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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

CASSETTE SIDE A

JOAN JEFFRI INTERVIEWS ZELDA FICHANDLER, 7.24.92

JOAN JEFFRI:

Let me start by asking how you first got interested in the theater.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

How I first got interested in the theater! That was -- I think I was seven or eight, and I went to a -- a place called Rose Robertson Cowen's school for speech and drama. My mother took me to it. It was down the street in Washington. And Rose actually just endowed -- she's now eighty-something -- just endowed a place for a young actor in the Arena Stage Company in my name. And that, that, that teacher of mine from when I was seven or eight, and I got wonderful revues as an act -- as eight-year-old! [LAUGH] I got -- I played Helga, and Helga and the White Peacock, and I got -- I got very good revues as an

actor.

JOAN JEFFRI:

This is outside of school.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah! Oh, yes. And oh, in school, I was a storyteller. I mean, I was in kindergarten and the first grade and I told stories, I remember making up -- I haven't thought of these things, nobody's asked me this! I remember at the school assembly in the second grade making up and inventing an eskimo story, we were studying eskimos, and I cut out of a sheet an -- what was my version of an eskimo costume, and glued cotton batting around it to be the fur, and didn't know how to do the sewing, I was too little, so I put pins in, and I put straight pins. So that my memory -- it's very vivid, talk about being etched in memory -- I had these scratches all up and down me inside of my thighs from the pins.

But I went right on and, and I remember this

as being this kind of exquisite combination of joy and pain, telling the story and having everybody pay attention to me, and following my train of invention, and at the same time knowing I was going to be bleeding from these pins.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What a metaphor.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah.

JOAN JEFFRI:

So you were eleven when you wrote this essay.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. I think I finished that far. And then, that sort of went sporadically nowhere. And I got interested in other things. I did a -- I took some acting classes as an undergraduate, but I was -- and acted as an undergraduate --

JOAN JEFFRI:

Before we get to undergraduate school, what about your family? How many people were there?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, I have a sister who's a teacher, my father was a very well known scientist, a pioneer in aviation, and invented the proximity fuse and blind instrument flying and blind instrument landing devices. My mother was a housewife. And --

JOAN JEFFRI:

Were they interested in the arts at all?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

They were not interested in the arts, and they were very interested in conventional things, like who was going to marry us. And how to make that as feasible as possible. And my way, my process through life was not promising to them. I was -- a maverick and born into the wrong family in a way and caused them a lot of grief. Because I went through all kinds of radical phases in my life, politically, emotionally, psychologically. So, I was difficult. But then I straightened out a little bit.

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JOAN JEFFRI:

You went to high school in Washington as well?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I went to high school in Washington. I went to two years of college in Washington. And then I went to Cornell. I saw a little thing, an inch in the Washington Post saying we are starting a course called contemporary Soviet civilization for teachers and scholars. I was then I think seventeen. And it was the first course in America on Soviet civilization. It was at Cornell.

And I picked myself up, and applied for it, and I was the youngest in a class of five hundred that dwindled down to about forty, because it was so intensive, it was sixteen weeks. And I learned Russian, and then I majored in Russian literature, language and literature. It was, it was a mind-blowing experience for me. I mean, it was, it was the seminal experience of my life. I can't tell

you exactly why.

I got away from home. In fact, it was so urgent that I get out of -- I had appendicitis about ten days before I was to go to this course, and I went anyway. My boyfriend carried my suitcase, because I wasn't supposed to lift things. And it was absolutely mind blowing to me.

And it was funny how the magnet and the, and the magnetic field came together in that little one inch clipping. I mean, why did I see it, and how did I go? And I had these amazing teachers. Ernest J. Simmons, who's -- wrote the wonderful biography of Chekhov. I read Chekhov in Russian before I ever heard of Chekhov in English. Didn't know who Chekhov was. He writes so simply and clearly, he's used as a text for beginning Russian students.

So I encountered Russian literature, and, and

I had encountered Shakespeare with a teacher in high school by the name of Celia Oppenheimer, and Celia encouraged me to a career in the theater, to something having to do with the theatrical, whether it was being a playwright or being an actor, being a critic, or -- she just felt, she felt that I had an affinity for dialogue, event, and character. And she, I remember she encouraged me, and then my Russian professor, Leon Stilman, also pushed me towards the theater.

It's funny, he said, you, you, you are a theatrical person, you belong in the theater, that's where you'll be comfortable.

JOAN JEFFRI:

You stayed at Cornell after the sixteen week course?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yes, I stayed there, and I got my B.A. in Russian language and literature, and then I came back and worked in military intelligence

for a while, and then I worked as the secretary to the vice president of the union, then I met my husband, then I got married and went back to get a master's degree at G.W. George Washington, which is in Washington.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What were your aspirations at that time?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

At that time, I think they were in the political field. I did a lot of volunteerism during the period of the O.P.A., Office of Price Administration. I, you know, got us on the front page with food baskets costing this versus that. And they were in the political field. I was interested in the union movement.

I wrote a -- really a book for my master's thesis on Shakespeare and the Soviet Union, and I spent two years holed up in the Library of Congress. It's -- it was really a book, it was hundreds of pages long. So I was wavering between scholarship and activism, political

activism and scholarship. And I was hovering, I was very young. I was twenty when I got married, and I think twenty when I -- twenty-one or something when I got my master's, maybe twenty-two.

