May 2006

Judy Lisi oral history interview by Suzette Berkman, May 23, 2006

Judy Lisi (Interviewee)

Suzette Berkman (Interviewer)

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SB: …who is President and CEO of the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. It is May 23, 2006. And we are sitting in Judy Lisi’s office in downtown Tampa. Welcome, Judy, and I’m happy to interview you today. We’re hoping to get into some of your past, beginning probably when you were born! If you could?

JL: Yes, I was born in Connecticut, Bridgeport, Connecticut, October 13, 1946.

SB: Wow. And could you tell us something about your early years? Where you went to school?

JL: My early years I went to Catholic schools my entire life. I wore uniforms until I was 20 years old. [Laughs].

SB: [Laughs]

JL: I didn’t know how to shop! [Laughs]

I was raised in an Italian extended family. We lived—my aunts all lived near us, next door, down the street, so—and with lots of cousins, big meals. I know it sounds stereotypical, but it really was!

SB: It was a warm, Italian family.

JL: Very warm. Music all the time. My uncles…

SB: What, what kind?

JL: ….all played…mostly piano and strings. And every Friday they would all get together and play, play together. Because that’s how—everybody played an instrument in my family, so…

SB: Do you?

JL: Yes, yes.
SB: Oh yeah?

JL: Yeah, oh yeah. …I started taking piano when I was like five or six, and then I took, I added flute, and…it wasn’t anything special, we all took, and I took piano from a nun around the corner who used to wear this big, big habit, I could barely sit. And she would sit on the stool with me and I would feel her habit…[laughs]…next to me—I was scared to death of her!

But yeah, we all, my, my whole family all, all the kids in our family…

SB: Was, was this your inspiration for the performing arts?

JL: Yes! Well, I don’t [know]—it was just always there. I, I never thought of it as an inspiration. You know, my grandfather, he died before I grew up, and I remember going in the attic one time, and I found all of these opera recordings. And then, I found recordings of them, [and played them on] this old crank[y] kind of thing. And old ones of Enrico Caruso, and all of those early, early singers.

So it, music never—always seemed [there]…

SB: Was part of…?

JL: …part of every, part of every day. You know. I thought everybody’s family [was] like that! [Laughs]

SB: And where did, where did you go to school?

JL: I went to school and grammar school in St. Charles Borromeo School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. And, and my—then we, but there—that was the Irish church. Then the Italian church was Holy Rosary Church. And that’s where all my, my mother and all the aunts used to sing in the choir there. And my uncle, and they all, they always had these shows. And so we were all always in shows growing up [laughs].

SB: Oh! [laughs]

JL: Every holiday there seemed like there was a show the whole family was in. So I never thought of it [that way], but that was probably the beginnings of…[laughs]…my career! When I was five or six years old, and I was in one of my uncles shows that he had….

SB: Funny story.

JL: Yeah, yeah.

SB: And then you went—where did, that was elementary….

JL: Then I went, that was elementary school, and then I went to a private girl’s school called Lauralton Hall in Milford, Connecticut. And it was part boarding school and part,
you commuted, part of the girls commuted. And there were 68 girls in my class. And still, when I go back to reunions, they don’t have a reunion where, year-by-year—they have every—they have one reunion for everybody, every year [laughs]. Because we had so few students!

And then again, so I wore uniforms when I was in high school. And they were the Sisters of Mercy. And the one thing about a Catholic education is that you really did get a good education. Very much based in the, in the classics and the humanities. And I really had wonderful teachers and still, I, you know, when I think of the English Literature that we have and American Literature, and we had to memorize poetry, and writing, and take Latin! I took four years of Latin, and I can diagram, still, any sentence, up and down and split it apart!

SB: [Laughs]

JL: So, they did—they were strict but you did get a good education. And I still have my best friends are still from Lauralton Hall.

SB: Wonderful.

JL: From when I was fourteen years old.

SB: That’s great. And then college?

JL: Well, college, then I went to the convent.

SB: OK.

JL: With the same sisters that were in Lauralton Hall. I was, you know, you felt that you were called to do that. And so that was in Madison, Connecticut. That’s where the Sisters of Mercy—actually it was the old, Woolworth [estate]…

SB: Oh, I do.

