won't like it." I said, "Yes, of course, I want to hear." One of the things that he said to me was, "Aubrey said, 'We like Gordon. He's made several pictures here, and they've done well. But we're not hiring people his age.'" I had just passed my sixty-first birthday at the time. I said to myself, "He said it. Who knows how many people are thinking it that I don't know about?" It was that night that I started composing a letter to UCLA to ask whether they might be interested in my services. That while I didn't have necessarily the most distinguished record as a film director, it was substantial. Nor did I have—what shall I say?—the most advanced academic qualifications, yet I did have a master's degree in fine arts from Yale University. Maybe the combination would be of interest. I got a very courteous reply from the then chairman of the department, whom I had never met, who said that they found my resume of interest. They didn't have an opening, but they would keep it on file. It was some months later that I got an inquiry as to whether I'd be interested in teaching a class in the summer session—that was in the summer of 1970—which I did. The following year they invited me back again, and that was the start of my career here. But that was in a sense the turning point. And that film, that very nice script, was never made as a film.

DESSERE:

Let me ask you something. You did some work in television. Was it when you were already at UCLA?

GORDON:

Well, I continued, yes. Summer was the only time that I could sequester from 1971 on. So I did a lot of little knick-knacks that were really engagements of like three weeks at most.

DESSERE:

You worked for "Room 222" in 1971 and "Anna and the King" in 1972 and "Banyon." So you directed a few episodes.

GORDON:

Yes, "Anna and the King" I did the opening episode.

DESSERE:

I see, the very first one. How did you find the ways of shooting in television?

GORDON:

All of the things that I did in television were miniature movies. I never worked three camera. I never worked in that way. I would be terrified of trying to sit in front of a monitor and doing it. I just made movies; they were little movies.

DESSERE:

So you shot them one camera, but you had a very tight schedule, I suppose.

GORDON:

Oh, yes, yes. You had to do very careful preplanning so that you could accomplish what you needed to do, try to get quality and so forth. In each instance, as I said before, they were miniature films and not conventional television.

DESSERE:

Were they half an hour long or longer than that?

GORDON:

"Banyon" was an hour, I think.

DESSERE:

What was "Banyon"?

GORDON:

Oh, it was just another private eye series.

DESSERE:

So you were back, in some ways, to the times of *Boston Blackie* [*Goes Hollywood*].

GORDON:

In a way, yes. I think that "Anna and the King" was a half hour, but it was the pilot of the series. "Room 222" was an ongoing thing. It was maybe in its second year by the time I was invited to do it. I had known the producer, Gene Reynolds, for years. When I was a dialogue director, he was a boy actor in one of the films that I worked on, and I got to know him then.

DESSERE:

Did you find any constraint working in television because their schedules were very tight?

GORDON:

Oh, of course. The tight schedules of the first B pictures that I made were more generous, in a way, than what you did on television, as far as shooting time. You had to do twenty, twenty-five setups a day.

DESSERE:

That's a lot. And that didn't particularly interest you? You thought you were going backwards?

GORDON:

Well, I wanted to keep it alive if I could, but meanwhile my commitment was really at the university. I only did them during the summer when I had open time. As a matter of fact, what happened was one summer just as I—it was the day I finished in the first summer session. There was about an eight- or six-week hiatus before the starting of fall quarter. I got a call, and—I can't remember the name—someone who I slightly knew, a producer, said, "I heard you might be available to do a television thing for me." I said, "Sure, it just so

happens I've got this time." He said, "Great, it will fit right into our schedule." The commitment was like for three weeks or two weeks. I said, "Yes, I'll do it. Send me the script." And he sent me the script, and I read it with dismay. It was so terrible. It was called "Love American Style," the series. It was an awful thing. I had never even seen the darn thing on the tube, so I didn't know what it was. I read the script, and for the first time I had to renege on a contract. It was verbal, but I had committed myself. I said, "No, I can't do it." The reason was that I would lose my entire credibility with the students if I were to do that. That was the last thing, and that was the end. My agent at the time said, "Oh, let's forget the whole thing." I said, "I agree with you." That was the time I said, "I'm not going to do television anymore. I don't need the money, and I don't enjoy it, and why should I do it?"

DESSERE:

Well, of course it was a major departure, because you are one of the last great Hollywood directors of the big era.

GORDON:

That's perhaps an overstatement, but I was a respected director.

DESSERE:

Well, yes, you are among the last generation of the big studio system.

GORDON:

So that was the termination. I didn't ever entertain any offers or seek any offers after that. That closed the door for me.

DESSERE:

Because even a lot of directors went to television and did fine, but obviously for you it was a medium you didn't appreciate at all.

GORDON:

No, it was working under the most unpromising, unfavorable of conditions. I think I discussed with you the business of the absence of rehearsal even in major films, the virtual absence of it. Obviously, it was exaggerated in the case of television. I mean, bang, you just come right in: "Nice to meet you. You're coming from your father's funeral. Here's the man who you think is

responsible. Well, let's bring the camera over here." And that's the way you shoot. That was not rewarding at all. As I said before, if I had been in economic need I would have done it. But I wasn't, so I decided that I'd devote myself fully here. Then I began to do these plays, or I had already done one or two, and as I told you, ultimately I wound up doing thirteen productions here at UCLA. So as far as my creative thirst was concerned as a director, it was satisfied here.

DESSERE:

Yes. Because you were already working here, you had no desire to go back.

GORDON:

That's right. It wasn't as though I were only teaching. I was teaching and directing at the same time and working with original material and with student playwrights and that kind of thing, all of which was far more gratifying.

DESSERE:

One last question. You had to go through the administrative procedure of having a file. Who wrote you letters of recommendation besides Ross Hunter?

GORDON:

Ross and Larry [Lawrence] Weingarten, Rod Serling, Richard Berg, people whom I knew. There may have been one or two others. I forgot who they were.

DESSERE:

Did you go from assistant professor to full professor?

GORDON:

I didn't start even as an assistant professor. I started as a lecturer. Then after two years I was up for promotion to assistant professor. But no. I mean, they said, "With this background you can't make him an assistant professor." So I was made a professor "in residence," which is not tenured. So there were two more years as professor in residence. Then I was made a full professor.

DESSERE:

So that's when you got tenure.

GORDON:

Yes. Which lasted for one year, because at the end of that, after two years I guess, I reached compulsory retirement age. So between my fifth and my sixth year I had tenure. Thereafter I didn't. In eighteen years I had tenure for one year. I enjoyed tenure for one year.

DESSERE:

Back to the insecurity of the film industry!

GORDON:

Exactly. SECOND PART (March 31, 1989)

DESSERE:

Yesterday I forgot to ask you about "Decoy," which was a series which existed in the sixties.

GORDON:

No, the most interesting thing about that was that it was in the fifties. It was made in New York, and it was a syndicated program. Now, while it was possible for me, as we've discussed, to continue working in New York in the theater during that blacklist period, television was completely a closed book. That was as black a blacklist as it was in film, perhaps even more so. It started earlier. It did not have a connection with any government agency, with the House Un-American Activities Committee and that sort of thing. But it started the blacklist under the pressure of people who agitated the advertisers much, much earlier. There was a book called *Red Channels* that listed all manner of people. Many of them were erroneous. It was based in great measure just on scuttlebutt and that sort of thing. But it did create problems for a number of people, who found that they weren't being employed simply because their names had appeared in this very unofficial publication. That was an enterprise that for some people, in many respects, I think, perhaps [was] just kind of a money-making scheme for them. However, in the syndicated area the barriers were far more porous. I was very surprised to find that I was able to work on this series, which was simply a cops-and-robbers series.. "Decoy" was based around a character who was a policewoman and who frequently was involved

in what nowadays we call "sting" operations and things of that sort. Beverly Garland played the leading role in it, a very, very capable actress. I don't remember how many episodes there were in total. The series was already in work when I was called on. There were two directors. There was another director and myself, who kind of alternated week to week. They were half-hour series and shot in New York. I would say that every other episode involved exterior shooting in the streets.

DESSERE:

Was it very fast paced in terms of shooting schedule?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, I don't recall. The shooting schedules were maybe three days, four days perhaps.

DESSERE:

Do you remember how many episodes approximately you shot? Was it a very successful series?

GORDON:

In terms of ratings I have no idea. But it did have a pretty good run. I guess I must have done perhaps six of them over a period of a couple of months. As I said, we alternated. I can't remember his first name. He did some film directing later—Stuart Rosenberg was the other director who alternated with me on those things. I'd be preparing while he was shooting, and then while I was shooting he was preparing. We just leapfrogged that way. It was very concentrated work.

DESSERE:

Did you find that you didn't have time for rehearsals? Did that bother you?

GORDON:

Well, this is true in television all the time, as I think I may have said. If you were to talk about it in practical terms, when you are shooting television your first rehearsal is your dress rehearsal. You're ready to go. Your actors know their lines. You do what rehearsing you can while they are setting up the lights and the camera.

DESSERE:

So you contemplated television at the time as an alternative, I suppose.

GORDON:

Well, it was work!

DESSERE:

Another thing I wanted to ask you, were you surprised you were not in this *Red Channels*?

GORDON:

Let me say that I don't think I was ever because I wasn't very much in the radio-television field at the time that book was compiled. There were blacklists, of course, but they were not as scrupulously screened in a small, independent syndicated operation as in the networks. So that it was possible someone just overlooked it by accident or possibly even in one particular case by design. I think that the producer of the program probably knew about my talent—I'm sure he did, because he was a man that I knew for many years. It didn't disturb him.

DESSERE:

Since we are still talking about the blacklisting, let me ask you a few questions here and there that I forgot to ask you before. Did you know about Ronald [W.] Reagan's intervention or contribution with the committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities]?

GORDON:

Oh, no, none of us knew that until just recently, when there were some disclosures made. We knew that he was aligned on the right when he was president of the [Screen Actors] Guild and so on, so we knew where his sympathies lay. But as far as his doing undercover work for the FBI, or whatever it was, no one knew, not that I know of. It came as a surprise to me when I read about it recently in the news.

DESSERE:

What about the American Civil Liberties Union? We talked very briefly off mike about that. You contributed to that?

GORDON:

Oh, yes, and I still do, as a matter of fact. But I never had any active involvement other than being a contributor, which is interesting in a way, because many of the causes that they support I'm not in sympathy with. But the basic principle, in general terms, in categorical terms, of civil liberties is one that I'm very much in sympathy with. Even though in certain instances—where they will defend the Nazis, for example, the right to march in Skokie, Illinois, and so on, this I personally am very opposed to. But nevertheless I have to acknowledge and respect the principle that animates them to take that position.

