

Delmar J. Hansen
Narrator

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Interviewer

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I: This is the Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project for architecture and fine arts. We are discussing the theatre program at Moorhead State University with Dr. Delmar J. Hansen, who is chairman of the department as well as director of the theatre program.

Del, would you explain how you developed your interest in your area of work?

DH: Oh, gosh, I would say probably there had always been an interest in theatre per se. I think it probably goes back to the fact that I personally feel all people have an interest in the arts in one form or another. But...I think perhaps some see it as a way of life. And very early on I found that it was a way of living that I liked very much.

I: Did you undertake any formal training?

DH: Yes. Obviously, I was involved in theatre productions when I was in high school, and following the Army and working for a couple years, my interests continued to develop. And then I went to the University of Omaha in Omaha, Nebraska, got a Bachelor's Degree in English and in theatre, and followed that with a Master's Degree at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Taught for a couple years, and then went to the State University of Iowa where I got a Doctorate in speech communication and theatre arts.

I: How would you say your work is accepted by the community?

DH: Oh, my response, I guess, has been that the community over the years has been extremely positive in their reactions to the things we've attempted to do in the theatre program. Obviously, I don't think one always succeeds, because an audience is made up of such a complex set of individuals that I'm not sure any art form satisfies everyone. But you do try, I suppose as you do a show, to strike always for that mythical individual you perceive as the most intelligent person out there, and hope you'll catch everyone else along the line.

I: What constitutes that mythical individual?

DH: I think someone who has a good educational background, who has an understanding of the rules that govern any art form, and who brings a certain critical perception to the audience to find what it is a play is attempting to say, what the ideas are.

I: Have you discovered that there are quite a few of those individuals in the community?

DH: Yes! As a matter of fact, as I've said many times, I think I have always enjoyed the intellectual level of Fargo-Moorhead audiences a great deal more than I have as a theatergoer in New York City, where it seems to me a great many people are there either on expense accounts, or they're simply there for sheer entertainment, and they don't want the play with an idea or a message.

I: Have you found that this community support has increased or diminished over the years?

DH: Oh, I think it has increased. And I think perhaps one of the best examples of that is the summer theatre program the Straw Hat Players. I always recall the first season we did it, twenty-two years ago, we sold seven season tickets. Last year—our twenty-first or twenty-second year, I'm not sure which—we sold two thousand season tickets. So there has been growth.

I: What do you attribute that growth to?

DH: I assume that we are offering them an artistic experience of which they approve. I think also the audiences enjoy watching the student talents develop over a period of years, and enjoy watching them go out into the world, and keeping track of them to see how they fare professionally once they leave the university. So that I think there's always been a kind of sense of family, actually, with our audiences.

I: Who do you think have been some of these students that the community has sort of adopted as family?

DH: Oh, I recall many years ago there were people, for example, who were great favorites with the audience, such as a young man from Minneapolis named Leslie Sarnoff who was, I suppose, at the time that he was an undergraduate, was one of the most popular actors we had. And audiences came to the plays because he was in them. The same thing I think was true with Jerry ver Dorn, who is currently in New York on a soap opera. People such as Delrae Knutson (who had a magnificent soprano voice) and we used her a great deal. Kim Moerer. Steve Poitras, who is currently a local weatherman. All these people during their time with us became audience favorites. And they frequently came to the theatre because they knew one or another of those people were in a play.

I: And what other ways did they let the students know that they were a favorite?

DH: I think ultimately the only way one really has of *knowing* in theatre whether you've pleased an audience is by the applause they give you. It seems to me that while you may talk individually to audience members their responses will always vary. But ultimately the one gauge you have, I

suppose, is the applause which they offer the performers after a show, and the fact that they come back again to see another show.

I: Who influenced and supported or assisted you in the development of your program?