JL: Well, that was the old estate. On, on the Connecticut coastline. Beautiful, beautiful estate that he had given to the Sisters of Mercy for some reason. So it was just beautiful. And, and so I wore a uniform there! [Laughs]

SB: Again? [Laughs]

JL: For three years! And we used to go swimming—it’s next to a state park called Hammonasset Park. And then we were the next beach over. And we were all swimming one day, and this boat came up and it was these fellows that were—Yale University was right in New Haven, which was next to us. So they all, so they invited us to a party that night. [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]
JL: And they were—you never saw a boat go so fast. We told them we were nuns, and we...[laughs]...couldn’t stay out past six o’clock! [Laughs] That boat took off so fast!

So, but, but again, I got a very good education there. It was St. Joseph College, and, and then I, when I left, I had one more year to finish. And I finished my first degree at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

SB: That’s wonderful.

JL: So that was that. And then I went to, I got a Masters in Education. Because I was a teacher...

SB: How many years?

JL: For four years.

SB: What did you teach?

JL: I taught English. This was in 1968. I taught English in Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, Connecticut. And then I think, this is where I first had an interest in the Arts, other than music. I was the young, a young teacher. I was 21 years old. And some of the kids in the school were way bigger than me, and some of them as old as me, who had stayed—in those days, they used to actually keep people back. You know, that doesn’t happen anymore.

But they were starting, there was this experimental program that they were starting in 1968, called homogeneous grouping. And you might remember what this is. But that’s when they grouped kids according to their test scores. And Norwalk, Connecticut was very unusual because it had one of the richest communities, called Rowayton, which was right in the heart of Fairfield County. The highest per capita income in the country. All the way to Ridner Court, which was a project in Norwalk, Connecticut. So it had everything in between. And usually the kids that were from the very wealthy homes were in the higher stratus, and the kids that were from Ridner Court were usually lower than in between.

So I was, that was the atmosphere that I went into. This was 1968 when—you, you probably remember this—when the kids were just starting to wear long hair...

SB: Oh sure.

JL: ...and it went to the Supreme Court. That was one of my students....

SB: How interesting.

JL: ...at Brien McMahon High School. There was a very, this was a very interesting community. One of was, there was a section in Norwalk that was made up of socialists from the ’30s and ’40s. They had kind of moved there—they were like ex-communists and all of this. But very broad, broad minded, liberal thinking people. And this, this boy
was the son of one of those families who was challenging his right to grow, to grow his hair.

My first year, we had 33 bomb scares!

SB: Good grief, oh!

JL: So I used to have to prepare tests for before—I realized I couldn’t give a long test, because there could be a bomb scare, so I used to give the kids five questions at a time!

SB: Oh, how interesting!

JL: It was fascinating. To, to be—I mean, it was, that was my first year of teaching.

SB: Did this influence you politically, at all?

JL: Oh, well, I…

SB: Your beliefs?

JL: I, I think actually, Sacred Heart did a lot because that was, Sacred Heart University is a very interesting school. It was the first Catholic university that was run by lay people. It wasn’t connected to, you know, usually at Catholic Universities are associated with a religious order. And many of those lay people were again, very, very intellectual, and very, very liberal. It was during Vietnam, and, and every—as you know, that’s 1968 was kind of a watershed period of what was happening there. And so I had some very interesting teachers and of course you, you’ve probably heard of, of the Berrigan Brothers. They were there all the time. It was just a lot of free-thinking—it was just a very fascinating place to be. And I’ve always found, and I like, I wind up in these places that are really interesting—not through any fault of mine, I—this happened [inaudible] of these places [laughs].

So anyway when I got to teaching high school, when I was 21, in this homogeneous grouping, they gave me the drama component because nobody else wanted it. And I was the new teacher—the new kid on the block. So I said, OK. I knew nothing about drama! Remember I had been in a convent, and I had been—I spent one year in college finishing. But I didn’t really know anything about drama. I knew music, but did not know theatre at all. And I, I put together—they wanted to do a musical. So we, we did South Pacific.

Well, when we had—I had put up the announcement, I got kids that were in Rowayton, in that high category, all the way to kids in Ridner Court. And when they all came in, it didn’t matter what grouping they were in. And it was very interesting to me that the kids that were from the high, the upper class area, and they were much more suppressed than the kids from Ridner Court who just would try anything, do anything. And all of a sudden, they were all looking at each other in a completely new way.