DESSERE:

You think, for instance, that the American Civil Liberties Union would defend too many causes?

GORDON:

Yes. I don't think that the Civil Liberties Union discriminates with respect to the specific ideologies. It's the principle of civil liberties that they are always defending. In that respect they have my sympathy and support, even though some of the specific, shall we say, subjects whom they are supporting and defending I am not in sympathy with.

DESSERE:

I am going to ask you another thing about the blacklist, which I was going to ask you later anyway. What is your feeling now about all the interest people have had? Because I know you've been interviewed by—

1.30. TAPE NUMBER: XV, Side Two (March 31, 1989)

DESSERE:

What do you think about all the interest about the blacklist and the legacy of the blacklist? It still stirs some emotion. I know historians have come to you also, like Victor Navasky, to ask you about many things. What do you think? What is your feeling after all this? Because the book by [Victor] Navasky

[*Naming Names*] was published in 1980, so we are now nine years later. Do you have any thinking about this?

GORDON:

Well, it's not something that is constantly in my mind, although obviously it's something that made a profound impression on me. I was always very reluctant to discuss it at all for a couple of reasons. First of all, it's inevitable that in discussing it, the things that I say might appear to an objective listener or reader as self-serving, and one does not want to place himself in that position. Nevertheless, I feel that the things that I did—while from a material point of view, they were not, certainly not, a benefit to me—they were just the contrary—I feel that the choices that I made were necessary and valid choices because of some very important principles involved. Now, in the stress of that period, those principles were outweighed by a certain kind of anxiety—one might almost call it a paranoia—that pervaded the country. It is very difficult for someone of your age to understand what that period was like. In the perspective of forty years later, people now see that this was a very dark and not an admirable period in the national psychology, if you like, and that it had implications that went beyond the injuries that were done to individuals. The blacklist caused a degree of self-censorship among many writers and artists generally that went far beyond the actual sanctions that may have been applied. That persisted for many, many years after that. There was a quality of "You can't write that," "You can't say that." Even though there was no arbitrary censorship imposed from above, there was always that anxiety that if one were to have said something of that sort, that would place him in jeopardy of some kind of investigation that might ultimately jeopardize his career. So it was really a pervasive kind of anxiety on the part of many, many people who were writers and other creative people that inhibited many of the things that they chose to deal with, chose to write, even lines of dialogue which might be regarded as something that would place them in danger of investigation and persecution.

DESSERE:

Do you think that influenced your creativity at the same time? Of course you always liked comedy, but do you think that, for instance, it occurred to you,

consciously or unconsciously, to choose comedy because it was a lighter kind of material and maybe this way you could escape a certain pressure?

GORDON:

Not really, because comedy always is attacking something. Comedy is critical. The question is what could be the targets of your comedy. So I never viewed comedy merely as cream puffs. Comedy actually, at its best—the genre that I like very much is the comedy about something. And by "something" I don't mean an anecdote; I don't mean a little contrived situation. But about some aspect of either individual or social attitudes and cultures which deserves to be exposed to the searchlight of ridicule. Do you see what I mean? So the implication of your question that comedy isn't important, that nothing serious comes from it, I don't think is truly applicable. As a matter of fact, I think Moliere at one point was quoted as having said that comedy improves people's behavior while amusing them.

DESSERE:

Oh, I agree with you. I was just playing the devil's advocate. The blacklist people are now reexamining this and really are very shocked that something like that could happen in America. I come from a foreign country, and I can tell you that this was certainly not appreciated, since a lot of people went to Europe and lived in Europe. The Europeans were shocked by this type of attitude, because politically there was a wider representation in Europe. This book by Navasky is now criticizing from the inside what happened. He really stressed some ambiguities that people went through at the time, because that's the work of the historian, to reexamine the past. Sometimes you have different opinions than the people who experienced it. You've been very generous in sharing your impressions of that period, for somebody who was so badly hit by it.

GORDON:

Well, again, in 1980, or whenever it was that I agreed to have the interview with Navasky, there was a long period of time of cooling off, and so the stresses of that particular period were a distant memory of pain. That was the first time that I ever agreed to discuss the subject at all. I am obviously not very pleased with what Navasky wrote, less in terms of what he wrote than in

terms of what he didn't write. A number of things that I felt and expressed to him did not appear in his essay. Those things that he did write were justified from his point of view. My dissatisfaction is with what was not included, rather than what was. I remember particularly with respect to a question that he asked me about certain individuals—I remember saying at the time—it was quite spontaneous, off the top of my head. I said that it was a very fortunate man for whom material self-interest and moral responsibility coincide. In the case of most of us there is a conflict between self-interest and social imperatives. Many of the people who were the so-called cooperative witnesses tried to make it appear, and did successfully in that time make it appear, that there was this identification between material self-interest and the ethical imperatives. He did not include that. I remember afterwards that I thought that that was a very felicitous improvisation of the moment and made a note of it. That's why I remember it.

DESSERE:

But did he ask you if he could use your declarations? Did you give him permission?

GORDON:

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, he was sent to me by a member of this faculty, Howard Suber, who had also written extensively, particularly about Jews among the people who were among the blacklistees. I felt that Howard was a very honest and intelligent man, even though I didn't always agree with the biases that he expressed in the articles that I had read of his. It was at his request. I didn't know who Navasky was at the time. He was just a person who wanted to write a book. It seemed to me this was a subject that was worthy of illumination, of further exploration. And so without knowing where his head was at, I talked to him quite openly, and I don't regret having done so, even though I'm not very pleased with the general tone of that part about me.

DESSERE:

He said that when you had that meeting in that hotel and you expressed—you know, because the times were gone—that's what you said, that there was no pressure and everybody knew. He said that you came back, and you were

supposed to go to a party, and you said, "No, I won't go to this party, because these people won't want me in this party." Do you remember that?

GORDON:

Yes, I do. I understood the feeling. I didn't want to either embarrass myself or embarrass my friends by socializing with them, because people felt very, very strongly, even though it was almost nine years after the social issue was a burning one.

DESSERE:

It was a very sensitive issue obviously.

GORDON:

And was for many people until the end of their lives. Their thinking and their attitudes were profoundly influenced by it, as I suppose mine still are to some degree.

DESSERE:

You could see it from this documentary, *The Legacy of the Blacklist*. Even the children and the wives suffered immensely, and some of them cried.

GORDON:

Yes, I saw some of that footage. I can understand it, because it was a very traumatizing experience, involving dislocations and so on. I told you the story of my having to uproot my family, take them back [East], and say it's over—exile in perpetuity—which is what I felt at the time.

DESSERE:

So now we are at UCLA, and we are going to talk about your productions for the school. Did you like the department when you arrived?

GORDON:

When I was first invited to join the department, after that first little experimental visit I had the summer before, it was on a very trial basis. It was on a one-year contract as a lecturer. We both entered into the enterprise on a trial basis. I found to my surprise that I was enjoying it far more than I anticipated. I remember speaking with the then chairman, saying [that

though] I had not had any formal academic teaching experience, it was my belief on the basis of my experience that when you're directing you're always teaching. Although you are very careful when working with professionals to conceal that fact, but you are. [laughter] I felt that the transition from directing—what I had been doing for so many years—to teaching was not going to be a difficult one. I recall that when I was asked to make some kind of a statement for some review boards about what my present creative work was, I actually wrote in the statement, the self-statement that one is asked to provide, that my experience was rather the opposite of the norm. One comes out of an academic background and attempts to do creative work, but I had been doing some forty years of creative work, creative research, or whatever one calls it in academic terminology. What I regarded as my most important creative effort at this time was attempting to translate my experience into terms that were communicable to students, so that my experience could be shared with them. I felt that this was certainly a very worthwhile and dignified enterprise.

DESSERE:

I think you communicate very well with the students, because I have sat in your Fundamentals of Play Directing. You have to deal with undergraduates, and you are obviously perfectly able to impart to them a lot of things. What I find very interesting about this is—

GORDON:

Let me say that the imparting is not difficult. Determining for yourself what by now in my own life is intuitive almost—what is the causality, if you like? What brought me to those intuitions? To try to say there was a chain of causality in my thinking and activity that has brought me to the positions and attitudes that guide my work now. To try to reconstruct, as it were, a chain of reasoning which has brought me to it. That was the difficult part. The conveying it to the students was not difficult for me.

DESSERE:

What I found very interesting is that you thought that you were more or less forced to leave the film industry, because somebody said, "You are now over

sixty and you cannot understand young people. The market is now geared to young people." And here you find yourself working with very young people!

GORDON:

Which proved ultimately to be a very nourishing experience. It keeps you on your toes. No, the only difficult part that I found as far as the actual teaching is concerned was to be able to say, "I know this is right and this is not right, but I don't know why unless I force myself to find whatever principles can be drawn, as it were, extrapolated from these particular experiences that led me to that conclusion." Normally in the course of working I didn't stop to ask why. I just knew that this was the better way to do it, and this was like a gut feeling. But there was a process of cause and effect, and [I had] to discover what that cause and effect was. Because I can't share my intuitions in a kind of way with students. I can, but that doesn't necessarily teach them anything. But if one can find the rationale for those intuitions, then it can be of some use to them so that they can apply those principles. That's really it. I suppose that was the difficult part. To say, "Well, why do I know that it's right this way?" Whether this side of the stage for the scene is right and the center stage isn't. The left side is the best. That kind of thing. You begin to say, "Well, maybe it has to do with the way we read." As a matter of fact, I had that confirmed, because once I had an auditor who proved to be—I thought he was a graduate student. He was a visiting associate professor in Near Eastern languages. When we were talking about the qualities of the space, just the qualities of the space, both in static terms as well as in dynamic terms, of movement with the eye as opposed to movement against the eye, which has a different quality—in other words, I knew that if I were storming the Bastille, that I wanted to go against normal eye movement. It had an internal tension, but I didn't know why I felt it that way. I just found it in terms of trial and error. But when we were talking about that, this auditor had just the opposite opinion. It suddenly occurred to me to ask him—he was an Iranian—whether Farsi is read from left to right, as we read in European languages, or like in Hebrew, for example, where it's read from right to left. To be sure, it was read from right to left. That seemed to validate a kind of hidden hypothesis which I had felt, that it was merely a product of what is our normal eye movement, which can be violated if we go against it and create an internal dynamic as a result of that conflict.