So it -- everything was floating, and that was fine. But in a class I took, my professor, Edward Mangam --

JOAN JEFFRI:

Where was this?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

At George Washington University. My professor said something about that all of theater was in ten blocks of Broadway, and wasn't this terrible. And Margo Jones, from Dallas, where he came from, had started this a hundred and ninety-eight seat theater in a building on the state fair grounds, Dallas State Fair grounds, and that was the wave of the future, and something went boong! in my head. In a very fanciful way, it was like an improvisation, an

acting improvisation, where you don't know it's coming and you haven't really planned for it. It enters you out of the circumstances of the moment.

And, and I said, why don't we start one? Why don't we do one? Why do we have to -- why is there just one? Why don't we do one?

And at that time, there was no theater, because the National was closed on the segregation issue, and the Gaity had closed --

JOAN JEFFRI:

In Washington.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yes. There was no theater. So we started one.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Who is "we"?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Maybe fifteen people that I rang up, and Ed rang up, and we got together, and we raised

fifteen thousand dollars. A few of those people I went to the yellow pages of the phone book, and, like I'd pick a jeweler, or I'd pick a real estate person, I'd call up and I'd say, can I come talk to you? Here, I have some drawings of a theater we want to set up, and I'd written a prospectus. And, you know, when you're that age --

JOAN JEFFRI:

You do it all --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

When you're that age, it's all possible, and actually, many things are possible because you're that age, and because there are so many vacant places in the surround that haven't been filled, that -- your passion fills them and your will and energy.

So we raised money, one person was a tennis pro, one person was Bess Davis Shriner, who ran a subscription series of the Theater Guild and wasn't -- didn't have one to run. One was

a White House policeman. One was a former actress on the British stage whose husband was vice president of the World Bank. One, who's still with us, [Lessa Morey?], was a retired restaurateur. One who is still with us was a lawyer. We're talking now 1949.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Are you aware that there were other people besides Margo Jones who were having similar ideas?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I found that out in a little bit, I found out about Jules Irving and Herb Blau, and I found out about Nina Vance, and about, about Porter Field, and about [K.L. Malone?], Cleveland, but I didn't know at the moment. Found it out later. Through Mack Lowry of the Ford Foundation, who put us all together. And said did you guys know that you guys were doing this?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Right.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. So, but that's often true with new things, they start in different places simultaneously. Because the thing's floating around in the air and it lands here and there.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Did you sense or think at that time that the theater world was very competitive?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

In terms of my personal career?

JOAN JEFFRI:

And in terms of what you were trying to do.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Did I know that -- did I realize the hazards and difficulties? I think I did.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think I knew the -- I think I knew it was tough for women to direct. I was getting an urge to direct, and I knew I wasn't going to Broadway in my little blue jeans and white

shirt and say how about -- and sneakers! -- and say how about hiring me? And right about in there I had a baby, and Ed Mangam left. So I was, in 1952, left with the theater and a baby, and -- it never occurred to me to abandon ship. Because I don't know why. Just never occurred to me.

It was very -- it was extremely arduous. And not fun.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What were the expectations of the actors that you worked with at that time, do you think?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

You see, we're talking post-World War Two, so we had some actors who were like twenty-six to thirty. Coming back, and well trained from Carnegie Mellon, and -- we had an absolutely marvelous company. We had people like Parnell Roberts, Lester Rollins, who's [died?], George Grizzard, Francis Sternhagen, Ann Meacham, Henry Oliver, who's died, in our first

company. These were just, just people who came to auditions that we held in -- was it Ed's apartment? Must have been Ed's apartment. No, it was my apartment. We were in an apartment then. And they were fantastic, and they did, the first year we did seventeen productions. And in five years in that first location we did fifty-five productions in five years.

Do you hear that? Fifty-five productions in five years? Slept on the floor, and we.... The actors expected the highest ideals of repertory theater. To play the great roles, to build an audience, based on their creativity, to be among fellow actors who shared their enthusiasm and expertise. To be the best company in the country, because as we grew up in the fifties, other theaters were already beginning to make themselves known to us. It wasn't till the sixties that we had that great big surge of theater in America.

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But already in the mid-fifties they were beginning to creep up.

And, oh! What happened was that this wonderful man, Brooks Atkinson, drama critic at the New York Times, paid attention to us. So our actors had the benefit of being noticed. They weren't just sort of like in the hinterlands and, and Washington was considered the hinterlands. And getting actors wasn't always easy. In fact, it was never easy. But we did have a company that stayed together almost the whole -- well, many of them stayed the whole five years, till we broke up and we had a hiatus of sixteen months, and then we went back in another location.

But we had -- we had the ideal. A permanent company doing the most extraordinary sequence of plays. The Adding Machine of Elmer Rice, and the Delectable Judge of J.P. Conklin, and

Taming of the Shrew, and Pygmalion, and Glass Menagerie, and Firebrand, which is a play that's seldom done, Edwin Justice Mayor, which is a -- it's a wonderful play. Golden Boy. Lots of -- I'm talking the first year.

And -- it was extraordinary!