Now I’m sure the show was terrible. Because I had no idea what I was doing. But I had this overall sensation of, oh my goodness! I said, look what’s happening here! These kids are talking to each other! These kids that never would interact with each other
in any—had a whole new respect for what the other could do. And so I realized I didn’t know anything, and I had to go back to school and really learn how to…[laughs]…to do what I was doing!

Because I knew there was a lot, there was a powerful thing happening here. And that was transformational, so I really had to learn. And so when my husband, Ernie, he, he had gone—he was going back to school to get his PhD.

SB: You were married at this point?

JL: I was married at that point. But we didn’t go back right away. I, I taught there for two years and then I had a baby, my daughter Rachel. And then he was working in a corporate job and, he really needed—I knew he needed to go back to school, he just, he just wasn’t done. So we went to the new school first in New York, and then he went to a University to get his Ph.D. in American studies.

And while we were there, this is St. Louis University, I—and I had two children by then. They had a wonderful program in theatre. And I said, gee, maybe I’ll take a couple of classes. And it, it was—made up of the most giving people—it was just right for me. Because I didn’t know anything. And they kind of embraced this ex-nun, mother [laughs]…

SB: [Laughs]

JL: …and they took me under their wing, and it was just the most amazing experience. Because what they’d had in that program is, you had to direct, you had to perform, you had to write. You had to do everything—you had to learn everything. And also, the history of theatre and where it came from. And I, you had to do mime, you had to do movement, and these were things again, as an ex-nun, I had never done or would have thought about doing! And, and so, what happened was, because I’m a singer, I was, I, I had a natural ability for that—I used to get cast in these shows! I had no idea what I was doing, but because I could sing [laughs], I’d be in the shows!

So that’s how I started performing. I, I wasn’t one of these people who thought that theatre was going to be my career, or thought that I wanted to be an actress, I wanted to be a singer, no. I just really wanted to learn how to, how to do it.

And then I got a fellowship to the University of Minnesota for my PhD work, and we were only there for one year because my husband got a job back in Connecticut, and my kids were getting older, and I wanted to be near my family. So we moved back. But I started teaching theatre at Sacred Heart, where I went to school. And then I started performing. Because I would get these jobs. They, I mean, they just—I didn’t look at it, but then I—I’m sorry if I’m talking too fast…

SB: Oh no, no! This is…

JL: …but this is how, this is how my life is!

Then, the more I learned about music, the more I realized opera was still appealing to me. And I really didn’t know anything about opera. So I went down to the Juilliard School of Music, and I took opera, their opera courses there. And had the most
amazingly wonderful teachers—Judith Raskin, who was just an amazing teacher—and again, she took me under her wing. And then, that’s when I started learning opera and singing opera. And I, I enjoyed that so much. So I had a nice little career for about three or four years. But once my kids started getting a little older, I, I really, I didn’t want to tour. To be a real, to be a working professional artist—and that’s why my heart goes out to artists. They give up so much because you have to, you have to tour. And, and you’re at the service of the Arts. So I had to make a decision at some point of, do I want to do that, or do I want to be a mother? And I, I really wanted to be a mother, so….

[Tape paused]

SB: Judy, you, you’ve said how important your family is to you. Could you tell us how you met your husband, Ernie?

JL: Well, my husband Ernie, we’ve been married—it’ll be 37 years on July 12. Which is Thoreau’s birthday. My, my husband loves Thoreau—Henry David Thoreau.

At any rate, I met my husband at Sacred Heart University. He was the president of the class, so—and I was so shy when I came out of—you, you would not know that about me!

SB: It’s hard to believe that, yeah!

JL: Well, you know in the convent, we had what, what was the “rule of silence.” So I really didn’t talk a lot when I was in school. And, and in the convent. So when I came out, it took me a little while to—when I came out, it was like I had lost three years. And so I didn’t know about a lot of current fads and things that had been happening. And, and I—it took a while for me to adjust to things.

And he, was the president of the class but he had been in seminary for, for four years. And, and we met—when we met, it was at this kind of—I told you about the Berrigan brothers, but we met at this anti-war kind of thing. And he, he claims—but I don’t believe him—he claims as soon as he saw me that it was love at first sight. Except for one thing! I remember that—and I remember he didn’t even talk to me! [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]

JL: …Until we were, we had a class together, a writing class. And we were sitting next to each other, which was a few months later! [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]

JL: So, you know, you know how his, how—what is it, when you, when you change history? It—revisionist history? He has a revisionist history of how we met [laughs]. But I’ll, his sounds much more romantic…

SB: That’s a different interview [laughs].
JL: At any rate, he, we started going out when we were both in college, and we got married as soon as we got out of school.