DH: I suppose I got my basic ideas about theatre from an undergraduate professor at the University of Omaha named Ed Clark, who is no longer alive, but who brought a sense of commitment and dedication to theatre that...of which I stood in awe, I must confess. And I never quite encountered anyone with that much passion for a field until I got to Moorhead State University. And the man who hired me, [Clarence] "Soc" Glasrud showed to me that same kind of commitment to the field of literature. And when I first came to Moorhead State I was in the English department, and it was a *genuine* pleasure to work for him because of his love of literature, and the tremendous support which he gave the theatre program over the years.

I: At that time then was there a theatre program per se?

DH: Not really. [Chuckles] As a matter of fact, the facility at our disposal was Weld Hall, which at that time, of course, had no backstage space to speak of. No space above the stage opening to hang scenery. It was filled with wooden seats, which were not the most comfortable seats in the world. And the equipment consisted of an old broken lighting board, a set of the ugliest maroon colored drapes that were also in shreds, and a series of nineteenth century rolled drops and wings for scenery. So the facility itself...ah...didn't have much to offer. But I think it's one of the things about theatre, and that is you take a space...as Thornton Wilder, the playwright, once said, "All you really need to do a play is a platform and a passion or two." And I suppose that was my feeling when I took the job here. I thought, well, we can work in that space. We'll build out from the stage; we'll add to it, we'll do what we need to do.

I: At what point then did the theatre program become independent of the English department?

DH: It seems to me it was two or three years after I was here that Dr. Glasrud encouraged the university administration to separate speech communication and theatre arts from English at the same time that he requested foreign languages be made into an independent department. And of course, it was a time in the early 1960s when enrollments at the university were growing very, very rapidly, and so there were plenty of students to go around. But it was primarily Dr. Glasrud who made the suggestion and encouraged then President [John] Neumaier to follow through on it.

I: What means of financial support are available to the program?

DH: Our primary support has always come from the student activities budget committee on the campus where each year we are given a specified money, a specified amount of money. And up to the present year we were also expected to meet an income. This year, however, they have changed the format, whereby they gave us a specified block of money. And we had to meet *no* income, but all the receipts which we brought in from ticket sales could be put back in the

program. So that while their investment is not as large, it allows us a little more flexibility in terms of buying materials and deciding what plays we can afford to do.

I: Are these financial resources sufficient?

DH: I don't think anyone in theatre would *ever* say they have sufficient finances. I don't believe anyone in any art form would ever say it. Simply because I think this country as a nation has never really honored its arts. The whole idea that the arts should be self-sufficient, that they should pay for themselves, [is] a rather archaic idea, actually, which I think in many respects goes back to the days of the colonists in this country, where theatre, for example, was viewed as a no-no. I think as a result of that, over the decades, the whole idea of theatre is one that says it should pay for itself. I've never quite understood that...that line of thinking. My feeling has always been we support communities in a number of ways through libraries, hospitals. And I suppose I see, personally, the arts in a community as more than a bowling alley. They are not...they are something that should be *part* of our lives, just as a source of books in a library, a source of medical help in the hospital should be available to us.

I: About how much is spent on an average production?

DH: Oh, it really is rather hard to say. I suppose if one is doing a large musical you can spend anywhere from ten to twenty thousand in Fargo-Moorhead. Obviously, professionally it's a great deal more.

I: Where does that money go to? What consumes the...?

DH: The costs are one, royalties. You have to pay very high royalties for a musical. You also usually have large scenery shows. You have tremendous costume rental bills because musicals usually have a great many characters with a great many costume changes. You have, of course, the costs of scenery construction and painting, the costs of lamps for lighting instruments, and at Moorhead State we also pay the orchestra. So that there is a constant demand on the money in a musical. A straight play is much more reasonable to do. And I would say the average straight play will cost from five to seven, eight thousand.

I: Are the actors paid?

DH: No. All acting is simply part of the program, and we don't restrict the assignment of roles to just theatre majors. Any student on the university campus who is interested in theatre either as a vocation or an avocation is free to come to auditions. And the play I'm currently working on has three out of seven actors who are non-majors.