JOAN JEFFRI:

Do you think actors have similar expectations today?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, I think -- I think there's, I think the movement, the movement, if one wants to be fancy, the movement has -- altered shape, as the society around it has altered conditions. And you find very few companies that can keep actors on a permanent basis. Also, you've seen the rise of television. Because television was a post-war, basically a post-World War Two phenomenon. The rise of television and -- but even then, even then it was beginning to take actors away.

But the commitment to company has weakened. And become sporadic. It was sort of the golden dream with the few of us who started it, Margo and Nina and I and Jules. Whoever I'm leaving out, Kay Lowe, Bob Porterfield -- that was all company. Ned Beatty, the movie star, came from Bob Porterfield to me when he was twenty-six. And he made sixty-five dollars a week. And, you know, emerged into major actors, into a major actor, as did all those other people I mentioned, who came on at fifty-five a week in 1950.

JOAN JEFFRI:

How did you move from your original eleven-year-old aspiration, eight-year-old aspiration of being an actress into becoming a director?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't know. I don't know. But I, but, because I did continue to take acting courses, even after I was married I took some studio work in Washington, I think that I felt two things: not gifted enough, ill equipped, I

hadn't had real serious voice work or body work or any kind of work that was really serious, and limited by the vocabulary of acting. I seemed to need to be more socially oriented, and to be able to make a larger statement than the personal one. And I think the balance, that I Didn't feel gifted enough, talented enough, and I saw people who were more talented than I, and that always makes me not want to do that.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Did you act in any of the productions?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I acted in one or two of them.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Did you?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And I didn't feel, you know, oh boy! that magic is really there! she's got it! And actually, my husband, who comes from a theatrical family, didn't encourage me to be an actor, he encouraged me to direct and

produce and do the theater, and then came into the theater with me. But he seemed to think that acting was not -- I think what he said once was I think you're too intellectual to act. I think he said that.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What would you think in your own terms would be the period in which you first got professional recognition? Your own assessment of when that was.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't know. I don't, I don't know. I mean, I got local recognition right from the beginning. And then it just grew by degrees, and then of course Brooks Atkinson came down, and he gave me New York Times recognition right in the early fifties, right in 1953, something like that. So I, I, I felt we got recognized.

What was really funny was in 1968 when we did the Great White Hope, 1967, we did The Great

White Hope. And the magazines, you know, the national magazines were, this theater is discovered, we were eighteen years old. And the producing director is -- her reputation is made, and we've been hacking away there! We'd already moved to the [Old Vat?] and left the Old Vat and built a new building, and we were --

JOAN JEFFRI:

Far beyond.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Far beyond, but, I don't, I can't -- I think the hardest thing was to be recognized by the audience. That was a very slow climb. That was very gradual. That was one on one audience building, because we had to teach the community that what they didn't recognize deserved to be recognized. And I mean recognized not in the sense of bestowing awards upon, but identifying for what it was. Didn't know what it was, it was a strange animal. Where was Helen Hayes? Where was

Carol Channing? Who were these people? How did they make a living? I mean, no one ever thought that we didn't really do this as a hobby.

JOAN JEFFRI:

So you were really building an audience as well as a company at the same time.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

We were building an audience, we were building a company, we were building an economic viability -- our first budget was eight hundred a week. We were building a balance between the number of seats and therefore the amount of money we could take in and the amount of money we could spend. We didn't start as a non-profit institution, we were a regular stock company, and we became non-profit in the end of the fifties in order to receive gifts and grants. Because the Ford Foundation came in then. End of the fifties.

We were building everything kind of

simultaneously. Like an octopus. And all the arms had to be built. So the -- it could function as an organism. And that was the large creative act of building that institution, was to keep all the things in balance moving forward together. [Part?] and economics.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Have you always worked with institutions, or made institutions, as opposed to independently?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Well, there isn't an "always," because I started this, I started this when I was in my early twenties, and I just left it last year. So that's my whole life. And then I came to the school. And worked within this institution to try to transform a training base for the kind of theater.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And I'm sure you always see actors who are struggling with that, where do I find a place.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yes. And then some actors like to freelance. You know, and then some directors like to freelance. But more and more people want an artistic home. I always want a home. I think the answer to your question is I can't imagine being a freelance artist, or a freelance anything. I'm very home oriented. Nest oriented.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yes. And you make your nest [?] [?]--

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And collective oriented. I like to work with a group of people. I'm not a highly -- autocratic or anarchic artist, I'm a rather -- collective artist, I think. And my colleagues are very important to me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

When you evaluate your own professional work, is there someone you go to, or talk to in your mind, for that evaluation?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Well, I had this very close relationship with Alan Schneider. And I suppose that he and I were, that was probably my closest professional relationship. Not without its sturm und drang, at all. But I would want him to look at my work. And he would want me to look at his. And then of course he died about six years ago. And now, I'll grab hold of a colleague or two or three, and have them come in and evaluate, our dramaturge, or Doug Waiter, my associate, who's now artistic director of Arena, I'll have them come in and evaluate. In the end, in the end it's my own eye. It really is, and I, I must say I trust that, and I know, I know when it's, I know when I've hit it and I know when I've missed it, and sometimes, as we all are when we're doing something creative, we're so close we can't see it, and then in a while we can. In a little while we can see it, and, and render it good or bad or middling.