SB: How long were you dating?

JL: We dated for about a year before we got engaged. Then we got engaged six months later.

SB: Pretty, pretty quickly.

JL: It was pretty quick, yes.

SB: And then you had your children?

JL: And then we had our children right away.

SB: …Pretty quickly too.

JL: Yeah, yeah, we had Rachel that first year, and Joel a year and a half after that.

SB: Oh my goodness.

JL: So, so there were exciting times. And you know, that was an age when there was so much change happening in the, in the late ‘60s that you know, you took chances on things. I think now, we, we—when he, he had this really good corporate job. And we gave it all up so that he could go to school and, and, you know—that Joseph Campbell thing, “follow your bliss,” you know, whatever it was. And, and he’s always thought that way, and I have too. And I, I have found in my life that it really can happen. If you follow your bliss, good things can come of that.

On the other hand, I don’t know if that’s really true or not today! I, I just wonder today, if things have gotten so much, I think more difficult. In terms of—first of all, for artists especially. It’s a very hard time for artists, very, very hard. And I, my heart always goes out to artists because—in this country especially, there is just no net for them at all. They, young artists especially. They consistently, we lose good artists because they don’t have health care, there’s nothing that—if, if they don’t come from a family that can help support them, they have no way that they can work on their craft until they get to a point where they really have arrived…

SB: Is that your underlying, sort of motivation for the conservatory or what have you?

JL: Yes, for those people who want to become professional artists. On the other hand, and the conservatory, I’ll be happy to move on to that if you’d like…

SB: No, we’ll go—we’ll keep going. No, we’ll definitely come up to that. But in regard to your children. You mentioned that you, in a way sacrificed for your children.
JL: Well, it didn’t seem like a sacrifice, because you, you know, I really enjoyed it so much. So the things that you wouldn’t enjoy. It was harder being away from them. That I didn’t enjoy. So to me, it, my joy was being with them.

SB: Yeah….

JL: And I was, I was fortunate that in, in those days you, with one person working, you could actually afford to be home with your children. And it’s interesting—I have found though, when we were at the University of Minnesota, my husband and I, this was 1973 or ’74 now. They were starting then, this new concept called, “day care.” And, and my—this is interesting, I’ve thought of this often. We’re talking 33 years ago now. And they had, for every child that was there, they had 4 children. And the parents had to participate. It was this wonderful program. And this was supposed to be a model that they were going to roll out to the rest of the country. And I look back, 33 years at the state of day care, and this country, and it is absolutely pathetic.

But that was the thinking then. There was this—it was kind of an age of idealism, where you know, we were going to—there was going to be an end to war, that women were going to be able to make choices. But not at the sacrifice of children. Children were going to be able to—not only be well cared for, but they were going to be given opportunities that they probably couldn’t be given in their own home. And when you look at what’s happened, it, it just went haywire. And I feel sorry now for children that were raised…

Well I can go on and on and on… [laughs]. I’m going to give you my whole life philosophy.

SB: Well, which is part of you of course. That’s what we want to know.

JL: Well…

SB: But…we’d love to know more about those years, with, with your children.

JL: Well… I, what happened was…

SB: And what were you doing?

JL: I was very fortunate, because I was teaching part-time at Sacred Heart University, which was perfect for me. And there was a lot of theatre activity there. And, and so—and then a new theatre opened up independent from that. So I was actually able to, while my children were growing up, I was able to perform and direct on a part-time basis while they were little.

As a matter of fact, they would come to me many times—with me to do casting sessions. And, and they, they were kind of that typical—they were really raised in the theatre. And they would say, “Mom—we would be driving home—‘we liked that one, not that one.’ ” And they were always writing! [Laughs]

And they were both in shows, you know…
SB: I have to ask you if, if they are now in this area?

JL: Well, they’re both in the arts. And both struggling artists. My, my daughter is a would-be writer. She writes books and—well, she writes a lot for, at her—she likes to write for adolescents. She thinks that’s a very important time in life. And she writes a lot of poetry. But she can’t make a living, so she’s decided to go back to school to get her Master of Library Science, which kind of—she’ll have some kind of career. [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]

JL: And she loves it, so that’s, I think it’s the perfect thing for her. She’s got a big heart and just a great, great person.