DESSERE:

That's an interesting point. Tell me, did you feel that you understood young people? Did you feel that there was a major gap between your generation and theirs?

GORDON:

Well, I have children of my own. [laughter]

DESSERE:

So you could relate to them pretty well?

GORDON:

Yes, of course.

DESSERE:

There was absolutely no problem of communication. I suppose that influenced you to choose some plays as opposed to other plays to produce when you were asked to direct.

GORDON:

Here? Not that much as opposed to other considerations. I don't know whether we talked of this. The very first play that I was asked to do?

DESSERE:

The Gods Sit Back?

GORDON:

Well, that was the what we ultimately did. It is extraordinarily written. It is quite expensive, involving three or four sets and a large cast. Its subject matter, even though ultimately the theme is sublime, is what one might properly call an optimistic tragedy. It is a very dark play. This is a play which I've known for a long time and actually did once in a tiny little summer theater on Cape Cod, the Wharf Theatre, in Provincetown [Massachusetts]. It was never produced commercially, understandably, because its commercial prospects were not very promising at all. I said that this was exactly the kind of play that the university theater should do. Now, it wasn't so much in terms of

the psychology of students that determined the plays that I would subsequently do, but rather doing plays which I respected. I was particularly interested in doing original work, which was what, as a professional, I'd always done. I think I mentioned I'd only done two revivals in my whole life. So I did a number of those plays—plays that had not been theretofore produced. Many of them written by students. One by a member of our faculty. One by a professional writer, an established playwright, Oliver Hailey, which had not been done. My interest was in doing original material and, to the degree that it was possible, those plays which could be adequately cast from among our student body.

DESSERE:

Did you find some restrictions in the academic world?

GORDON:

I don't know what you're referring to.

DESSERE:

Well, in terms of creativity, what you could do according to the theater and the things that you could produce.

GORDON:

No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I remember in the second play that I did, that was written by Professor [Theodore] Apstein, there was some language in it—*Sleight of Hand*—which I would not myself utter in mixed company. I remember asking Wally Boyle at the time whether there was any university policy or departmental policy with respect to the language, which was very outspoken and regarded as obscene. He said, "Well, what is it?" I told him what I was referring to. He asked me—and I respected his question very much—"Is it organic to the development of the play? Is it consistent with the characters?" And I said yes. "Then," he said, "Go do it." From that point of view, there was no problem.

DESSERE:

So you would think that when I say "restrictions," you understand them in terms of good taste, and this is the way you understand my questions.

GORDON:

Yes, there was never really any censorship that I knew of. In certain instances—"This is what you want to do, go ahead and do it, " sight unseen, in the majority of cases. In the case of the thing that I spoke of with Wally Boyle, I was hoping that he would say take it out. ' [laughter] But he didn't, so I respected the author's prerogatives, and it remained in. And the building didn't fall down! [laughter]

DESSERE:

Had you chosen this play yourself, or was it offered to you, suggested?

GORDON:

I don't remember how I came across it. Maybe Ted [Apstein] gave it to me to read. I was rather intrigued. It was a very strange play and an interesting one. It seemed to me that it had wonderful production possibilities. In a couple of cases the casting problems were difficult. There was one character in the play who was an immigrant from Eastern Europe somewhere who was sixty-seven years old and a homosexual. I said, "How in the hell am I going to cast that?" But I found a student who was a very, very good actor, and he did it splendidly. You can do a great deal with students in character roles for which they are not either in terms of age or physical type well suited.

DESSERE:

Did it ever occur to you that maybe university theater production was a place where you could experiment without too many problems?

GORDON:

Yes, I think specifically in the area of economics. Not that the department doesn't have its own economic problems when they are laying out a program for the season. You don't do, for example, two period-costume plays back to back because we just don't have the resources in the department to do that. The same was true with large scenic demands. But the commercial considerations, which are the dominant ones in the theater—when we speak of the "art of the theater," I promise you it is as economically oriented as film is, which always calls itself the film "business" or the motion picture "industry"—it never made the pretension of beaux arts enterprise. In view of

which fact, it's always been to me miraculous how much artistic work has always been done. I mean, not all the work, but it has consistently been there in isolated instances.

1.31. TAPE NUMBER: XVI, Side One (March 31, 1989)

DESSERE:

We were just talking about the plays. We were discussing restrictions in the academic world. What do you think of the [theater] department as a whole in terms of equipment, props, and everything that would be available to you, as opposed to the professional world?

GORDON:

I think that from a technical point of view the work has been very, very good here. The resources are good. While budgetary constrictions do play some role, they're not as dominant as they are often in the commercial theater. So from that point of view, it's certainly very good. When I first came here I felt that the technical departments took a rather negative view of directors generally—that we were always imposing problems on them, [tape recorder off] I think that that had some basis in fact. There was an attitude of "My God, this director is asking for this and asking for that and makes much more work for us." But I don't think that that continued very long. It is not really characteristic. The one time that we had some difficulty in a very practical way was when we attempted—I forget, maybe seven or eight or nine years ago—to establish what was called the Resident Theater Company. We were having a kind of a mix of professionals, graduate students, and even undergraduates in certain cases—people who had just graduated, recent alumni—as a kind of a halfway house between academic theater and the professional theater. We were only able to work during the summers, and there was a certain resistance that we encountered. There were obstacles that were in our way during those three summers that we had that Resident Theater Company in existence. The first project that I did was the [Eugene] Ionesco play [*Rhinoceros*]. I did one each summer, and then there was another director from outside who did one as a companion piece. Our access to the resources was limited in a way. We were kind of regarded—even though it was a project of the university—as invaders in some way, trespassers, which seemed rather

strange. I mean, John [R.] Cauble was very actively involved with us. We used other people who had department affiliations as well. This I know in a sense more or less by inference and at secondhand—that there were in the faculty certain members who still were experiencing a kind of sensitivity that dated back to when the Theatre Group was on the campus years ago under the leadership of John Houseman. The people who were in the theater department were ignored in a way and not invited to participate in any active way. I think that many of those people still were smarting from some of the slights that they felt that they had suffered. They were fearful of a repetition of that when the Resident Theater Company was started under the aegis of one of the vice chancellors, [Elwin V.] Svenson. It was not welcomed really very fully by most of the members of the faculty and the department as a whole. However, we functioned, and some of the things were good. Some of the things weren't so good. There was one Shakespeare play that was done by an outside director; there was a Chekhov that was done by an outside director. I did the Ionesco play, and I also did a student-written original in that series with the professional actors. The professional writer that I spoke of, Oliver Hailey's play, which had not been produced, was done. My inclination was always towards original material, even though I haven't been able always to put it into action.

DESSERE:

Because they wanted you to do plays that were already recognized as part of a college stock, let's say?

GORDON:

Well, not so much that. Something that had name recognition and would have audience appeal simply by virtue of that fact. Plays which were well-known plays, which people may not have seen or would like to see again, were the staple. That is to say that in the programs on the subscription series over the years, there had been very, very few original creations included. I would say that there was one a year—that would be perhaps an exaggeration, one a season—looking back over a period of eighteen years.

DESSERE:

What do you think is the reason for that?

GORDON:

Well, simply the same considerations, actually, that, not to the same degree, operate in the commercial theater. You want things that have audience appeal. If you do *A Chorus Line*, people are interested, even though it was done seven, eight years ago here at the Shubert Theatre. And, actually, the production I thought was splendid. It was a very close copy of the original, but it was executed I thought extraordinarily well. I enjoyed it more than I enjoyed the original.

DESSERE:

Are you talking about this recent—?

GORDON:

It was done just this current season.

DESSERE:

Yes, I went to see it.

GORDON:

It was very, very well done.

DESSERE:

But I had never seen the original.

GORDON:

The general format of it was almost identical, almost a carbon copy of the original, but executed with great expertise and with a thorough commitment on the part of all involved, including the actors, as well as the director. I thought that Gary [A. Gardner] did a splendid job. And his assistant, who was the choreographer, a former student of ours, Jason Ma, did a first-rate job.

DESSERE:

Yes, I thought it was a very nice production. I like that idea that you think original productions should be done.

GORDON:

Yes, and some of our faculty are not inclined to do that. One of the most prominent members of our faculty now has always done things which in a sense are established masterpieces, whether it be Shaw or Chekhov or Shakespeare or whatever, right down the line—or Sam Shepard—those things which are standard successes. They were all very well done—I think extremely well done—but in other respects they were not as adventurous, if you like, except perhaps in manner occasionally. But not as exciting as trying to unearth new talent, particularly from among students, but not restricted necessarily to students, which I think the university theater really should be doing. A certain aspect of what one might call the museum function, the archival function, of the university is certainly a very valid objective or goal of university theater, but it should not be the dominant one.

DESSERE:

I'm surprised you've never been tempted to do some Shakespeare or classical play.

GORDON:

Well, for the very reason that I talked about. That my inclination has been to see the university as a seedbed for new talent. I mean, that is what we do with students, and that interested me more. A lot of people do Shakespeare. Some do them very interestingly. Some turn them upside down and inside out. Whether it's good or not is almost beside the point—it is, quote, "innovative." The production of Hamlet that was done here by one of our faculty made very little sense to me. It used most of the dialogue that was in Shakespeare's original play, but not necessarily in the order in which Shakespeare wrote it. I'm not sure necessarily that was a great contribution to the history of the American theater. Whereas, if one were to unearth a new talent—if, as I think, there is a reasonable prospect to anticipate that a writer like Denis Clontz, who wrote *Generations*, will be a force in the American theater, I will take great pride in having been a springboard for him. Steven Morris is another individual. Kevin Droney is another whose work I did. Edward Mast. I felt that these were talented—even though the plays were flawed, that did not matter. These, in my view, were young writers who showed extremely promising talent. I felt that they should not only be given the opportunity to display it,

but to learn from the experience of having their work produced and not merely existing on pages between snap binders.

DESSERE:

I want to ask you about the general evolution of the faculty. First I would like to know, how did they welcome you? Obviously, you had a very prestigious background, as opposed probably to most of them. Did they receive you well on the whole? They knew about your films?

GORDON:

Well, I don't know how much they did know. I suppose they knew something. Among certain people I felt that there was a guardedness at the outset. They anticipated some kind of arrogance, or whatever, which is not in my nature at all. It did not take too long for that to be overcome. But I did feel that at the outset, when I first came here. I was looked at askance a little because I didn't come out of the academic background.

DESSERE:

And also they were maybe scared that you would revolutionize a lot of things or want to?