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JOAN JEFFRI:

Did you have any mentors throughout your --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Alan was my mentor.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Alan was your mentor.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I learned most from him. See, I never, I never really, I never went to what is called drama school. I took some courses, but I never majored in drama. I didn't know a thing about how you did any of the things I've done. Including I never had a directing course. But Al -- I watched, I watched the people who I hired. And I learned from all of them, until I found my own voice as a director, and then I, and I think I learned most from Alan.

I remember seeing his productions when he was at Catholic University. Maybe they're the most vivid in my mind, Skin of our Teeth, Oedipus, Cherry Orchard, done with student

actors, and I can still see them, and see the images, and even hear some of the sounds -- it's incredible. It's incredible that I can still see them from over forty years ago.

So he was my -- and then when he came to work with me, I was, he was both my mentor -- he worked for me, and he was at the same time my senior and my teacher. So it was really interesting how that was. I employed him, but he taught me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah. Do you think you fill that role for other people now? Are you a mentor to others?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh yes, I think so. Yes, I think I've brought up a number of artists. I feel very good about that.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What do you think are actors' perceptions of what you do?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

You mean like my company?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Your company, your work.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

My students? I think they think I'm an actor's director. You know, that I work for act -- with actors, and that my main paint is actors' thoughts and feelings. And, and that I need them. I don't think they think I push them around. I really need them. And it's a highly collaborative and sustaining and -- quite wonderful, intimate act of creation. I think they feel that, because I feel that, and I don't think I would feel it if they didn't feel it.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Do you have any professional safety nets? Things that when -- it's all falling apart at the seams, or it's not going right, or it's going in the wrong direction, that you go to regain your perspective on things?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

You mean like when I'm doing a piece of work, or do you mean about life in general?

JOAN JEFFRI:

No, just working.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

[PAUSE] The moment that's most important for me, if I'm directing a play, and I must read a play for the first time without any interruptions, if something interrupts me I don't pick it up where I left off, I have to put it away --

JOAN JEFFRI:

Start again.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Start again. I go back to the pulse that I felt in the play that made me want to do it the first time I read it. Or maybe it was the second time, maybe I didn't feel the pulse the first time. I go back to that original hook that started to pull me and move my thoughts and feelings forward through the play. When I

lose my way, which I always do, in the middle. I lose my way and think what am I doing, what is this, what is this for? Why did I do that set? Why am I, why is that scene that way? I always, in the middle, I get, I like fall down a hole.

And it seems incomprehensible for a few days, or maybe even a week, and then I just go back and try to recapture the original intention that opened me up in the first place. But there's always a -- as I'm talking to you, I'm starting to feel that -- that, that sense of confusion and -- forgetfulness, what am I doing here. It's almost like when you're in the middle of a bad relationship, you think, well, how did I get here and what am I doing here? How do I get out?

JOAN JEFFRI:

What do I do next?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah, what do I do next. Right.

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JOAN JEFFRI:

Sociologists had an interesting word, called gatekeepers, which means of course people who let you in or people who keep you out. Are there certain people who have been gatekeepers in your professional career? That you consider those who either helped you in or kept you out, or tried to?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't think there's anybody that kept me out. I never thought of this question. And I don't think there was anybody that let me in! [LAUGH] The, the, there was a very seminal interview with Margo Jones that I had after we'd started, and I asked to meet with her, through ANTA, American National Theater and Academy. I remember it very vividly, I dressed to the nines to go see her. I bought a hat, and I wrote my white gloves and I had my blue knit suit on, and at that time I could wear four inch spike heels, now I wear flat shoes--

JOAN JEFFRI:

Right!

[LAUGHTER]

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And I met her in the ANTA office, and she had on a sort of a yellow print cotton skirt, no stockings, sandals, a ribbon in her hair, and sat on her desk and dangled her legs. And thought, probably thought who is this strange creature talking about the theater? And she was very inspirational. That's why I -- you know, you never know where you're dropping a seed. And I remember that. What she did, in that couple of hours, was really give me the courage and faith to go on this long road. She really did.

So that's a -- she was a gatekeeper, but I didn't, I didn't feel, I, I think I made my own gate. I don't think anyone said come, come. Or don't you come in here, one way or the other. My husband was very helpful. In

that when it seemed overwhelming he'd say, oh, yes you can.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What about major turning points? I would suggest that might have been one of them, but what were some others?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Major turning points. Doesn't feel like that. It feels like a very tall mountain. And, and one foot in front of the other for many long hours each day, each week, each month, each year.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Did you get to the top yet?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

With Arena I think. Yeah. I think it's as good as, it's where I -- as far as I could take it, without just going on with it. You know. Just continuing on, I think it -- I got to the top of it. It'll always keep changing. Whoever runs it will make it change. But for me, personally, I got to where I wanted to do

something else.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah. So it was more a progression for you.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It was a progression, I mean, of course there were turning points. Building the new theater, building the Arena with Harry [Wees?], a great big enormous turning point. The Great White Hope, a great big turning point. Certain productions for me, where I made breakthroughs in my own work were turning points. But it, the general feeling of it, the tone, the feeling tone, is one foot in front of the other for endless time. That's the feeling tone of it for me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Let me ask you a question about the period of The Great White Hope, since I've so often --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And-- and-- just, excuse me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Sure.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And also like layering things. When I think back, it's one of the reasons I wanted to leave, when I think back the memory bank was so dense and so deep that I thought if it got any denser or deeper I would get lost, and I had to like start another memory bank. It's like being five hundred years old when you've done that many productions, and lived in that many worlds.