And my son is a musician, and you know, he, he travels a lot as musicians do. He’s on the road all the time.

SB: What is his instrument?

JL: His instrument is, is guitar, but he also does an orchestrator. He went to the Hartt School of Music in, in Hartford, Connecticut. And, and he’s committed to it—he’s absolutely committed to it. And, but it’s difficult, you know, it’s difficult…

SB: As in all of us.

JL: …for, for them.

SB: Sure.

JL: But they love it. So, what—I guess as long as they love it…

SB: Do you definitely…

JL: And who did I think I was raising?

[Both laugh]

JL: And of course my husband, Ernie, he, he’s been in the corporate world all his life. But he really writes poetry! That’s what he really likes to do!

SB: Oh, good gracious.

JL: So, I mean, there, there you have it.

SB: You’re an arts family.

JL: And we’re an arts family. And, and that’s, that’s how we are. Really, you know, even with my children, you know, as far as materialism, they could care [less] what they wear,
they, they just don’t think that way. And my husband either. I’ve got to kind of dress them all before they leave…

[Both laugh]

JL: …Including myself actually! No, no—but you know, that’s, that’s just how they are. And it’s funny, and since…

SB: It’s typical of arts, I guess. I think, very typical.

JL: You know, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SB: So, so you…

JL: That’s, that’s—those are the Lisi’s.

SB: Well that’s great! We’re so happy! So happy that you’re, you’re here, and who you are!

JL: Oh, thank you.

SB: But well, kind of back to when you were raising them, I know you went to the Shubert Theatre. Could you kind of take us [through] how that happened?

JL: Yes. In 1983—well, what happened was the, I, I was artistic director of a theatre called the Downtown Cabaret Theatre. And it, it was a wonderful little place, and I had done a lot of, I had gotten a lot of grants for it and subscription. And I built up their subscription base. So anyway, I got a call from the Shubert Theatre, which was a very, very famous old theater. And in Connecticut, it was like, like the Ivory Tower…

SB: The ultimate.

JL: It was like the ultimate. Because the Shubert Theatre in New Haven, which opened in 1914, it, it was called the birthplace of the nation’s greatest hits. Because most of the shows that, before they went to Broadway, would either start there, or have a pre-Broadway tryout tour.

And there was this, the person who ran the Shubert Theatre. His name was Mr. Maurice Bailey. And Mr. Bailey was this wonderful impresario; everybody in Connecticut knew who Mr. Bailey was. And, and so—and actually, my husband and I, one of the first shows we ever saw was at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven. And it was called, “We Bombed in New Haven.” It was a take off on, on a show dying in New Haven. And Jason Robards was, was in it—I’ll never forget that, this was in the ‘60s.

So, what happened was, in 1975, they were going to tear the Shubert down. The Shubert had, after Mr. Bailey died, it, it closed in 1975, and there was a lot of—as typical in cities, there was a lot of urban blight. And it was, and that—it was on College Street, if you know—people don’t know New Haven, but it was right across the green from Yale
University. And, New Haven’s a very interesting city. Because you’ve got this world class university next to these very ethnic neighborhoods, but you’ve got this old blue-blood New England base, who is really the leadership there. It’s just a very—that when you—and everything’s rubbing elbows next to each other. It really, I’ve always thought of it as like the microcosm of America on, on a postage stamp. You know? That’s how I—you could drive—I used to drive from my house to the Shubert and go through like five absolutely different neighborhoods before—and then through the Yale University campus, before I got there. Everyday I would think, this is so, this is just an incredible experiment in America.

So at any rate, I got a call from them in 1983. They, they had a big—they had raised a lot of money to renovate the Shubert Theatre. And they had, there was this Taft Hotel that was very famous that was next to it, and the Hotel Adams was over it. And they put a lot of money into renovating the whole Shubert Theatre as a part of an urban redevelopment project. That was the catalyst. And this has happened in a lot of cities, in Cleveland. It’s happened in Pittsburgh—they would take these old theatres.

But it had been closed from 1975 to 1983. And they hired and fired two executive directors from January in 1983, to when I got this call in December….