GORDON:

I don't think—I don't know. Perhaps they did. I never inquired into it. I didn't say, "Why don't you like me?" [laughter]

DESSERE:

Of course. But did you feel that they liked you and respected you after a while?

GORDON:

Well, I would think so, because as I think I mentioned the other day—during those eighteen years, there was only one year when I enjoyed the privileges of tenure. I have been invited back twelve times since compulsory retirement, among other things, so there must have been something that made them think that I was of value.

DESSERE:

You see, a lot of people say, particularly on television—I didn't ask you about that, but we can talk about it in general terms. It's about the politics behind the productions or the shows or everything. I'm just curious, what is your feeling?

GORDON:

Well, politics—I suppose you could say that that is operative. But more basic than that is why the politics. I think that one of the things that has generated in me a growing disaffection with the department, particularly in recent years, is the fact that the educational mission seems to me subordinated to the drive for self-advancement in career terms. In some respects, both the university itself, its resources, and even one could say the taxpayers of the state of California, are being to some degree exploited. Now, enlightened self-interest is not something which one should deplore. Obviously, it's been a source of much great work that has great social benefit, as well as, shall we say, artistic merit over the ages. But the question is one of balance. At the start I sensed here and there that the question of self-interest—of the protection of turf or the widening of turf—was a very compelling factor. I began to get a sense very soon that whenever some new proposal was made for something at a faculty meeting, I could almost see or sense that everyone was saying, "What's that going to do to me?" In other words, the issue was not debated exclusively on its intrinsic merits. It wasn't grotesquely pernicious and perhaps not as endemic as I feel it has since become. In many respects the considerations of profile to the outside world, which includes, by the way, the university itself—the administration of the university, as well as on the outside—is frequently more important than what I call the educational mission. Now, they are not wholly unrelated. If the profile of the department is a gleaming one and a prominent one, it attracts more financial support, which in turn benefits presumably the teaching opportunities, the resources, and so forth. But there is that other factor which I think gets in the way very often. One of the things that I found distressing but amusing in a kind of way is that when individuals are up for review, among the considerations that are presented in support of promotion or advancement is often the grants that they have received. That so-and-so got a \$5, \000 grant for this or a \$2,500 grant for that. Never, never have I heard very much emphasis, if any, placed on what was done with that grant. What was accomplished with those moneys? Grantsmanship and

scholarship seem to be identified, which I don't think generally speaking they are. Now, this is not restricted to the department, but this may be characteristic of the academic world, whether it be in the life sciences or in the humanities or in the arts. Nevertheless—I suppose maybe I'm being a little naive to have wanted something a little more Utopian within the university, but it always caused me some degree of distress, which I think during the deanship of Bob [Robert H.] Gray was enormously increased. One did not feel it that much when [Charles] Speroni was the dean. At least I didn't. Perhaps I was a little myopic and didn't see what was in front of me, but it seemed less so then. But under Bob Gray that seemed to be a very dominant factor that determined policies and specific decisions that were made.

DESSERE:

It seems also that, let's say, the administration is extremely overbearing here. I know some faculty members have discussed that with me also—that they felt oppressed by the administration. Of course, students, even graduate students, have to fight a lot for their projects and deal with a lot with paperwork.

GORDON:

Well, that's not really what I am concerned with, although I recognize that those are certainly justifiable irritants. But things like, let's say, buying the Huntington Hartford Theatre, which is now the Doolittle Theatre—it sounded like a great idea. "We'll bring it to the community," etc. etc. Well, we got the facility, and we don't know what to do with it! We don't know what to do with it. Because to put university productions down there—we can't even get the critics to come here. If we put them in the Doolittle—we have a house that seats five hundred people which we don't always fill. To go to a twelve-hundred-seat house to see student productions? They would be playing to one-quarter houses all of the time, which is a demoralizing experience for young actors and everybody else! It has great hype value, great PR value. That seemed often to be the dominating factor in policy decisions of that kind. At one time they were going to get the Greystone Mansion. Somehow that fell apart; they didn't get that. But it's that kind of thing—"Bring it to the public"—which becomes more important, although, as I said, to be honest and fair, [it is] not wholly unrelated to what I regard as the educational mission. Even the policy of the University of California itself places far, far greater importance—

it's referred to as a "research university." You want to be a teacher? Well, go to Cal[ifornia] State [University] Northridge or [California State University] Long Beach, part of the state university system, as opposed to the University of California. Meanwhile, the students, the best students, are breaking their necks to get into the University of California, but nobody tells them that our interest in teaching is secondary to our interest in research. In many respects the students are being exploited in the interest of the research objectives of members of the faculty. We do a production or we develop our curriculum not necessarily geared primarily to the benefit of the students, but rather to the benefit of the faculty.

DESSERE:

How would you describe the evolution of the faculty in terms of interest through the years?

GORDON:

I think in a sense those generalizations that I was making before do have application in very specific ways. As I said before, the educational mission is subordinate to other considerations. To some degree I think that has always been true, but it is more marked, it seems to me, now, or maybe I'm more observant than I was in the past. But it seems to be more widespread, pervasive, and consistent than it was in the past.

DESSERE:

Do you mind talking about this letter that you wrote and you read?

GORDON:

Oh, it was not a letter. Actually, this was notes for a discussion in a meeting. My mother said, "You must never address a group of people larger than your immediate family without preparing." So very often, even in orientation lecture for a class, I write an essay. I don't read the essay, but this is the basis of what—very often what I will do is simply make an outline, an abstract, of what I want to talk about. In order to clarify my own views I write, and that's what this was. It had to do with almost an aesthetic. Particularly in the area of acting. It has been very popular in recent years to "shake off the shackles of realism" in the theater. Realistic acting, which is based, with various

modifications of course, on certain Stanislavskian principles, is to be discarded in favor of something which I would call "performance orientation," rather than acting as I understand the term acting. This, I think, possibly had an element in it of certain personality considerations, as well as pure aesthetics. In any case, there was a group, which I didn't know about in advance, which had a number of discussions. A campaign was launched last April, just about a year ago, in a faculty meeting, in which the question of educational policy, curricular criteria, and so forth were to be profoundly revised from what had existed in the past. In some respects the proposals that were made were good, very good. Our graduate acting students in particular had too limited a curriculum. I had always felt that the proper or the best—most effective—kind of acting training really consists of three phases. This is arbitrary and schematic. Of course, there are areas of overlap, but the first phase should be preparing the actor to act—preparing the instrument, revealing to the actor what his resources are, and providing him with certain techniques that would enable him to bring those into play in his work. Much of that was internal in its origin. That is to say, utilizing the total persona—that the actor himself as a human organism is the instrument that needs to be perfected. First, preparing the actor to act. Second, preparing the role, which has overlapping values and criteria and appropriate techniques and so on, but which now takes it to another phase. You're going now beyond the actor himself, but applying what the trained actor in phase A now brings to a particular play, a particular role, in the course of its preparation, development, and creation in rehearsal. The third phase is performing the role, in which once again some of the things that are the principles of the earlier phase are now made more subordinate to the needs to actually be effective in theatric terms. It seemed to me that that should have been the progression of order. But it never really worked out that way. Actually, the new philosophy about which I made those observations, that I was opposed to, made the performance phase the primary phase of work, which I feel is quite inorganic. I don't think that that is the way to do it. In other words, it was with a preponderant emphasis on external manifestation rather than internal recreation of experience, which I feel is where the art of the actor lies. What amused me in a kind of way, even though I felt very strongly about what I was saying, was that this was now the "avant-garde" approach to the theater. I pointed out that these were exactly the

principles that were articulated by Diderot in the early eighteenth century, so it's not that avant-garde. It's arriere-garde. [laughter]

1.32. TAPE NUMBER: XVI, Side Two (March 31, 1989)

DESSERE:

So that was the reason why you decided to leave the school?

GORDON:

Well, that plus advancing years. If I were to start in the fall quarter, I would have already passed my eightieth birthday. While I was very aware of the generation gap when I first started to teach students—could I connect with them? That was almost a double generation gap. I was as old as their grandparents! Now I would be as old as their great-grandparents, and it's a triple generation gap! That, plus the fact—the philosophical differences were contributing factors. Also, within the evolution of the department and the maturing of the younger people—let me say that when [William W.] Melnitz was teaching here in the later years after retirement, while his memory was revered, his views were not very respected by the faculty. In a sense, I feel that attitude applies to me now. My opinions, my judgments, are not regarded as I would like them to be regarded. That's another factor—that I'm not really being made full use of. That the younger faculty coming up are, as it were, building fences around the territory that they have acquired, and I don't choose to play that kind of game. Last quarter I had no contact with graduate students at all, which was I think the first time that this happened. This is not quite the same, but I'm not really accorded the kind of position of influence that I was in the past. So that's another disaffecting factor.

DESSERE:

I remember you said in class that what was the most important thing for you was not necessarily that people use the Stanislavsky method, but that the actor was able to give the performance what you wanted.

GORDON:

Whatever it means. The Academy Award given to Dustin Hoffman is not the kind of acting that they want. They want the polished performance of *Les*

Liaisons Dangereuses. Their concern is much more with style and manner than it is with matter, and I come from the opposite quarter of the horizon.

DESSERE:

I can imagine that that goes totally against what [Harold] Clurman and all these people were trying to get. They wanted the feeling that the actor was just putting words on feelings.

GORDON:

Let me recognize the fact that there is an evolutionary process which sometimes circles back on itself. I guess it was Heraclitus in 500 B. C., an early Greek philosopher, who said that the only permanence is change. This change is going on, and either one chooses to accommodate himself to the change or chooses not to.

DESSERE:

What I find very interesting about that is that there is definitely a continuity in your evolution and in your interests that goes back to your early years and all your training.

GORDON:

Yes, but actually, in addition to that, from a very, very practical point of view—I remember often feeling that I have never been happier than in the first fifteen years that I was here at the university. I really, really was enjoying myself enormously. But there was only one shadow over the landscape. I felt, "What are these students going to do with this education that they're getting from us?" Their professional prospects were very limited. If we were to compare the employment of our graduates with the employment of graduates of the law school or graduates of the dental school, we make a very sorry showing. In contrast with other institutions like ours, it's not so bad. But if you make the contrast with different disciplines, then a very, very small proportion of our graduates make their living in what we are teaching them here. That used to disturb me a great deal. To the degree that this new philosophy is not preparing these students very effectively, let us say, for employment in television, where the greatest area of employment exists, or in film or normal theater, not merely university theater— That we are not necessarily equipping

them very successfully or very efficiently, if you like, to hack out a career in this very precarious world, which is the world of the theater. This issue that we were just discussing, it seems to me, is moving even farther away.