So it was like archaeological layers, in a sense. And there wasn't -- I didn't -- did I move from the Stone Age to some other age? I don't know. Maybe the buildings mark turning points, changing buildings, adding buildings.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Monuments and institutionalization.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah, milestones. Millstones, milestones.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah, right.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Excuse me, I interrupted you.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Now, in terms of The Great White Hope, I've often read that was one of the first times you had to lose a company and start another one.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

That's right.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And I would like to hear a little bit about that in terms of the actors and what you perceive happens in that...situation.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't know whether I can remember everybody I lost, but I lost the company. But I also lost the company again when we did -- another company when we did Moon Children.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And why do you think that was?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Because the attraction of the Great White Way, and also they'd been with me for a while, and

it was the attraction of getting on to Broadway. And only one actor didn't go with Moon Children to New York. Howard Witt, he didn't want to go.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And how did that -- how did you start again?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

With despair! You know? And weeks of auditions. But, everything fills up from underneath, and there were other, other people. But I -- I felt that loss very deeply. It was a wonderful company that went to Arena, you know. It was Jane Alexander...

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's right. Do you -- I'm sure -- I mean, the Arena of course has received many, many grants. Have you personally ever received that kind of grant? Or was it mostly institutions that you [?]?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't separate them that way. I'm trying to think, did I get personal... I have gotten

personal grants for -- from the Ford Foundation. There was one program where they gave ten directors in the country grants for whatever they wanted to do.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That was at the beginning.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yes, that was at the beginning.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Tell me about that. That's very important.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

That ten director grant?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Well, I'll tell you what I did with mine.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yes, please.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think this was in the -- when was this, late fifties or something? Fifty-nine? I raised the actors' salaries from eighty-five to a

hundred and twenty-five dollars a week --

JOAN JEFFRI:

With your grant?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Uh-hunh. And I hired for -- that was I think part, used part of it, and then the rest of it, I hired a secretary in the summer, so that I didn't have to answer all the subscription applications that came in and do all the filing and answer the phone myself.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's very telling.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think that's very interesting.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's very telling.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It's from another age.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yes, absolutely.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Really, I really can see it as -- from a --

from a whole other world.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Absolutely.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

You know, and I, in those days I negotiated all the contracts myself, and it wasn't easy. To get actors for eighty-five dollars a week. You had, you had, you had to persuade and cajole, explain.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What I think I'm hearing you say is that the points of greatest recognition for you were -- had more to do with your own sense of validation than the outside world.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think. Yeah. I think. And somehow I became very identified with the mission of the theater, so it's hard for me to separate one from the other. I mean, like the Tony Award, we were the first theater outside of New York to get a Tony Award, and I received it, but it was really, it was the theater, but it was me,

it was an identification of the institution with the person.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Sure.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And I suppose that's just as valid as a potter making a pot. Or a painter making a painting. Or an actor creating a role, I think, I think an institution is an art work. And I was making an art work which was an institution. So all the pieces that were within that were parts of me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Absolutely. Sure.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And the question is, you know, what was left over to be part of something else. That's more the question.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah. What kind of control do you think you've had over the lives of actors?

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE A

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think I've had influence over the lives of a good many actors. And at NYU I think I had a lot of influence, because I come from a world that did it. Isn't talking in a vacuum. And I think that my particular value here, where we're sitting at NYU, is that having been through the wars, my moral and aesthetic values are as they were when I began. And so they believe me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

How do you think this influences students who are in a world in which the media is so strong, much stronger than it was when --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

That's a good question.

JOAN JEFFRI:

-- you started the theater.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It's a good question. It influences some -- I mean, it's an interaction between them and me, I mean, there will be some who will want film

and television very strongly. Marsha [Gayarden?] is on her way to being a major star. And gives back, gives money every year to the school now. For a needy student. And there are some I affect very strongly, and go out and start little theaters. Someone was sitting here on -- Monday or Tuesday who's starting a theater project. Because I do, what I -- I introduce something called free play in the third year where they have six weeks where they can do whatever play they want to do, pick a director, do the PR, gather the props, do the lights. They gather their own production team. They get a hundred dollars and that's it.

So they learn not to sit around and wait for the phone. These are actors. And this young man said to me, Kevin, said to me, you know, I'm rather liking this producing business, I'm not sure I'm going to just act, or maybe I'll move over into producing.

So that to me is an effect on -- on an actor who may not want to be an actor. But learning how to act really is learning how to produce, learning how to direct, learning how to have values, learning how to lead an institution with an aesthetic.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Do you think students today are as -- do you think it's as possible, or --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

More so.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Do they?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Um-hmm.

JOAN JEFFRI:

To start their own--? Really?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think students today think everything's possible. I mean, my students think things are possible, and I don't disagree with them. I don't disagree with them, I think

everything's possible. It's more possible now than it was when we started. It was impossible when we started. There were no models.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's true. You created those.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

There were absolutely no models. There was nothing to look at except the Comedie Francaise, or the Berliner Ensemble or the Moscow Art Theater. But look at Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Off-Broadway. And it's all melding together. In fact, what's happening right now is that the institutions stand, but they were a past movement that has now been realized. And what the real action line is site specific theater and culture specific theater.