[Tape Paused]

JL: And they, when they called me, they said they were looking for a Development Director. And I said, you know, that would be great, because I really love raising money. And again, I thought it’d be a good job while I was raising my children because the Cabaret Theatre, I had to be there like, a lot of nights and weekends. But this way I could work—as they were in school now, I could work a kind of nine-to-five job and then be home in the evenings, which I thought would be a good, a good thing.

So I said, OK. Well, I didn’t realize this—I didn’t know how bad things were there when I got there. I just thought this would be a good opportunity…

[Both laugh]

JL: …And I got there, and they fired the guy who hired me, Brian Littercoat. They fired him three weeks after I was there. The Board did. And they asked me if I would come in as the Acting Executive Director. And I said, “Wait a minute!” I said, “Hold on here!” I said, “I’m the Development Director, remember?” [Laughs] They said, “No, no, but you did such a good job raising money, and with your subscription, and with your background there…”

SB: Oh, wow.

JL: “Can you just serve as Acting Director until we find somebody else?” I said, “Well, I said, it has to be for a limited period of time.” Because that was not the intent, my intention of coming here. So, after six months went by, I, and I fortunately—knock wood!—and I didn’t know anything about Broadway at that point, I really didn’t, because I, all of the—I had been with producing companies. I had not been in Broadway. I went down to New York, and I just knocked on the doors. I met Gerry Schoenfeld. I said,
“Hello,” I said, “I’m up at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven!” [Laughs] And he said, “Who are you”? [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]

JL: Well, he’d become, he became like my mentor. He’s a dear friend now, and Phil Smith and all of these guys—went to see the, the Nederlanders, you know who they were. I had heard these names, went to see producers who—I would go on this list and say, “Now, who is that?” [Laughs] Irving Siders, who was with the Marvin Krauss. And I said, “I need some help, I really don’t know anything about this, will you help me?”

And you know, what I realize is—and it was all men. There were no women, in 1983, there were no women in arts—a lot—not Broadway anyway, doing anything there. But they kind of all took me under—I would say they’re my Dutch uncles, but they were my Dutch…

[End Tape 1, Side A]

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JL: …didn’t know, as I said, I didn’t know anything about Broadway. And I just had to kind of, figure it all out. And I went down there, and with Mr. Schoenfeld, who is the head of the Shubert Organization, which owns most of the theatres in New York. I went into this office, and it was so intimidating because you know, there are these plush offices in the middle of—in the heart of Broadway. And I remember sitting down waiting for him to come in, and my knees were shaking! I could actually, I could actually feel my knees shaking! [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs]

JL: But he was so nice to me. I said, and I said to him, I said, “Mr. Schoenfeld, I’m very, very nervous!”

[Both laugh]

JL: And he said, “Well why are you nervous?” I said, “Because I’m sitting here talking to you!” [Laughs]

So he said, “Relax, relax,” so…. And he became a just a, a great supporter and helped me a lot. And that’s what I found, that all these people—if you, you know, I just didn’t know anything. And they really helped me. All of them though had fond memories of the Shubert Theatre. Because they all had spent a lot of time there.

SB: Yeah, of course.

JL: So when—and they were all happy to know that it was going to be saved. And, and so—and that’s, what you see up there, that was—that was the opening poster.

SB: Historic, yes.
JL: All of those people there, Carol Channing and everybody—*My Fair Lady*, you can see Julie… Andrews right there…

SB: Andrews… yeah.

JL: Ethel Waters, Jason Robards up there…. All of these people played there, and many of them had, had their debuts there. People like Marlon Brando—this is my favorite…

SB: And who—this, this was, this was before your tenure?

JL: Oh yeah, this is before my tenure…

SB: But contained… [References pictures they are viewing]

JL: But, but the history of it was so remarkable…

SB: Incredible.

JL: My favorite one was Marlon Brando, who made his debut on the Shubert Theatre. Not in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but as Nels in *I Remember Mama*. [Laughs]

SB: Oh, how interesting.

JL: And that’s it, there were so many summaries…

SB: That’s amazing.

JL: Yeah. So what, what I did when I was at the Shubert was, the history was so fascinating, I put up this thing called the Shubert Wall of Fame, and listed all of the shows who, that had their…

SB: What a history.