DESSERE:

Do you think it was different when you were a student at Yale [University] because times were different, there were more opportunities?

GORDON:

No, I think that this is going back to what it was like at Yale! [laughter] But in the intervening time—we are talking now from 1929, when I started Yale, and 1989, when I'm talking to you now—there have been a number of waves, if you like. Yale was in that sense what I came to regard as very old-fashioned. What we were doing in the Group Theatre was the wave of the future. Now that is regarded as very old-fashioned, and the wave of the future is what the wave was in 1929. It's the nature of things; it's a cyclical pattern. Very often in working with graduate directors one of the things that I deal with, among other things, as far as directorial techniques are concerned, is how to plan in the theater—as opposed to film—a rehearsal process. Among other things, one has to make a determination as to how one should progress during the rehearsal period, not only in terms of objectives, but even in terms of the relationship of review to advance. I often used the metaphor of the rolling cylinder. That you're going forward, but you keep backtracking on yourself as you go forward. That is I think characteristic of history, whether it be in the arts or in politics or whatever.

DESSERE:

But it seems also that performance is artificial. We were talking about *Dangereuses Liaisons*—this very polished type of performance all based on technique, at the expense of naturalism and reality.

GORDON:

Not exclusively. In other words, there was good acting there too, but the emphasis is more on manner and style than it is on content.

DESSERE:

Are there some particular dislikes that you have about some plays or the orientation of the theater or some subjects that you've seen not well treated? Or something that you would have liked to do?

GORDON:

Oh, there are many things that I don't particularly like and that don't interest me very much. Not that I haven't done them; I have done them as a rule. We talked about what it means to be a professional—that's how you make your living. But there are other things which I really despise and would not do. I always have some concern with the thematic thrusts of things that one is doing. For example, watching the Academy Awards the other night, which I thought was a very, very poor show overall for a lot of reasons—the most deplorable part of it was the thing that Robin Williams did with that other fellow, whatever his name is, where they were doing things that I felt were in grotesquely bad taste—offensive to certain minorities—where a certain kind of cliched Negro dialect was used by this guy. I would be surprised if there isn't a very, very negative reaction, particularly in the black community, about that little bit in which he gets a laugh by talking with an old minstrel show Negro dialect to get laughs at someone's expense. I may have said this in the course of our work in our classes, although I'm not sure that I ever had the occasion to talk about it. Basically, comedy is successful if it makes the audience laugh. But one cannot ignore what the subject of the laughter is. In other words, the virtue of comedy, as well as its effectiveness, lies in the targets that you have picked. If indeed you pick targets which are simply easy straw men which you knock down—let's say minorities or some kind of physical infirmities and so forth—rather than social values, attitudes, characteristics, as Moliere attacked them—predominantly hypocrisy, which is the main thrust of most of Moliere's plays in one form or another and in one setting or another. That this is vile comedy in a way. I remember using as an example that the so-called Polack jokes that were current for a long time were very bad jokes, because they were simply at the expense of minorities or people who didn't use the English language well. You create a cliché of stupidity or whatever. I said that there was only one Polack joke that I thought was a good joke. I spoke about a play that was a hit on Broadway many, many years ago called *Jacobowsky and the Colonel*. The joke was—everybody in New York was pronouncing the name Jacobowsky differently—Jacobuffsky, Yacobuffcky, etc. The story was that two

Poles, two Polacks, if you like, were standing in front of the theater and looking up at the marquee. One says to the other, "Yacobuffsky and the what?" Now, the target of the joke was not the stupidity of the Polacks but our chauvinism. Like when I go to Paris and I want to buy something and I say, or think, "How much is that in real money?" The ugly American kind of thing. That's a good target for a joke, not the other thing, "Well, why aren't the Frenchmen as civilized as we are and have the salad before the dinner?" [laughter] Or Shaw's, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" *My Fair Lady*, based on *Pygmalion*. What is being made fun of? It's men that are being made fun of, not women.

DESSERE:

You've always stressed that difference between the laughter of the body and the laughter of the soul, as they used to say. This is very strong point. I want to go back to the play that you directed here—*The Gods Sit Back*. You had already done that.

GORDON:

Just in a very small summer theater way out in the country.

DESSERE:

Yes, we talked about that. Then *Sleight of Hand*—you already said what the language problem was.

GORDON:

That was only isolated instances. It was related to the question of whether or not I felt oppressed in my creative work by the university environment. I said no, on the contrary.

DESSERE:

I remember when I took this directing class with you, and obviously you disliked some of the material which was by a contemporary author. I forget his name—he's very well known. There were a lot of profanities. I remember I could tell you didn't like that too much because the vocabulary was very strong.

GORDON:

My vocabulary has deteriorated enormously by virtue of my contact with students today. [laughter] The interesting thing, though, from a writer's point of view, is that what had originally had impact value loses its impact value by overuse. I remember reading a novel by the man who wrote *The Lost Weekend*, Charles [R.] Jackson. This was a subsequent book. I think it might have been called *The Fall of Valor*. One of the characters in this novel was a very wonderful, admirable kind of young woman. She should have been played by Deborah Kerr in her best days—cool and intelligent but very much alive. I remember reading this book and being very absorbed in the book. Around page one hundred for the first time she discovered something, and she said, "Shit!" And I dropped the book! The impact was so enormous. But if you use it the way David Mamet uses it, over and over again, it ceases to have any meaning. It seems to me that dramatists are very unwise, in a way, for squandering a resource that's available to them to create an impact if it is used selectively and judiciously.

DESSERE:

But wouldn't you agree with me that sometimes the strongest lines, since they are strong in themselves, happen to be stressed unnecessarily?

GORDON:

Well, of course, in performance and for a long time—now it's become commonplace, but the four-letter words would almost always, when the actor got to them, be given an additional impact in performance which it didn't need. Because the words themselves carried that impact. It always seemed artificial. "Oh, boy, I'm going to say the dirty word now." The "F" word. I used to be shocked the way the French use *merde*. In English we didn't do that. That was very offensive. So the cultural climate makes a profound difference. And the four-letter words nowadays—some of the plays would only be a half hour long if you eliminated them all.

DESSERE:

After that you did this play called *Give Me Sanctuary*. That's also an original script.

GORDON:

That was written by a student here, Kevin Droney.

DESSERE:

What was it about?

GORDON:

It's actually set in a mental institution. When I first read the script—there was a series of what one might call clinical pictures of individual patients. In a way it was a little deficient in having a central story line. There were a number of stories of people who had this or that kind of psychological problem and so on and so forth. But I remember when I read it having a feeling—I said, "This does not come from secondary sources." I had a sense that there was an immediacy of experience in the writer. I didn't know him very well at the time; I scarcely knew him at all. I said, "Oh, this poor guy, what he must have gone through." Because I had the feeling that there was something autobiographical in it and that he had possibly had this kind of experience. I was mistaken, actually, in one respect. He had never been a patient in a mental institution, but had worked as a technician in such an institution and was writing out of direct observation. I was correct in that estimate. I felt that the play had a great deal of merit, although in terms of its execution, it was not sufficiently organized. One of the things— This again [shows] how your past experience guides your present assessments of current situations. The problem was that we could watch this from a distance and feel compassion for it, but we did not identify exactly with those characters. They were too different from us. There was a therapist in the story who served as an interlocutor, almost, to bring out the thing, but it didn't have a central story in itself. I said that what the play needed really was to have as the central figure the therapist—his hopes his obstacles, what he overcame, his frustrations and disappointments. Not everything worked as he hoped with the patients. In the rewriting process, both prior to and in the course of rehearsal, he was made more central, not merely the interlocutor. The question of his struggles, his aspirations, all of which was given substance by the materials that he was dealing with, including obviously the patients and their problems. He actually did help a person who went out. He was discouraged. He was about to give up because one of his patients actually got hold of some drugs and OD'd and died. He said, "I have failed." He was leaving. At the very end of the play he is packing, taking

his books out of the bookshelves, when a patient whom he had, quote, unquote, "cured" came back and said, "I've had difficulties in the outside world. I need your help again." The very last moment of the play was without dialogue. He simply took the books and put them back into the bookshelf again. And the struggle, his struggle, was continuing. That was one of the major contributions I was able to make to the dramatist in developing the play. That's what the play was really about. It was an extremely interesting play. Once again, it was a hard play for audiences. It had elements of shock and was a shattering experience. It wasn't a happy ending. It's what I talked about with respect to *The Gods Sit Back* when I called it an optimistic tragedy, because the people died in a struggle for something that is such a commonplace for us today. You see, it was a period piece. It was set in 1832, *The Gods Sit Back*. They were struggling for an objective that was, to them, impossible of achievement. People died in the process in this struggle. What they were struggling for is something that we take so completely for granted today that it never occurs to us that it even had a history. Much less a history of conflict. And what were they struggling for in 1832? The installation of sewers in the city of New York! Interestingly enough, in today's paper there is an issue in Malibu, where they do not have a sewerage system. They have individual septic tanks. The environmental impact, the contamination of the groundwater, is now a subject of great concern. When we did the play in Provincetown, interestingly enough, in the weekly newspaper in this tiny little town, we not only were reviewed very favorably on the front page, but there was an editorial that accompanied it. Because that was an issue in Provincetown, which had a beautiful beach. The means of garbage disposal was to take the garbage and trash at high tide, or just before, and put it on the beach, so that the high tide would come in and wash it out to sea. This beautiful beach and lagoon there was continuously being contaminated. We didn't know about it at the time, but that was a big civic issue in the town. The newspaper was opposed to that process and wanted more advanced methods of disposition of waste. The taxpayers didn't want that. So we had the benefit of this little civil conflict that was going on in the town that quite by chance redounded to our benefit.

DESSERE:

We've talked a lot about comedy, but we haven't talked much about melodrama. I just want to know your approach to melodrama, because people tend to dismiss melodrama.