JOAN JEFFRI:

I agree with you. Where does that leave the institutions?

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE A

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Well, it leaves them, they'd better look to their laurels. They'd better stop repeating themselves and start inventing perceptions of the world that are important, that they want to embody on their stages. They'd better look to themselves.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Well, you seem to be going back to very much your original impulse, of community and the audience and --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. I'm glad you say that, because I -- that's what I feel.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's what I hear.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. I'm going back to the beginning. I'm going back to reaching out into the country, with actors. Connecting audiences and actors, and in a way, I'm shedding some of the paraphernalia of institutionalization.

Because I am -- I've had it with that. I mean, I did that, and I know all about that apparatus. It occupies twenty hours a day to maintain, and it dilutes somehow the -- it dilutes your solar plexus energy after a certain amount of -- well, I mean, I did my long -- at my -- at my -- farewell dinner at Arena, somebody got up, and it was forty years, you know, and somebody said, she's a terrific gal, but she couldn't hold down a job.

[LAUGHTER]

JOAN JEFFRI:

Let me turn this over on that note.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Isn't that delicious?

* <u>END CASSETTE SIDE A</u> *

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

BEGIN CASSETTE SIDE B

JOAN JEFFRI:

We were talking about institutionalization and how we've come to this pass or impasse. What part do you think the unions have to play in this present day arrangement of trying to reach into culture, as you just said, and reassess the community?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I don't know. I only hear about them as being a problem on Broadway. I don't -- I'm afraid I can't be responsive to that. I don't know.

JOAN JEFFRI:

I'm just -- or even institutionalization. I mean, I think some of the issues, I would love to hear your thoughts on some of the issues about reaching into those cultures, and does that fit with the pattern of institutionalization, or might we need some new patterns?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I think that -- this is all new thinking for

me, because I haven't resolved my thoughts about this at all -- I've been on a lot of panels lately, and been with many different cultural groups, which has been very interesting. And I find that what the so-called emerging groups want is to become institutions. They're asking for a bigger share of the pie, economically, they need more labor, they need more bodies --

JOAN JEFFRI:

[Manpower?].

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Person power, yes. They are interested in the training of their people. They -- I hear the old story, and I, I'm thinking to myself, but of course, because the natural form of theater is for people to be permanently together in a home with the resources, human and material and economic, to do their work. So what is that? That's an institution.

So I think you go through the cycle. I mean,

you build it, you tear it down, you build it, you tear it down, you splinter it, and then you build it up, and then you splinter it and you build it up. So you deconstruct it and then you construct it. So whatever you didn't do last time, you do this time.

But it's so interesting to hear them, and they're fighting for a bigger share of the economic pie. We're tired of being emerging institutions. We want to emerge. And I think they will. I think they will. They won't emerge, I just don't see, in my lifetime, that there are going to be theaters with ten or twelve million dollar budgets. I don't see that. But I can see them....

JOAN JEFFRI:

The -- I guess the question of unionization which I meant was that the union seems to always be interested in unionizing as many actors as possible --

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, that union.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That union.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, I thought you were talking about like IATSE and --

JOAN JEFFRI:

The Actor's Union.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, the Actor's Union. They just want anybody who -- they have absolutely no standards of their own, so that, and in a way it seems very democratic, they say you directors and producers, you decide who's a professional. And after they've -- we define it by how long they've worked, so if they've worked X number of times as a non-professional, then they're a professional.

So there are no aesthetic standards anywhere about what an actor is. When you compare that

to the Japanese No dramas, where you have to play a part for twenty years before it's yours, you really see the extremes of culture.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Absolutely.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. A Japanese actor is considered mature until they're about forty-five.

JOAN JEFFRI:

I know. It's amazing.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Because they have to learn a form, and, and to animate it. To animate a cultural form. Historic form that's passed down.

JOAN JEFFRI:

It's amazing.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It's amazing, it really is.

JOAN JEFFRI:

You mentioned Brooks Atkinson, but in other instances how have you been affected throughout your career by critical review or

critical dialogue?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Deeply.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Tell me.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Deeply! Well, we had one critic in Washington who was enormously instrumental in launching us. And supporting the idea of the theater and explaining that idea to a public and helping us build a theater, and then the relationship turned sour for certain reasons, and he was on our back for seven or eight years. In fact, it seemed at one point that he might kill the theater, because it was one bad review after the other, and then the community got wise to it. They just saw that what they were seeing on stage was not what he was writing about. And so it turned.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Which -- and what happened to him?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

He's an emeritus now, and he admits that he was prejudicial. At that -- but he really -- it was a waiting game. I mean, I -- I didn't know whether we'd make it, whether we'd last. He was the most influential critic in the city. And I honestly didn't know.

And also, I had lost my way, too, and he had some things to criticize. When we built the new Arena, that was so much larger than the one we had before, and I had to learn -- it all comes back. You know, I had to learn how to use this big space, how to run this, what seemed like a mammoth institution, because it took more people. We moved from an intimate five hundred seat theater to a large eight hundred seat arena with all kinds of support systems and hundreds of lights and a trapped stage and a fly system and -- I had to learn how to fill that space. And I had-- and I wasn't, for a while I wasn't doing it well, a

number of years there.

