

Ken J. Frolund
Narrator

June Dobervich
Interviewer

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JD: This interview is with Ken Frolund. This taping is being produced in Moorhead State University's recording studio. The interviewer is June Dobervich, representing the Heritage Education Commission. Ken, your involvement with the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre, although it has been largely in set construction, I believe, covers administrative and a few other little items. I wonder if you'd tell me what made you interested in theater in the first place?

KF: Well, it wasn't theater per se. I got a frantic call from my daughter who was going to NDSU [North Dakota State University] at the time and helping with the tech end of the theater. And they needed someone to build a stairway with a railing and platform and so on, and she asked if I could do it. And I said, "Well, I'll drop down and help." Well, they turned me loose on this, and the director Jim Wallis[sp?] had a beautiful pen and ink sketch and dimension drawing, and so I just went ahead and built it. And incidentally, about oh, a week after the show closed, he called and he said, "Ken, he said, "How did you build that stairway?" And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, we want to take it apart."

JD: Hmmm.

KF: And I says, "Take it apart?" I said, "I built that for all eternity!" [Chuckles] "That's screwed and glued together. You'll never get it apart!" [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

KF: That was my first involvement in the theater.

JD: After that you learned if it was steady it didn't have to be forever! [Laughs]

KF: I learned that you build it for ten days instead of eternity! [Chuckles]

JD: [Laughs] Well, that's interesting. Hmmm, you're, I guess, by trade an engineer. Is that...?

KF: I am an electrical engineer and I've always worked with power tools. I have been doing some woodworking since I was about twelve years old.

JD: Kind of your avocation? [Chuckles]

KF: I guess you could call it that. [Chuckles]

JD: Hobby, whatever...

KF: Hobby, yeah, whatever.

JD: [Chuckles] Yeah. Well, Susan, you say, was your daughter. Now I seem to remember another Frolund by the name of Carol.

KF: No, that was my wife. And after I got involved they found out that she was an excellent seamstress, and occasionally call on her for elaborate costumes. And I guess her first involvement was about the same time as mine.

JD: And then after that, as I recall, she did lots of other things, too, just as you have. Hmmm, I'd like to get in perhaps to talking about your administrative involvement with the theater at this point, and then we'll go back to set building, which I know is the thing that you've done the most of. Hmmm, I know that you did serve on the board. What led up that? I mean, what...?

KF: Well, after I had been building sets for a little while they asked me if I would consider being a board member. And I didn't know what it involved, so I said yes!

JD: [Laughs]

KF: And so I served, I guess, a three-year term and then was off. And I think I've been on the board three different times.

JD: Well, they know quality when they see it, Ken! [Chuckles]

KF: [Chuckles]

JD: You also, I believe, had something to do with the...you worked for the telephone company, is that right?

KF: Yes, I did. I am retired from the telephone company.

JD: And you had some overseas assignments. Want to tell us about that?

KF: Yes, I hmmm...I was assigned to Nigeria for six months. And they did have a British theater group over there, and I got visiting with them one time, and they asked if I would help build sets. And I said, "Sure, I would be happy to." And so I took a taxicab down there. But I only made one trip down there and I didn't accomplish much the first night. It was too...very difficult to get

from where I lived to where they were building. So I did go to one of their shows, which was a British comedy, and I didn't quite understand it.

JD: [Chuckles] And then...

KF: Then later I spent eighteen months in Iran and they had a very well-equipped theater in the Iran-American Society building. And hmmm...I helped them build sets there for the...oh, sixteen months that I was there before the troubles started. And it was quite interesting over there because everything was in metric units. But the plywood and stuff was in four by eight [foot] sheets as it is here. [Chuckles] So you really had to do a lot of converting back and forth. And it was interesting and fun.

JD: You're probably the one American that's been forced into the metric system! [Chuckles] We seem quite stubborn about that, don't we?

KF: Yeah. We should have gone metric a hundred years ago as far as I am concerned.