GORDON:

What do we mean by melodrama? In a sense what we are really talking about is a play, frequently having violence in it, in which the stakes are life and death. We can become involved in it. But melodrama—and I used the phrase before—is essentially a play or a screenplay which is anecdotal. It's about a story which is told and is not very much about a theme. I find myself out of the main current many times. *Moby Dick* is a great book, a really extraordinary book, something that I read with enormous interest. I learned a great deal from it and was very involved in it. *Billy Budd*, another novel by Melville, is often regarded as a great parable of good and evil, almost an allegory if you like. It is viewed in that respect. I think it's overrated, grotesquely overrated. I don't know whether I ever had occasion to say that the struggle between good and evil invariably is the substance of melodrama. Cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and so on, has good and evil. I've often said that the struggle that comes from good and evil makes for melodrama. High drama comes from a conflict between good and good. And that is far harder to write. If lives are on the line, that's a grabber. If I can identify with the cowboys in the white hats against the cowboys in the black hats, fine. Just as [there is] this great melodrama in any athletic contest; it has all of the elements. I'm curious about the outcome, and I'm rooting for the home team. So I have curiosity and I have concern, which makes it suspenseful, because I've already made good guys and bad guys in my mind. I'm for the Bruins against the Trojans. But that's not high drama.

DESSERE:

When you talked about *Portrait in Black*, you said that was a melodrama.

GORDON:

A very ingenious one, by the way, and very interesting just on the story level. But I don't regard it in the same category as something like *Thunder Rock*, which is about a theme, has almost a philosophical underpinning—which I

must confess, contrary to all evidence, I believe in—which is the perfectibility of man.

DESSERE:

Also, I suppose you would prefer *Thunder Rock* because it is very ingrained into reality, whereas—

GORDON:

Actually not. It's a kind of a fantasy, a ghost story.

DESSERE:

But it reflects social issues much more than bourgeois issues like *Portrait in Black*.

GORDON:

Well, that's not even bourgeois issues. It's merely a story of contrived characters which had a very ingenious kind of plot. *Dead Fall* would fall into the same category—a man who's being framed for a murder of a person who was never killed. So it's an ingenious kind of story twist, which can be interesting indeed, but one does not view that as something of enormous—

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DESSERE:

Now we are going to talk about your other plays. *Pipe Dream* was also an original. So was *Generations*.

GORDON:

I must tell you a little bit about *Pipe Dream*, which is kind of amusing. A very, very bright student named Ed [Edward] Mast wrote the play, which is in many ways a strange and baffling play. In many respects it's a very funny play—on the surface simply a kind of melodrama, but it has a little more to it than that. Ed Mast and I liked one another very much, but we disagreed about many, many things, not only during the course of the production of this play, but just in our transactions. He was a student of mine in the manuscript analysis class. Almost every day when he was in school he'd knock on my door, stick his head in, and he would say, "Black" and I would say, "White," and he would go on.

But we liked one another very much. The comic but central figure of this particular comedy-melodrama, while he never acknowledged it, was based on me, because he was a very rational man who, with perfect logic, always came to the wrong conclusions. [laughter] So it was great fun for me too. He never admitted that it was based on me, but I could see it in the play.

DESSERE:

So you could tell that you had definitely had an influence on him.

GORDON:

He made fun of me. Incidentally, the character was a law professor at Harvard [University].

DESSERE:

So it was a comedy?

GORDON:

Yes, it was largely a comedy with very bizarre twists, like Chinese boxes, boxes within boxes within boxes.

DESSERE:

I think we talked about *Thunder Rock*. I've already asked you about what you did with it during your days in New York. Is there anything that you would like to add about your production here?

GORDON:

I don't really quite know what to say. One thing may be an element of interest. *Thunder Rock* was very, very well done in New York. As a matter of fact, a film was made of it, but the film was quite unsuccessful. It was made in England. Although it had elements in it, qualities, of a ghost story—as I said, it was fantasy—actually, I think that in terms of thematic thrust it was very close in a totally different way, dramatized in wholly different terms, to *The Gods Sit Back*. That is to say, that that which in the past seemed impossible to us is ordinary today. In the case of *Thunder Rock*, it was about a man who was so disillusioned with the world that he became a lighthouse keeper. He wanted total withdrawal. He didn't want a radio. He wanted no part of it. In his isolation, on the basis of a logbook which was salvaged from a shipwreck a

century earlier—which was the cause of their having built this lighthouse—of people who had emigrated from Europe in the period of the 1840s, when there was a wave of immigration—there was great turmoil in Europe. Each, for different reasons, had fled. Their names and occupations and so on were listed in this log. In his isolation, he created them in fantasy, and they came to life. He brought them to life in the mysterious ambience of this strange, isolated lighthouse. I remembered the play with great pleasure. I thought that it would be interesting to do here, even though it was very difficult to cast from the point of view of suitability and particularly ages of characters and so on. When I reread the play, I said, "Dammit, there is something wrong—there always was—with the third act." It was a three-act play in the production in New York, in which he had a character return in act three who had been in act one of the play. The play was set in 1937 more or less.

DESSERE:

So you put it in the context of the time when you produced it here.

GORDON:

No, the play always—the lighthouse keeper was contemporary, but he created these characters from the distant past. He had a friend who in the early part of the play was going off on a kind of foolhardy crusade to fly for the Chinese against the Japanese invasion. He was actually a pilot, and he worked for the lighthouse service—sea planes. That's how they brought provisions. He knew that it was very hazardous—what he was doing—but he was doing it out of conviction. This was the period right after the fascist revolution in Spain, and World War II was on the verge of starting. And he was brought back as a ghost. That seemed wrong. It was not within the context of the story. I remember when reading—I had the old book from before—I said, "Gee, [Robert] Ardrey is now dead. If he were alive, I would ask him to see whether or not that couldn't be eliminated." But it would have left a very short third act if that whole episode had been deleted. I said, "I wonder if I dare do it." Well, we were doing it at the university. It was not a commercial production. Yet I hated to do that. I knew Ardrey, who had written the play, but Ardrey had died. [tape recorder off] Meanwhile, the office had ordered the books for the cast from Samuel French or Dramatists Play Service, I can't recall which one had published it. The format was different. I wasn't going to direct from

the old book because the pages would be different. When I read the new edition, I discovered that Ardrey had done exactly what I had hoped I would be able to persuade him to do since the New York production, and actually had expanded certain other materials which gave the required body and heft to act three. Really a very, very interesting coincidence. He had apparently on his own come to the same conclusion that I had. So in many respects, we had a better play than the play that was done in New York. Actually, there was another thing. [Elia] Kazan had done a very striking job. I think I told you I had been the light designer on that production. But the play was very intellectual, based on an intellectual concept—it really was. And most scenes were played in a certain kind of cerebral way. I said, "Dammit, it is possible to become passionate about ideas, and that's how we should have played the play." That it should not merely be the intellectual concept. That when the argument is going on, it's not merely a debate, but some of the things that I probably have talked about. That in playing the action, I can argue with you, but I can also try to make you change, because I view you as my son. That's the way we played it. Even though we had a very distinguished cast in New York and we had students here, I think our play was much better by virtue of the script and by virtue of the approach, even though [in New York] it was done by a splendid director and splendid actors and so forth and a splendid lighting designer!
[laughter]

DESSERE:

But that's very nice that you were able to use that experience in something here and at the same time be more satisfied.

GORDON:

Well, I was more satisfied. As I say, largely it was because Ardrey on his own—because I hadn't seen him in years and years, and we never talked about this.

DESSERE:

Did he come?

GORDON:

No, no, he was dead at the time. I think that he would have been very pleased with the production.

DESSERE:

I'm intrigued with those new plays that you did. The other one I see on the list was *Triptych*.

GORDON:

Triptych was written by Oliver Hailey and it's—

DESSERE:

Also a student here?

GORDON:

No, no, Oliver Hailey was actually a Yale. He was one of that bunch that came out of Yale [University] long after—a generation behind me. He had been produced on Broadway—a play called *Father's Day* that he had written. It was quite successful.

DESSERE:

Had you ever seen it?

GORDON:

No, I never saw *Father's Day*, but I know the play quite well. As a matter of fact, I have frequently had students do scenes from it in my directing class. But *Triptych* was a new play that he had written. I don't know how it came to me, but I read it because I knew Oliver to some degree. I thought that it was a very, very interesting play. Just your character study within the family with different—

DESSERE:

Generations?

GORDON:

Yes, in a kind of way. So that was it, and we did it. It's interesting. I've often talked to directors and said to them, "You must be very careful in proposing revisions to a playwright." Even in the manuscript analysis class, just in the abstract, if we're proposing revisions in a play we must follow certain logical procedures. That in proposing any proposition of policy—to make some

change—you have to really support three propositions of fact. First, that there are existing evils that require a change. Secondly, your proposal is going to correct those evils. And thirdly, that it is not going to introduce any new evils, or if it does, that they are of lesser consequence than those that you're correcting. That's the logical process. I remember I had an idea for Oliver Hailey's play, and I knew it was right. There was this young boy in the play (he never actually appeared in the play) who was, as it were, the prize over which two brothers were struggling. The father, who was a no-good—he just got out of jail—was one. The hero of the play was his unmarried younger brother, the boy's uncle, who had been taking care of the boy while the father was in jail. Now the father wanted him back. The values of the play, the emotional values, were that that shouldn't happen. Now, the central figure was a piano teacher who was a performing artist, a concert artist manque. He never made it. As a matter of fact, he had recordings. One of the things was the second Rachmaninoff concerto. He played the recording, and he did it on the keyboard at the same time. Only the keyboard was muted and he just did the fingering. He was a piano teacher. Well, the boy, as written, had no character, except, as I say, as being the prize over which these two conflicting forces were struggling. I had an idea. It would be wonderful if this boy had the god-given gift of perfect pitch. He'd hear a melody, and he could play it on the piano. He's eight years old. That he had this extraordinary talent, latent talent, as a musician. Maybe was younger than eight years old, six years old. I said, "I want to make that proposal to Oliver." I hoped that he would accept this revision. I remember going through a whole strategy. I was working at my home at that particular time, on a Sunday. This was long before rehearsal. I developed a whole strategy of how I would approach it to him—the arguments that I would give in support. But the moment that I mentioned the idea over the phone, he said, "Fantastic!" [laughter] So sometimes it's not necessary to go through all this process. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, you better have your strategy well planned if you're trying to propose to an author, particularly a young author, that certain changes are called for. [laughter]

DESSERE:

Forest Murmurs by Steven Morris.

GORDON:

Again, that was a play that was written by one of our students. It had a strange kind of atmosphere and color. It was a story of personal interrelationships.

DESSERE:

Conflict of generations again?

GORDON:

Only in a limited way. It was a widowed mother with a young son and daughter, and a man who is interested in her and the kids' relationship to the memory of the father. It was that kind of thing. It was set in the background of Northern California around the Russian River. The whole atmosphere of the play, it seemed to me, was extremely interesting and well written. It was not more significant in its theme or subject matter than what I have just described, but it was a play that revealed an exceptional talent on the part of this young writer. Even though it was not the greatest play in the world, I felt that he was a young playwright who deserved a hearing, as well as what he could learn from seeing the thing translated from the page to the stage, which is why I did it.