And there you asked about gatekeepers. Who helped me through that was MacNeil Lowery, who was the Ford Foundation Humanities and Arts vice president. He helped me. The man who had really given us our life in terms of grants and gifts and support and recognition. And saw me floundering. He was the one, I remember one time he was sitting with me, and, and just really holding me together in the face of this transition and floundering and critical lambasting that we were getting, and really just holding me together, because I was in a pretty bad state.

So that -- criticism has, through the years, been very important, and even though we've built an audience, the audience keeps changing, and Washington does not have the biggest subscription base of any theater. I mean, where the Mark Taper has thirty thousand

subscribers, we're lucky if we have eighteen thousand, and so that means -- I'm talking about Arena -- that means that the critics do have an influence.

And always will, and that's fine, but we only have one newspaper now. When we had four it was okay.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Has your definition of success changed from the beginning through the years till now?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Of success?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

[PAUSE] Well, I mean, I don't, I don't like to pontificate, but I do find that word quite meaningless. I mean, it sounds -- kind of fashionable to say that, but it's quite meaningless. In fact, because of the natural wave of life, if you [blip?] success, it's

going to turn its underbelly to you any moment, so it's almost better to have the underbelly, because you've got success coming up!

It doesn't, it never meant -- it never had a real meaning to me, it has no real meaning now. I like the fact that I have influence on people for the good, I like that. I like being respected by my peers, I like being loved by my students, and I like it when I can do a good piece of work. I love the crowds that come around if we're touring the acting company, or when we go to Russia, when we went to Russia or Hong Kong or Israel, and they gather around and they've been thrilled, and they stamp and applaud, and...

I like, I like all that, but it's a phase, it's a transient phase. You know, I also get -- still get bad reviews, so.... Who's to say?

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

JOAN JEFFRI:

What do you think have been your greatest satisfactions and your greatest disappointments?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, my great -- one of my greatest satisfactions was building the Arena. That was, that was such a learning experience. I mean, I learnt, I learnt the physical universe, I never knew about how you make concrete, I know now. I never knew about raking brick. I never knew about a brick. I mean, I never noticed a brick. Didn't know there -- a brick was just a brick, a brick, a brick.

I began to know there were different kinds of bricks, and ways of fastening them, and ways that light hit the brick, if they were right or not right. And how you -- I nursed concrete through cold nights, you know. My husband and I built little fires and wrapped

the concrete in burlap so that it wouldn't crack. And it was, I mean, I-- I really learnt another universe.

And what did you ask me? What were my --?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Greatest satisfactions and disappointments.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Greatest satisfactions. The emergence of certain actors -- delights me. Watching an actor start with that little flame, little kind of motion of talent, and then that motion gets stronger and fuller, and then it opens and opens and opens, it's delicious when that happens, I love that. I love the moments, a few of the productions I've directed, I just got great pleasure from, because I thought they were fulfilled.

Again, the feeling of it is not great reversals and high points and valleys, it's kind of a steady physiological beat that just

goes on just like your body. Kind of a pulse.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Disappointments? That you remember?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Disappointments. I would say losses. Lots of losses, losses of people that went away.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Company?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Sure.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Great pain, of loss.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah. Kind of a betrayal I would say. I mean, I --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Some were. I feel some were betrayals. I experienced some as betrayals. But I -- some were not betrayals, and I experienced them as loss. I got -- I get very attached to the

people I work with. And they have to go. I mean I know they have to go, but it hurts. I want them always to stay there with me.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Of course.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Where else could be better?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Right. What would you say is the effect of the marketplace on your work? Now, of course there is not only a profit marketplace, as we all know, there's a grants marketplace, and a funding marketplace, and audience marketplace.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Right. So what are you asking?

JOAN JEFFRI:

Your relationship to those marketplaces. To those economic marketplaces. And if that's changed.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

You mean since I left Arena?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

JOAN JEFFRI:

From the beginning till now.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh. Well, I've been, I've been involved in that marketplace, that public marketplace since it was there. Longer than anybody who's in it now, dispensing money. You know. They're -- I guess they're on about their third generation. It has become more and more conservative.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And less and less visionary.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And less and less visionary, and they like to give to stable institutions like Arena Stage. So when I used to, I used to have to go plead and proselytize and give impassioned speeches and write long documents, which I still did, I mean, our cultural diversity program was really funded because of a long document that seemed to touch people, but basically they like to give to what they're sure is going to

be there tomorrow.

So it's become kind of pro forma. That Arena will get grants for this, that and the other, if they just phrase it well, because we're going to be there. The Acting Company it's very hard getting money for.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Because?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

There's not the -- I mean, there is just -- there aren't -- it's not as experimental, the grants giving is not as experimental.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Well, the Acting Company has been around for a while.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. But it's, it's a difficult institution to fund, because its audience is all over the United States, it hasn't organized its national constituency. And it's not --

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

JOAN JEFFRI:

And it can't document what they need documented.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It's not, it's not quantifiable the same way. And it has a cash flow problem because it doesn't get is money till after it's spent it all. The money comes in later. You know, you deliver the goods, you get the money.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Money for services rendered, right?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Right, fee for service. And all the money up front, for training and rehearsal, they have to get from bank loans and so forth. So I think we're going to turn that around now. But we're going to turn it around with devices. Borrowed from the more stable institutions, so.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Good. You know how to do that.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I do. I mean, I'm not sure I can do it, but I -- but if anybody knows how to do that, and if it can be done, I've done it. So I don't know, we'll see. I'm hopeful that I can be of help to the Acting Company because I really believe in what it's doing.