I: But the orchestra is paid?

DH: Yes, that's on a musical. Right.

I: What brought about the change in financing of the program this year that you mentioned earlier?

DH: I think the student activities budget committee felt that if student enrollments declined, student activities were going to have to become more self-sufficient and more dependent on their own income. And since I've been living with this sort of thing for twenty-two years, it doesn't really bother me. I'll be interested to see how it affects other activities.

I: What has been the nature of your participation in any specific arts organizations?

DH: Oh, over the past twenty years I was, for example, for quite a number of years on one of the advisory panels of the Minnesota State Arts Board. For about ten years I was a member of the board of directors of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. I was in on the original founding of the Lake Agassiz Arts Council, and an activity that went on for a few years called Imagination, in which arts activities performed in the parks each September.

I: What benefits do these organizations offer?

DH: I think perhaps their greatest value, as I perceived it at the time, was that it helped Moorhead State University by my participation. And people became aware of us as a school, became aware of our program, and I think to that end it was good promotion, good publicity for the university.

I: Do you find that the specific organizations operate independently or is there cooperation among these groups?

DH: How do you mean? Hmmm...

I: Do they tend to go off on their own? Or do they try to work with each other to coordinate things? To pursue...?

DH: [Coughs] Mmmm-hmmm. There has always been, I think in Fargo-Moorhead, a *real* lack of coordination. I recall fifteen, twenty years ago attempting to work out some kind of system whereby theatres did not duplicate production dates, did not duplicate plays. It's never worked very successfully, and I doubt seriously if it ever will. I think I may have been a bit naïve at the time, for the simple reason that you have three universities and a community theatre, all of whom are operating on different wavelengths, all of whom really have their own clientele. And consequently, I don't think they're prepared to make the sacrifices, nor actually...I guess I don't think they should, to provide a unified kind of artistic season, so that there are always going to be problems in terms of duplication of dates and frequently duplication of productions.

I: So you find this diversity then is really healthful.

DH: Oh, I think it's very good. I think it gives an audience a great many options and choices. And particularly, I think on the university level, where the three schools tend to start at about the

same time, they tend to close at about the same time; simply...logistics dictates that they're going to do plays at about the same time. And I would not like a system, I guess, whereby I was told I could only do a play during a particular week because that might not fit the Moorhead State format.

I: How do you go about selecting your production choices and your dates?

DH: Well, having just come back from New York City, I suppose I *go* a great many plays initially, both in New York City and in the major cities. And hmmm...I also read a tremendous number of plays. While I was in New York, for example, I think I spent a hundred and fifty dollars on softbound play scripts. Ah...I didn't get that many, I might add, for a hundred and fifty dollars! But I suppose I bought thirty or forty plays, and I will over the next six weeks read most of them, so I can begin to find plays that will work for our summer season as well as plays for the future. So that it's a matter of constant theatergoing and constant reading to see what is happening. And I suppose, as an undergraduate professor used to hammer into his classes, I think it is imperative that one know the literature of his field, and for that reason I have always been an avid play reader.

I: What factors do you consider in selecting your plays, for example, for the summer season?

DH: It seems to me, in the summer, one of the primary concerns is entertainment. Secondly, obviously, you have to consider budgets. Third, you have to consider the students who are going to make up the summer company. Obviously, you're not going to pick a show that's dependent upon a brilliant voice if you know that voice is not there.

I: What influences, Del, have you had from sources outside the area?

DH: I think probably going to the professional theatre, seeing productions that I suppose I wish I had directed, traveling, and constantly reviewing all of the things that I suppose it is essential to know to do a play. History, for example. When my wife and I were in Europe this fall most of our time was spent pursuing the history of drama and literature throughout England, and Ireland, and France. And I suppose that it brings additional understanding to what it is you're doing professionally, simply because you've been to the source.

I: Does your work exhibit local influences?