JD: [Laughs] Well, Ken, then when you returned from Iran, how long after that then did it take you to get back into the theater here?

KF: I think about two weeks! [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] They must have missed you!

KF: Oh, I dropped into the theater one day and the tech director said, "Oh, boy! You're back!"

JD: And they just handed you a hammer? [Chuckles]

KF: And he said, "Can you come in tomorrow?" [Chuckles]

JD: [Chuckles] Yeah.

KF: So I did.

JD: And you have been there ever since.

KF: Mmmm-hmmm.

JD: Well, I know that in addition to the theater you are also helping out some of the other area arts groups with sets, I kind of gather, right?

KF: Yes, I was asked by the Civic Opera about five years ago if I could help them. And it worked.

JD: Spread yourself a little thinner! [Laughs]

KF: So that worked out very well. Because during the day I could work at the theater, and then in evening where we couldn't work at the theater, I could go over to the opera and help them.

JD: Good heavens! I bet your wife hardly knows you're retired. [Laughs]

KF: Well, if I don't get out of the house she says, "Aren't you going to the theater today?" [Chuckles]

JD: [Laughs] Well, it's marvelous to have persons like yourself out of our community and...and you're one of those standouts. But there have been plenty through the years that have given of their time and their talents. Hmm, you have been then, you might say, kind of working steadily for the community theater for the last how many years? Because I know you're still there.

KF: It's got to be about sixteen, seventeen years since I got involved. Whenever they built the building, that was the day that I...[Chuckles] Or that when they were finishing the building, that's when I got started.

JD: Yes. The...you mentioned that the first production...you were just finishing the building about the time the first production was...

KF: Well, it was...yeah, it was the first production in the building, which I...I don't recall the name of it, but I think that the next play thereafter was *A Man for All Seasons*. And I...well, I started building, and I have been building ever since.

JD: At that point. What's the most complicated set you ever had to have anything to do with?

KF: Oh, I think that the most complicated was probably the last one we did, *Cactus Flower*, where we had to build on that small stage so many areas, a record shop, a dental reception office, a bathroom, an apartment complete with kitchen and sink and the whole bit. I think that was about as complicated as any.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Now these sets that you have been doing for community theater have been largely of that type of thing for thrust stage. You've done, I presume some of the proscenium type sets also. What are the main...for those of us who are not technically inclined, what's the main difference there, Ken?

KF: Well, I think the main difference is that in a thrust theater where you're surrounded by the audience, attention to detail...you do a little better carpentry job, let me put it that way.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: Than you do in the proscenium theater where you're thirty feet away or more, the closest seats. And then...hmmm...well, especially involvement with the opera, it's built in one location and hauled to a theater, either...hmmm...well, wherever they decide to put on their production. So

it has to be pretty well engineered and fit together. And sometimes it's so large that we can't fit it together in the shop. You just *hope* that it'll fit when it gets there. [Chuckles]

JD: Yes.

KF: I think that the size, the dimensioning is bigger in the proscenium theater. It's usually larger than the thrust.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. I recall that since we've had a home over here on Fourth Street for the theater, we have been able to build in place, and that certainly is a plus for a set builder, I am sure. Hmmm, but you were not then involved with Community Theatre back in the days when we had to do the same thing, virtually build our sets and transport them to whatever place...?

KF: No. No, I was not. I should have mentioned that in Iran we built in a separate location and took it to the theater, which was just a half a block away, but still was a separate building problem.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. And that certainly presents problems, which you don't have here in the...

KF: Yes. When you can build in place, go out and measure something [chuckles] and it should fit then.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Now perhaps since 1965 we've had more or less the same kinds of problems in terms of getting people to build sets. I know you have been a regular. And I presume that sometimes it's been kind of tough. But of course now that we have a staff member who does design and help build the sets, I would think that there is a great difference between this kind of arrangement and the kind of arrangement which existed in years past when we had no staff except an artistic director who really then did everything. Hmmm, I recall a time at which we had perhaps more set builders, maybe you know, a few hours at a time here and there, than we did cast members. I think that's...it would be nice if we had that same problem today of too many set builders. [Chuckles]

KF: Well, it has varied over the years. Sometimes we had set builders coming out of our ears and then sometimes we really had to plead to get them to help. I don't know. It seems to run in cycles.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: And right at the moment, I guess there are three or four of us that build rather consistently. We could always use more help.