JOAN JEFFRI:

If you were asked to describe your occupation for a census form or something, --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Theater director.

JOAN JEFFRI:

-- teacher? Director?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I would say theater director. Yeah. Teacher? But I usually just write theater director on medical forms.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Okay. What do you see as the next step for you?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Oh, I think the Acting Company and NYU, and I'd like to sort of segue them, and put the graduate students into the company.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Nice.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

And I've done that this first year. There were sixteen actors, and seven -- six of them were from NYU. And seven of the sixteen were non-white. So that's what I'm doing. Multi-culturalism, taking the show on the road to audiences that don't see it, keeping the classics alive and developing actors. That's what I'm going to do. And I'm going to do some -- I have to do some writing. I have to, I don't particularly look forward to that, but... I, I have to do that.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Have to get some things down.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah, like I like doing this.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah, I like your doing this, thank you.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I like to do this, because I -- I want that experience to be there for whoever wants to find it.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yes, exactly. Tell me what advice you'd give to a young actor today. Well, you have actors today, entering the theater world every minute.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Right.

JOAN JEFFRI:

What advice do you give them?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Get a liberal arts education, or an education in zoology, anthropology, sociology, metallurgy, Sanskrit --

JOAN JEFFRI:

These are people going through an acting program, remember?

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Get that first.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Okay!

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Get that first. Get a point of view on the universe, or a way to enter the universe. It doesn't, it almost doesn't matter what. Political science, anything. So that you have a lever with which to open the thing up. And then go to an excellent conservatory, and then pray and hope for acting jobs in however small a venue that can stretch the material, and make a larger self available to you. And understand, understand that it's a lifetime project. That you don't suddenly emerge into being an actor, you become and become and become and become. And the more you are the more you're going to give. And that the reservoir is you. So the more you put in the more there is to take out.

And that's true about technical things, like voice, body, concentration, it's also true just about human perception and awareness. It's a lifetime project.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Are there some major differences with a -- the diversity project at Arena Stage with this kind of multi-cultural thrust of the Acting Company that you've engineered very well? Are there any major differences you see in this, this era of trying to train actors or put them in companies?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Because of the diversity you mean. Yeah. It's -- you have to --

JOAN JEFFRI:

What are some of those?

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I guess the central question is how you keep -- the root of the person, their culture, alive while you allow them to develop skills of, say, physical neutrality, vocal neutrality, so

they can move from character to character, not limited to any particular ethnically derived role. You know, how to balance that out.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's very hard.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Well, it's very difficult.

JOAN JEFFRI:

It's so [?].

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I mean, you want -- you bet! You bet.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Well, your political science background comes in handy here.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah. Well, I mean, it's -- it's very, it's very tricky.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Yeah. Very difficult, but clearly dealing with the 1990's, as almost no one else is dealing with them.

ARTISTS CAREER PROJECT

ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah, if they want to play Hamlet, if a -- Hispanic actor wants to play Hamlet, and feels that piece of Western literature is of interest to them, though it doesn't come from their own culture, then they have to transform their personal self into readiness to play that role.

JOAN JEFFRI:

But white actors have been doing that for years. We don't grow up reading Chekhov for breakfast.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I understand that, but it's not as loaded.

JOAN JEFFRI:

No, it's not.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Because it's our tradition, and...

JOAN JEFFRI:

True.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It's not as loaded. If they don't choose to,

they don't come to a classically oriented conservatory, because they only would be doing, making themselves hurt. At the same time, their own way of doing things is an enrichment to the total life of the school, and some of their literature and their work has to be introduced too.

So this is, this is what interests me about training at the present time.

JOAN JEFFRI:

I think the other difficult thing, and I don't know if it occurs in your work, I would suspect it does, is the whole problem of language. I mean --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

It does.

JOAN JEFFRI:

-- teaching in many other countries, when you see people who at their fingertips have six languages, and Americans are so poor in this area.

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

I know, I know.

JOAN JEFFRI:

And yet these cultures, these other cultures have at least two languages [?] [?]...

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

[?] theirs.

JOAN JEFFRI:

That's right. And this is something I think that needs dealing with as well, I would guess, if you're about --

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

Yeah, yeah. That's very true. And I haven't dealt with it totally. There are so many things that play into it, the cost of going to the school, the availability of scholarships, what parents want their kids to spend close to a hundred thousand dollars being an actor when there are no jobs. I mean, there are so many things that come into play.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Is there anything you'd like to add?

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ZELDA FICHANDLER/7.24.92/SIDE B

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

No.

JOAN JEFFRI:

We sure have covered the waterfront here I think.

ZELDA FICHANDLER:

That's good -- good questions.

JOAN JEFFRI:

Thanks. [INAUDIBLE]...

[SOUND CUT]

* END INTERVIEW *