DH: I don't know. I would assume probably that the influence is primarily restricted to the students with whom I work. And I would hope the audiences that come to the plays.

I: What influences have local artists had on a regional or national level?

DH: Gosh, I think that's a rather tricky question. Hmmm. On a national level, or even a regional level, I suppose the contribution of local artists has been primarily in the form of graduates from the three universities who have gone off and become successful and become known beyond the Fargo-Moorhead area.

I: Who might some of those be?

DH: Oh, I think you have, for example, the young deaf woman from North Dakota who appeared on a Broadway show that was written for her. [Transcriber's Note: Hansen seems to be referring to Phyllis Frelich in the stage play *Children of a Lesser God*.] Ah, certainly locally there have been a number of musicians, a number of painters, artists who have made national reputations. Actors...for example, from Fargo, an actor named Kurt Knudson who is currently appearing in a principal role on Broadway in a musical revival. So that quite consistently, I think, people have been involved.

I think among our own students you have people such as Donna Larson, formerly from Breckenridge, who has, over the past five years, won three Emmys for television lighting in daytime television. John Schwanke, who has...while he may not be known nationally, has a tremendous amount of clout in the professional theatre community because a company of which he is a co-owner constructs and put into the theatres I would say ninety percent of the Broadway shows today. Ron Olson, who is marketing director for Kleigl Lighting, the largest lighting company, stage lighting company in the world. So that you have people who are influencing other people, who are not necessarily headline people.

I: On another issue, what impact have political and economic conditions had on your work?

DH: Ah, it's been a kind of interesting process to watch. When I first came to Fargo-Moorhead I felt I had to be very cautious in the selection of plays. Primarily, I suppose, over a concern that we might offend people by some of our play choices. Over the years, a greater freedom developed, and I felt during the late 1960s and early 1970s we had a tremendous amount of freedom in the selection of plays. And yet somehow or another, as the 1970s progressed, it seemed to me there was a bit of a backlash. And I don't think this was just local, I think this was a national thing, where suddenly an older generation simply decided it did not want these things. And I think, even nationally, the arts pulled back a little and began to respect that audience a bit more than perhaps it had previously...in such matters as profanity, in such matters as the *ideas* of a play.

I: What technological changes have taken place that impact your work?

DH: Oh, I think in theatre something is happening constantly. You have, for example, the whole development of using the film media on stage. Well, I've always been a bit skeptical about it. It's still a very predominant part of contemporary theatre on the professional level. You see a great deal of technological work, laser beams, for example. The creation in one musical I can think of in New York playing today, *Sunday in the Park with George*, where you not only have laser beams, but you also have entire Seurat paintings sort of recreated by light and color in front of you, really quite remarkable. The addition of sound as a very prominent medium in the theatre is also a real advance. So that a great many musicals are today written that simply *must* be amplified because of the way in which the scores are composed.

I: Will you tell us something about what Straw Hat Players is and how it got started?

DH: Well, after I'd been at Moorhead State for two or three years I felt there was something missing in the training of our students. I did not feel that they were getting adequate exposure to everything they needed to know about theatre during an academic year. And so I proposed—and the administration accepted—the idea of a summer theatre whereby students would earn university credit, but would proceed to develop in all the phases of theatre by working morning, noon, and night on a seven-day-a-week basis, and would present a number of plays to the community. So that its primary reason for being—and I guess as far as I'm concerned, that is *still* its reason for being—was the need for a place to provide additional training for the students, so that they were not only restricted to activities through an academic year.

I: Would you say that this has been successful?

DH: I think it's been very successful as I have watched our graduates leave the place. And I think primarily because of the fact that they have frequently, in their participation in the summer theatre, spent more time in front of audiences than a great many undergraduate students. And as a result, they can go to auditions, and I think they hold up better.

I: What problems have you encountered at the same time?