JD: Sure. A good balance but...

KF: But...

JD: But sometimes you're [unclear].

KF: Yeah, and it does help to have a permanent staff.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: You're accustomed to the way they do things. And whereas back in the quote "old days" when we had a director that came in...oh, he may or may not be technically inclined. I know we had one and I had to design the set from a picture in a book.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: And did so. But...most of the time, they have a feeling for the tech end of it.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: [Coughs] Excuse me.

JD: Well, I recall a set that was very unusual just last year where there was a...golly. Now I'm trying to think of how...what did you do with the floor? There was a...

KF: What year?

JD: ...kind of a mosaic floor. How...?

KF: Oh.

JD: How was that achieved?

KF: [Coughs] Well, was it the marble or the mosaic? I mean, hmmm...

JD: No, I was thinking of the mosaic, where there was the mosaic in the middle of the floor.

KF: Okay. Alright. Well, that was a piece of hardboard that was screwed to the floor and hand painted to represent tiling, the tiny tiles that you would have in a mosaic, and that's all it was. It was a lot of detail work, a lot of measurement laying out the little squares. And then I'm not much of a painter, so they...[chuckles] people that knew what they were doing painted the little squares.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Who are some of the people that have...that come to your mind that have worked with you backstage over the years that you have been involved? Some of the ones that kind of stand out in your mind? I know there are hundreds of them.

KF: Oh...

JD: I know you can't tell us all. But perhaps you can tell us about some of the people that you have...you can recall.

KF: June, I...I really...there have been so many I can't...[Chuckles] I can't really pick out any. Hmm...

JD: Well...

KF: I think I'll skip that question! [Chuckles]

JD: [Chuckling] Maybe that's an unfair question. We can go on to something else. Hmm, obviously, since we have a staff like we do and the budget is as large as it is at the present time, I don't suppose there is any problem about money in terms of building a set except that you usually, I presume, have to stay within a budget. But perhaps back in 1965-66 when you first started out, and the building was new, and we were perhaps not so affluent in terms of budget monies, maybe there were some problems then. Can you think offhand of some of the...?

KF: Yeah.

JD: ...kinds of things you did to achieve an effect in a very, very inexpensive way?

KF: Well, always we have reused what lumber we can. We tear the set down and reuse the lumber for the next show, or the next show, or the next show. [Chuckles] But I remember once we wanted to use some plywood, and at that time I think it was nine dollars and ninety-five cents a sheet. And they just said we just couldn't buy it, because that was much too expensive and would exceed the budget. I think we needed two sheets of the stuff. Well, we finally wound up with what we call gypsum board, which is kind of a cardboard [chuckles] for roughly three dollars a sheet and that was acceptable.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: And another time I remember, although it was not the technical end, the director wanted to order some...or rent some boots. And I don't remember what the rental price was, but the board said, "Oh, no. You can't rent them. We don't have enough money." Ah, and he said, "Well, I'll send him on the stage barefoot then." [Chuckles] And then they finally did rent them. But yeah, there is...hmmm...and every...well, we do, we try to stay within a budget. And hmmm...if you use your common sense, it isn't really that difficult unless there is some *unusual* thing that you have to buy.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Well, I have been backstage a few times, and it looks to me as if there might be a problem in terms of storing things that might have a use later, but you can't...just can't keep it all. Is that...would that be a fair assessment?