DESSERE:

Are you still in touch with those people?

GORDON:

With some of them. Not with Steve Morris, I haven't been. He's not living in Los Angeles anymore. I think that Ted [Theodore Apstein] has been in touch with him. But with [Denis] Clontz I continue to— Kevin Droney I saw recently, but he doesn't live in California any longer either. He married a French girl, and he's lived in France a great deal of the time.

DESSERE:

Are they continuing in play writing?

GORDON:

Well, yes, and often supporting themselves in teaching at various levels. Some more successful than others. I think that Steve Morris is teaching in some state college somewhere or junior college. Droney has been teaching on the

high school level. Denis has always had kind of a different job. I think that he had employment with the *L.A. Times* doing some kind of researching. I don't know exactly what the nature of his work was.

DESSERE:

We are going to talk about his play *Generations*, which I have seen here, because it was during my years as a student.

GORDON:

Well, *Generations* again was a play that was written by a student, and it needed work. Actually, we did that in a workshop production in advance. I didn't do it, but one of the students under my supervision, one of the graduate M. F. A. directors, did it. With no scenic investiture, just done under rehearsal conditions. We saw a number of things that needed fortification. Those changes were made, and then I felt that it was ready to be presented on the subscription series.

DESSERE:

I remember at the time you were rehearsing, you expressed some worries about the size of the stage at Ralph Freud Playhouse.

GORDON:

Yes, because a lot of it was very intimate stuff. The Freud is a great stage for a spectacle—for *Chorus Line* it's wonderful—but for something which is more intimate, it's not the greatest space in the world. I would have much preferred to do it in the [Macgowan Hall] Little Theater, but for whatever reason, that could not be scheduled that way. Rather than not do the project at all, I said, "Well, we'll do it there and then try to design the space to reduce its dimensions in some respects." You couldn't change, obviously, the width of the auditorium. I've rarely been comfortable doing the kinds of plays that I have done in the Freud. I have been much more comfortable in the Little Theater, which has the dimensions of a number of straight, legit houses, so-called, on Broadway in terms of the proscenium, not size of the auditorium. The payload, of course, is inadequate, but the dimensions of the proscenium are comparable to the Booth [Theater] on Forty-fifth Street in New York, which is one of the great theaters. But that has a much deeper auditorium and

has two balconies and can accommodate at least a thousand people. We can accommodate in the Little Theater only two hundred. But apart from that, it's a fine theater.

DESSERE:

I thought you used space in a remarkable fashion. You had just told me it was a handicap, so I kept that in mind when I went to see the play at the time.

GORDON:

I did confine it with the elements that were there. At the same time, since it was an exterior setting, it did "expand" beyond that. But I confined the playing space by virtue of the architecture and so on.

DESSERE:

I found very interesting that that play seemed to me very classical. It could have been written in the fifties. He had a little touch of modern things that were specifically this generation, but still it was very much a—

GORDON:

Yes, I think it was a thing that could have occurred at any time, although in the fifties I don't think that the general public was as familiar with Alzheimer's syndrome—with what happens when the mind begins to go and an older person becomes detached from immediate reality, how one deals with it and the fact that there are periodic remissions sometimes, and the impact of that kind of tragedy on the family. The play I think was written with great sensitivity. The family relationships were interesting—the contrasting brothers and the father and the sister.

DESSERE:

The women seemed to be very strong personalities, and they were also quite vain I would say.

GORDON:

Oh, they varied enormously. They were individuals not types.

DESSERE:

Let's talk about the other plays. I'm not going to take it chronologically. I'm curious what you did about *The Night of the Iguana*. I would have liked to see your production of it.

GORDON:

I chose that under duress. I had to make a decision. It was a play that I had read, I'd never seen, and I thought was very interesting in the writing. I felt that it was more or less castable. Most of the characters were older than our student body generally, but I felt that we could cast it adequately here. There was one very old man in it, and I had a young student who did a splendid job. He was very, very convincing.

DESSERE:

You had never seen the film version of it with Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr?

GORDON:

No, I'm quite sure I hadn't. I read the play. I get no image when you mention it, except when you mention these names I could project it. But no, I hadn't seen that at all. I thought that it was an interesting play written by obviously one of our very, very justly respected playwrights.

DESSERE:

It seems that Tennessee Williams, though, wouldn't be a playwright who would attract you. Am I wrong?

GORDON:

Yes, you are. [laughter] At one time this was true. I had an experience which may be of some interest. I don't know if I ever mentioned it. I was very fortunate to be able to see the original production in New York, Laurette Taylor who played the mother in *The Glass Menagerie* in New York. After the play was over, I found myself just kind of pole axed by the play. I just didn't want to get up out of the seat. The performance was so wonderful, and the impact of the play was so powerful on me. My wife wanted to leave. I said, "Wait, I'm thinking." She said, "Yes, I know, but we're going to get locked in." She said, "I know the play had a great emotional impact, but come on already. It's time to go!" I said, "No, no, that's not why I'm still sitting here." She said,

"Why?" I said, "Because I have a terrible feeling I would have turned this script down. I'm now having to reexamine my criteria." Because at that time I was in a phase of my life where unless it had direct sociopolitical impact, it didn't interest me very much. An intensely personal thing. But ever since that time, my respect and interest in Tennessee Williams—I mean, I think that the plays vary enormously in their quality. They're not all the same. But I have the highest regard for the body of work of Tennessee Williams. And it's a substantial body of work. I don't know how many—fifteen plays that he's had done on Broadway at least.

DESSERE:

When I took your film directing class, my first project for you was *Suddenly Last Summer*. I got a lot from what you told me, the indications, your interest in that project. I really learned a lot.

GORDON:

We used to call it "*Suddenly Last Supper*" because it was about cannibalism, if you remember the end! He was going off in very, very bizarre tangents at a certain phase of his life. Nevertheless, it certainly was a very compelling play.

DESSERE:

I like that comment you just made. The fact that sometimes your political interests or social interests would have maybe blocked your interest for more—

GORDON:

Not totally. Obviously, I have certain inclinations, as every one does. If you ask me, as I said before, what is the genre that I like most, it's the comedy that makes social commentary. Whether it be about academic freedom or political corruption in Washington or whatever it may be. Like *Born Yesterday*, a play which everybody enjoyed very much as a comedy, and it was very successful, but not everybody gave it as much credit as I felt that it deserved. Beyond its effectiveness as a comedy and character drawing, I think it's an estimable play.

DESSERE:

Because it had a comment about the oppression of women and—

GORDON:

That, number one. And in a way, the fact that she turned the tables on the guy may have been a contributing factor to what I was able to add to the original script of *Pillow Talk*, which also, I said, needed something. It needed a "third act," which it didn't have in the original script. To use the givens that were in the play—that she was always the interior decorator—I said, "He's got this great bachelor pad. Let her get even with him by making it into a Moroccan whorehouse." [laughter]

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DESSERE:

Among other plays you did, you also did *Goodbye, My Fancy* by Fay Kanin. Any comments about that one?

GORDON:

Yes, Fay Kanin was someone whom I knew quite well. I had done a play on Broadway written by her in collaboration with her husband, Michael Kanin. When I had the opportunity to do a play, I thought that would be nice, because that happens to be a very warm play, although I had never seen it. I think it originally had been directed by a guy who used to be a good friend of mine, although I haven't seen him in recent years. I think it was originally directed by Sam Wannamaker, who I respected very much as an actor and who made a project later on in restoring the Elizabethan playhouse, the old Globe, fundraising for restoration, a very strange preoccupation. There again it was a comedy about something. It did have to do with academic freedom and the woman question, because Fay is very socially minded. Perhaps you know, she's been a very important figure. She was the president of the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences].

DESSERE:

Yes, I think she still is, isn't she?

GORDON:

No, I don't think she is any longer.

DESSERE:

Oh, no, it's Bonita Granville Barker. Fay Kanin is chair of the American Film Institute.

GORDON:

In any case, so we decided to do it here. For me what was a matter of interest is that, while I had supervised M. F. A. directors on a number of projects that were done in various arrangements of the round—in the black box theater [1340 Macgowan Hall]—I had never directed myself in anything but proscenium, and this was an opportunity I wanted to take. I did that play in the full round. I had a good understanding of certain broad technical principles involved—the difference one must deal with in working in the round as opposed to the fixed frame of the proscenium—but I never had to do it myself. This was for me an experiment which I found very enjoyable.

DESSERE:

What were the particular technical problems involved in it?

GORDON:

Well, the technical problems really are largely staging problems—that is to say of focus and of not obstructing the view. Let me put it this way: You and I might have been having a very important—we've sat almost without any movement for two hours here. This is a very valid experience, but it would not be theatrically very interesting or viable, isn't that so? So that if we were making this either in the stage or in film, we would have some movement, we would have justification. I did get up and reach for something in the drawer at one particular point. Even though the life experience didn't require it, the theatrical imperatives might. The fact that the people on the north side of the auditorium in the round pay just as much for the tickets as the people on the south side, you've got to give them a fair shake. So that, in a sense, the theatrical imperatives there require even more movement. Now, this should not be random movement, because random movement is not only undesirable in its own terms but it's distracting from really what is focal. So you have to devise justifications and make very careful choices as to when people move and why. That they have a reason to make the move. So that one does in extension some of the things that I have always chosen to do, let us say, in directing even within the proscenium. In talking about *Triptych*, for

example, the guy who was playing the piano with the recording machine—as Oliver had written it, recording machine that was playing was right next to the piano. I chose to put it on the opposite side of the room, so that whenever he had to go to switch it off or play a passage over again, he had to cross—in other words, you create necessities, justification, for an amount of movement which in a life context would not be necessary but in a theatrical context is desirable.

DESSERE:

That reminds me of a question I should ask you.

GORDON:

There are other technical considerations that one does employ, but they're very, very primitive and not very important.