DH: Oh, dear. Where would I start? Ah...obviously, the *tremendous* amount of work that goes into simply doing a season of plays. One is always confronted with the disappointed actor who felt he or she should have had a role that someone else got. Obviously, I didn't see it that way. Ah, you also have late hours. People really are very exhausted, including me, by the time the season is up. Hmm...other problems...certainly I know in the late 1960s early 1970s when drugs were rampant on university campuses, *that* was a problem. But that has pretty much disappeared from the scene. And the students know very strongly where I stand on the issue of drugs. And so, consequently, I think most of them keep their distance from me as a result of that.

I: Where do you stand on the issue of drugs?

DH: Obviously, I'm opposed. [Chuckles]

I: In your opinion, what does the future hold for the arts within the community?

DH: Well, I think as long as the community continues to grow, the arts also should grow. And I suppose growth alone is not enough. It seems to me the primary concern of the arts today should be quality. My feeling is there is a tremendous amount of art in its various forms, not only in Fargo-Moorhead, but in North Dakota, Minnesota, and the country. The *real* question is how much of it is good art?

I: What elements are essential to the growth, or the change, or the success or failure of your individual expression?

DH: Repeat that again, I'm not quite sure I follow you there.

I: What elements are essential to the growth, change, success or failure of your individual expression?

DH: Oh, it seems to me, I suppose when it comes to growth, I need to constantly keep abreast of the field. I think one *must* know...even though one may not agree with a great many things going on in the field, one still needs to be very aware of all of the movements that are going on in the field, the various forms that theatre is taking today. And there are a great many forms in which it's taking. I think also that as you look at the arts, in order to grow you need to know where your actors are coming from, not only intellectually. But what are the things that are moving the young today? For example, rock music, which is a very dominant force today, has its influences on young people. And it seems to me that as a director of theatre, one needs to be aware of this and have an understanding of it, to see where it fits into their lives, so that you do not remain a generation removed from the people you're working with.

I: How has your involvement in theatre affected your personal life?

DH: Well, I never get to spend any evenings at home. Ah, not really. I suppose for the simple reason that my wife has always understood the passion I have for theatre. And she has also always been someone who has been actively interested and committed to it, and has been a tremendous help to me over the years. So that my personal life, I suppose, is a good fifty percent theatre, because I'm constantly reading to keep abreast of it, and because my wife's interests are in literature and theatre as well. And she was, prior to our marriage, a director of theatre also. So as a result of that, it is the life *we* have chosen, and we're very happy with it.

I: What stands out in your experiences when you look back over your years as Director of Theatre?

DH: Oh, I suppose it is occasionally doing a play that I find uniquely challenging in terms of working on it as a director with a group of actors who are equally excited by the script itself. And I don't think you get a great many of those over the years.

I: What happens then with those?

DH: Oh, I always recall the first time we did a Harold Pinter play, *The Birthday Party*, a great many years ago in Weld Hall. I found the play one of the most challenging plays, because the playwright did not provide all the answers. And it meant the director and the actors had to figure out what the play did. There was a British play also about education that I was always very fond of, a play called *Butley* [by Simon Gray], which explored university teachers and their attitudes. And while I don't think it was a particular popular play with audiences, I always felt the ideas in it were so powerful that it was a play worth doing.

I suppose in many respects it's confronting the challenge of a play such as the one I'm working on now, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, which is a very elusive play. You're never quite sure in

your own mind...while you can come up with answers...ah...you're never quite sure what it is the man is alluding to when he gives certain of his characters certain lines of dialogue. So the challenge really lies, and becomes a very stimulating kind of way to spend one's evenings, trying to grasp the ideas of a writer and then to translate them into action on a stage, so that with a little bit of luck an audience will understand some of the things you were attempting to do with the play. [Chuckles]

I: What would you like history to say about you and your involvement with theatre?

DH: Oh, I suppose he worked hard. [Laughs]

I: [Chuckles] And on that note, Del, thank you very much.

[End of interview]