KF: That...yes. That's one of our big problems. We have *virtually* no storage space. The workshop area is barely adequate, especially on some of the larger sets. And so we almost have to tear down everything, although you might want to save a stairway or two- or three-step unit from one show to the other, and sometimes we do. But unfortunately, there just isn't room to keep it.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. I assume that now with the building project that there will be a good amount of storage space. Will there?

KF: Yes. Hmmm...if you're familiar with the theater at all, it has an area that was designed to be a proscenium theater and is about forty feet high. And it's never been used for anything because there's no way of using it. And I think that in this building addition, they will build a storage area there. It's nothing but virtually waste space at the moment.

JD: Hmmm. Lots of heat maybe gets up in, hmmm?

KF: Yeah, the heat gets up there. Very definitely.

JD: [Chuckles] And leaves the stage completely. Well, Ken, there have to be some moments perhaps that stand out, some particular play where that was...some set that was particularly interesting to build, or where maybe it took a lot of...a good sense of humor to overcome the whole thing. [Chuckles]

KF: You have to...

JD: Any kind of experiences like that you want to share with us?

KF: You have to have an imagination and be a little crazy. Hmmm, I have built guns that go bang. And I think one set that we had the most fun with, I cannot remember the name of it, but it involved a ghost who caused various things to move. And we had a little motor rigged up that would tip a vase.

JD: Was that *Blithe Spirit*?

KF: Yes, it was. Yeah.

JD: [Chuckles] Yeah, okay.

KF: And I think that the audience was so intrigued by that moving vase [chuckles] that they forgot some of the lines.

JD: Mmmm.

KF: Ah, but...oh, that was one. And another...oh, there's been a number of challenges. Oh, and they did...oh, the western one with the wagon wheels. Hmmm...*Jane*...? No.

JD: *Calamity Jane?*

KF: *Calamity Jane.*

JD: Yeah.

KF: Ah, Marvin Add[sp?], a tech director asked me, “Gee, we’ve got to get some wagon wheels.” And well, he could rent some but they were, I think, in Park Rapids or something, and we didn’t want to go get them. [Chuckles]

JD: [Chuckles]

KF: And besides, they were too large. And I said...foolishly said, “Well, why don’t we build them?”

JD: [Laughs]

KF: Never having built a wagon wheel in my life, and then not knowing how. But we built four wagon wheels, and they looked like wagon wheels, and they worked.

JD: Well...

KF: And some of...oh, every once in a while we have something in my electrical line that I get involved in wiring something a little differently or having an effect on stage.

JD: Since that was your career in life, electrical engineering, have you helped out with lights?

KF: Only occasionally. Hmmm...I did quite a bit of lighting in Iran because nobody else liked to climb up on the balcony where the lights were. But I have helped set lights a couple of times here. But no, that’s not my field.

JD: It’s not your greatest interest?

KF: No, that...that...painting and light setting are not my favorite things. [Chuckles]

JD: [Chuckles] Yeah, well, maybe that’s like the shoemaker. Don’t ask me...[Chuckles]

KF: [Chuckles]

JD: Don’t ask me to do these things away from the job. Hmmm, I certainly have enjoyed talking with you, Ken. You...I think of you, I guess, as the Jim Baccus of...no, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean Jim Baccus. I mean I think of you as the Don Bishop of the first twenty years of the theater, say 1946 to 1965. And then somehow there might have been a little era in there where we didn’t have either one of you two boys, but I guess the last twenty years, it’s hard to think of anyone

more important to what people see on stage when they arrive to see a play than Ken Frolund. So I think you have your permanent niche in history of the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre. And hmmm, I just couldn't think of anyone on the tech side of theater to interview that I thought would be more interesting and be able to tell us more than you have. Hmmm. I know that there has to be a satisfaction that you receive from this. I'd be disappointed if you only told me that it keeps you busy and out of your wife's hair. Hmmm...you want to...?

KF: Yeah, there is a great deal of satisfaction. Hmmm. Oh, when you see a piece of paper with some drawings on it be they are very detailed or just some...I always like to kid the tech directors a little bit that they might ask me to build a box, you know, a foot square or something, and then I always say, "Well, I need a working drawing." [Chuckles] Which isn't true!