DESSERE:

In film there is now this increased use of what is called the "fluid" master, in which you cover practically the whole scene in one take just by choreographing the camera movement with—

GORDON:

That's not that new. One of the pictures that you made reference to earlier on, the first picture that I did at Universal [Pictures], *The Web*, was a fairly conventional kind of melodrama, at the the end of which the main detective gathers all the possible suspects in one large room, and now he's putting the pieces together until he zeros in on the guilty party, right? It was a long expositional talking sequence at the end of a picture, which does not necessarily make for a good movie (as opposed to a big chase). It was a five-page or more sequence. What I did was I did a rewriting, a rearrangement of the materials, in such a way that the detective "carried" the camera. Starting, let's say, with a group shot involving twelve people, he led the camera into a foursome, and then it became a threesome and then a twosome and then a close-up. I did that whole sequence in one setup, involving a good deal of dollying in and out. We didn't have the zoom then.

DESSERE:

You choreographed that.

GORDON:

Yes, with great care. It took me forever to rehearse it, and the production department was having a headache because instead of having a shot in the can at a quarter after nine, here it was twelve o'clock and I hadn't even rolled the cameras yet! But then I was able to knock off the whole sequence in one setup.

DESSERE:

And that's the way it appears in the final film? Because you didn't take any close-ups or anything?

GORDON:

Oh, I did for protection take a few close-ups, but we didn't feel that we had to use them. Actually, the important close-ups were in the master shot. That was part of it, and sometimes it came into a close-up or into a tight two.

DESSERE:

So you are not at all averse to that technique?

GORDON:

Oh, no. The only thing that I am averse to is the roving camera that is not led. That I don't like. If we have to show a great big restaurant scene and Doris Day and Rock Hudson are sitting in a booth together, I don't want the camera just to go roaming around and then come in on them. I have a waiter carrying something flambe, and I follow the waiter. He's not been in the scene, but he delivers me to Doris Day. He goes out, and there we are. I like the "led" camera, the camera that is led, rather than the camera which just arbitrarily goes snooping around.

DESSERE:

Because it attracts attention to itself.

GORDON:

Very often, actually, you begin sometimes to get a strobe effect, too, if you make that kind of a sweep-pan without something in the foreground. Very

often the whole set seems to bend or buckle. You get these strange aberrations when you do that kind of a shot.

DESSERE:

The Fifth of July by Lanford Wilson—what is this about?

GORDON:

The Fifth of July actually has to do with the family of the characters whom he had created in an earlier play, *Tally's Folly*, a family in the South. It's a family story involving a crippled member of the family. That was another very complicated task, which I also did in half round, because it involved an interior and an exterior simultaneously. It's just family relationships. It's a very well written play, as all of Lanford Wilson's plays are. I think he's a very expert dramatist and very protean in the variety of things that he's written. I mean, it's a very mixed bag of subjects that he has dealt with in his writing. He's an enormously prolific playwright, but also a very skilled one. It was a play that interested me, and I thought that I would do it. The interior-exterior thing was an interesting technical problem working in the round, because sometimes action would be occurring inside and outside at the same time. I had to graph out a design because I didn't have a designer early enough. I have to work in advance. I have to plan staging. So I worked out a rough on it of how we would do it. The basic element that we used was to frame the architecture, which differentiated the inside of the house from the exterior but without walls. You had only the architectural framing. To establish the convention in the play that even though it was all visible, that the characters could not see one another through the walls. The convention was that they would have to go to the door and look out to talk to someone outside, even though actually the audience could see the simultaneous action. It was interesting that it worked so very effectively. You know, that you could talk around the corner but you couldn't see around the corner. We got some interesting performances in that. It was done in the summer session. As a matter of fact, a very important role was played by a little high school kid, a kid from New York who came out here. She was a very, very talented actress. She bowled me over when I just encountered her in an audition. People in the summer session don't have to be of college age, as you know.

DESSERE:

So we have discussed all your plays. I know the last one was *The Tender Trap*. We've already talked extensively about it. That's the last play that you did.

GORDON:

We did it in the summer session, and again, you never know what enrollment you're going to have. The casting pool is much more limited in the summer than it is in the year. I said, "Well, these are principally young people, although older than our normal population, but it could be within range." It was a fun play. It was sort of a last-minute thing. I said, "Well, let's do it again," because I enjoyed doing it the first time.

DESSERE:

Let's talk about general things before I ask you about your projects. We've covered your entire career, which lasted more than seventeen hours of tape. I'm just curious. When you talk to people of the young generations within your family or whatever, it seems that people now are much more conservative, that they don't have the enthusiasm and the passion that you had which pushed you to make some choices in your life. What do you feel about that? When you direct young actors are you trying to explain something?

GORDON:

Well, it depends on what the material is and how remote it may be from their experience. I remember when we were doing *Thunder Rock*, I said, "Gee, these kids have to deal with materials that are not within their history." I said, "I better give them some background," which I remember, because I was an adult in 1937, right? But these kids, you know, it's ancient history, like the Crusades, as remote as the Civil War kind of thing. I started just to write some notes. I just sat at the typewriter batting some stuff out. Before I knew it I had seven pages of background. By the time I was through, I had written that much of my own recollections. I started by saying, "This is what I remember about the background of this particular play and the problems of the play." I read it to them. Frequently one is obliged to do that kind of research to provide actors with some background information that will make a play which deals with materials that are wholly foreign to them, whether it be in terms of period or lifestyles or whatever—to give them enough background so that they understand what they're talking about and what they're attempting to

do. This is standard procedure. It can be profoundly affected by the differentiation of age, but is not restricted to that. Even if you're dealing with adults who come from a totally different background—if I'm doing a play, say, about a courtroom drama, I know vaguely about it. But I have done personal research for myself. If you do a play that's set on a battleship, you have to provide material to help the actors know that which normally may be somewhat unfamiliar. If it's simply a domestic situation, marital infidelity, then you don't have to go into that extensive research.

DESSERE:

I know you don't have that attitude, but a lot of people always say, "Well, it was better in my time." It seems to me that I sometimes even say that. I find that people lack passion for certain subjects and do not feel the need to make themselves useful or interesting.

GORDON:

I don't know if one could assign that to periods. It's very difficult for me to generalize in very broad terms for that. I find that there are certain students that one encounters who are enormously committed and others who are not and who have no particular convictions about a variety of things. Again, it's a mixed bag. We have a large undergraduate population here, and they cover a wide spectrum of points of view, personality, backgrounds.

DESSERE:

How do you regard the evolution of your own convictions? In the thirties it was very relevant to be politically committed. After that you more or less lost interest?

GORDON:

Let me say, I didn't lose interest. I simply lost my convictions that the Communist Party was the way to effect the changes. The need for social reform, whether it be in terms of homeless in Los Angeles or the gang warfare that goes on downtown, the gun, where they should limit these assault weapons which the National Rifle Association opposes any kind of limitations on—I still feel strongly about those things. This is why I contribute not only to the [American] Civil Liberties Union but to Greenpeace. I make contributions

to a wide variety—not enormous, \$25 here, \$25 there. Because those things are important. I have had occasion to say to the students sometimes that there are many, many things about their youth that I envy very much, but sweating out the remainder of this century is not among them. I don't envy that because of things that are happening in the world. Not only politically, not only internationally, but globally, in terms of the dispersal of the ozone layer, ecological considerations, what to do about nuclear wastes without contaminating the water supply of the world. These are very, very grave problems. The degree that we can deal with them before it's irreversible is something which I feel very strongly about, not for myself but for my children and my grandchildren.

DESSERE:

How do you feel about the general perception of your work? I'm talking about your working in film. People would put you in the mold of the classical Hollywood director, the last big generation which came during the Second World War and followed strict compositions and ways of shooting, and the studio system. Do you feel like that?

GORDON:

I don't think of it in those categorical terms at all. There are very considerable variations in the things that I've done, which have ranged from quasi-classics like *Cyrano [de Bergerac]* to *For Love of Money*, with heavy dramas in between. I feel there are a number of things that are just within my own personal inclinations and ethic. One has a responsibility to the material. Ultimately it is designed, the work that we do, to create a certain desired impact on an audience, whether it's to make them laugh or to make them cry or to terrify them. Those are the objectives, rather than what we were talking about the other day with respect to auteurship. That I want the stamp of me to be on the material? No. I think that the director should serve his material and ultimately try, as I said before, to convey certain impressions to an audience, rather than say, "Oh, boy, there's the Gordon touch," if there is such a thing.

DESSERE:

But, for instance, has it ever happened to you, when you looked at a foreign film dealing with a subject which could have interested you and you would

have liked, to say, "I wish I had had that subject"? "I could have made it this way with a certain amount of freedom, as opposed to always banging my wrist back to a producer."

GORDON:

Well, to some degree this is true. Actually, in the course of shooting, I haven't had any striking conflicts with producers en route. When there have been conflicts, it has almost invariably been in the post-production work, in the cutting room, in the montage. I can't make any generalization about that. There have been conflicts. There was one with a man by the name of Frank Rosenberg in developing a story, which [Darryl F.] Zanuck finally resolved. As it happened, he resolved it in favor of the author, Oscar Saul, and myself, rather than the producer. There was just a standoff, a conflict which couldn't be resolved. It wasn't going to happen unless we could resolve this conflict.

DESSERE:

Well, the last question will be on the future. What are you going to do?

GORDON:

I'm going to devote myself to very serious enterprises like golf and chess, which I play against a computer which I have in my briefcase now. And editing the transcript of these hours, which I'm not looking forward to, but which I would like to do, because I didn't do it in the SMU [Southern Methodist University] interview and I should have. I had the opportunity to do it, and I neglected to because I was too busy or I didn't like going over things that I've said. I'm dissatisfied too much with myself, but this time I will try to do it.

DESSERE:

You've been such an active man, it's difficult for me to imagine you sitting around looking at the cobwebs at the corner of the room.

GORDON:

There are two states in this country I've never visited, Oregon and Washington. I've never been in western Canada; I've only been in eastern Canada. So I will do some traveling. And Scandinavian countries I've never been in. There are a lot of places, and I'm going to try to do them.

DESSERE:

And hopefully to France.

GORDON:

Oh, I've been to France three times.

DESSERE:

But have you been to the Cinematheque [Française]?

GORDON:

No, never, but all of the museums. I walked thirty miles in the Louvre alone.

DESSERE:

Is there anything that you would like to add? What do you think of such an enterprise as doing oral history? What would be your last words of wisdom?

GORDON:

I have no last words. The things that I say have no surprise value for me. That's why I don't talk to myself. I always know what I'm going to say! In a certain sense, I feel a little bit the same way about something of this kind. If it is of interest to others, I'm delighted. That's all I can say.

DESSERE:

Because you are somebody who likes to share his ideas and opinions.

GORDON:

Sharing is very important, because I think that is what a teacher at his best does. He shares his experiences with those who haven't had them, period.

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