JD: [Chuckles]

KF: But then when the set is complete and the other people have finished it off, so to speak, the painting, ah...you get a great sense of accomplishment. It's...it's fun when you like to do things like that, and I like to make a piece of paper come alive with boards and nails.

JD: Have you kept a scrapbook, Ken?

KF: No, I really haven't. I brought a few things back from Iran from the theater, I mean the posters and one thing. And no...no, I really haven't kept a scrapbook.

JD: I guess in thinking about it, kind of...it seems as if one builds something, you'd like to be able to look at it for a long time. And obviously, when this is torn down after a month or so in production after it's finished, it seems as if there must...some little part of you must die. I perhaps could use this parallel, if I might. I like to cook, but there's something about cooking. You cook all day, and then somebody comes and they eat it, and it's gone. So my feeling has always been I'd rather sew. We have that for a few years! Ah, I know you have built a lake cottage and you've done a lot of building that has stayed. Do you get...would you say you get more satisfaction out of something that stays built? Or is it a different kind of thing?

KF: I guess that after the first shock of the stairway that I built that wouldn't come apart...

JD: [Chuckles]

KF: And realized that you built it for, oh, maybe ten performances or twenty performances. Ah, that it's going to be torn down. And you build with that in mind. You don't take all the detail work that would be necessary if you were going to keep it for years. And you get acclimated to the fact that it will be torn down. And hmmm...once in a while you see a piece of lumber with...that you know that was back three or four shows, and you say, "Gee, I built that thing." But here it is, just a piece of scrap lumber at the moment.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: But no, I guess there's no nostalgia, so to speak, connected with tearing the sets down.

JD: Do you think we get lots of community support? Do you feel we're supported well in the community?

KF: Ah, we could stand a lot more support. Hmmm. I think we have a good measure of community support. We could always use tech people. Well, we could use actors and tech people. I'm talking from the tech side...

JD: Sure.

KF: ...because I'm...I am the backstage area.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm.

KF: Hmmm. I think though that our reputation is growing, if not...well, even in Fargo and Moorhead and in the surrounding area where many of us are asked questions from other theater groups who are getting started or have a question.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Do you think then that the theater has been of great benefit to the community? Do you think we've given back as much as we've gotten?

KF: I would certainly hope so. Hmmm, sometimes I think we give more than we get. But that's a selfish viewpoint. [Chuckles]

JD: Yes. Have you seen changes in our community, Ken, that might have had an impact on the theater and its productions? What kinds of impacts have you seen in this last twenty years?

KF: Well, I think that the fact that the three colleges in the two cities have theater groups, and now that there's a dance group. I think there is always some intermingling of personnel and ideas from them. I know that I have carried tech ideas to the opera and have learned from them certain things that they do that would help. And hmmm...NDSU has been very cooperative with our work and we borrow scenery or props back and forth if we can.

JD: And so you're seeing a good cooperation then between the artistic groups in the two cities?

KF: Oh, yeah, generally speaking, this is true. It would be better if there was a coordination of dates among the universities and the other groups because often two of the colleges will have a play running at the same time we do, and I think it would benefit all of us if we had some sort of a coordinating committee. I can see some overlapping, you know, of a few days, but not a week or ten days.

JD: Mmmm-hmmm. Well, certainly our two cities have become an arts mecca out here in the...what used to be the wilderness. [Chuckles] We certainly have seen lots of growth throughout the various art forums. And I think our theater can be very proud that it has shown

the progress that it has over the last twenty years, certainly since the building of our permanent home, which has alleviated lots of problems which we had before. Well, Ken, it's been wonderful to have you come over here and talk to me about your experiences in the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre, and I want to thank you a great deal for coming.

KF: Well, been a pleasure, June. And I have enjoyed every minute of my work in the theater.

JD: Good. That's nice to hear.

[End of interview]