JL: … premiere or their debut there, going back to 1914. Things like, *The Vagabond King*, that you, you would never—these operettas and the people who played there—it was, it was just amazing. And I wanted to make sure New Haven understood the value of that place as an institution, and why they had to care for it and preserve it. Because so much of it had to do, not only with the history of New Haven, but the history of theatre that happened there was…. Because it was bigger.

What you realize is so many places, like the performing Arts Center here, or the Shubert—they’re bigger than all of us. And we have to care for them because they, they carry our history—not only as the arts, but our communities. They’re very—the way you’re doing this! I mean, we have to know…

SB: Preserve…
JL: …that we’ve got to preserve these things, you know? And it had gotten so close to being destroyed, that we had to take advantage now of this new rebirth that we had, so that the people coming here know, that for the future, they’ve got to take care of it, you know. That they had another, a second chance to take, to take care of it.

At any rate…. So, after six months, I, I was able to raise the subscription level. They only had 400 Broadway subscribers when I got there, and we, I did this big subscription campaign. And we raised it to 5000 subscribers!

SB: Wow—in what period of time?

JL: This was like, I was, I came—I started in December, and then three weeks later, which was January, I got this call. And then by, by July I had booked some shows for the following year. These people all helped me, and I raised the subscription to 5000. And I didn’t…

SB: In that short period of time?

JL: Yes, yes! Well, one thing was that…

SB: How?

JL: …they had really never done a subscription campaign. And so I really—well I had also had the good fortune of meeting Danny Newman. I had gotten a Ford Foundation [grant] when I was at the Downtown Cabaret Theatre. Danny Newman is called the “father of subscription” in this country. He was at the Lyric Opera House in Chicago. And he was the one, in the late ‘60s that came up with the concept of selling all of your shows like they do in sports, or like you do buy a magazine. That you have a subscription, that you put your money down first, and then you go to see all those shows. And he was right. That was the only way Arts organizations—Performing Arts organizations were going to survive!

And a lot of people didn’t want to listen to Danny. They said, no, no, we want to keep all our tickets open to everybody....But they were collapsing like crazy! Dance companies, [etc]. And so Danny came up with this concept, and it changed the course—I think if it wasn’t for that man, we would not know the performing arts in this country I think as we do. And there he is right there, he’s a dear friend of mine. Danny Newman, he’s like in his 90’s now….

SB: Oh, isn’t that wonderful.

JL: And he’s still at the Lyric Theater.

SB: It’s an amazing concept.

JL: He, he…
SB: Which you still…

JL: …came up with it.

SB: …focus on today. Here

JL: And whenever, you know, some of these new marketing kids come in and say, oh, subscriptions—a thing of the past. And I say, it is? You try selling single tickets for every single show that you have. You can’t afford it. You spend too much on marketing. You have no advance, This way, subscription gives you that advance money that you can earn income on, put it back into the company—You’ve sold your ten performances, or twelve performances, or fifteen performances! Now you can concentrate on just selling the other tickets that you have left! It was brilliant. And it’s all due to that man.

SB: It is brilliant.

JL: And so I had gotten this Ford Foundation grant in the ‘70s, at the Cabaret Theatre, and he came, and we just hit it off. And so I applied those same things at the Shubert theatre, and we were able to raise it from 400 subscriptions to 5000, using all of the…. I owe it all to him, to his techniques!

And we did the same thing here!

SB: Yes, yes.

JL: Exactly the same thing here for both Broadway and opera.

SB: How many years were you there, at the Shubert?

JL: I was there nine years, from 1983 to nineteen—1983 [to] 1992, when I came down here. So…

SB: What are your fond memories there? Stars, incidents, stories…

JL: Oh yeah, yeah—well, there’s, there’s so many. One of the ones that is a standout is, we did That Scottish Play in 1986. Barry and Fran Weissler were the producers. And I remember Barry calling—I was, I was sick in bed with bronchitis or something. And he said, Judy, I want you to do a pre-Broadway tryout of Macbeth with Christopher Plummer and with Glenda Jackson. So—and so, [inaudible] was directing. And it was like, sounded like a beautiful thing!

[Both Laugh]

SB: [inaudible]
JL: So, and, and New Haven was the last stop before it was going to Broadway. Well, by the time it got there, they had gone through three sets, nobody was talking to each other, and so, so it was a dream. And Glenda was a dream. I don’t know if I should—Christopher was difficult as day! [Laughs]

So it was, and, and he would not wear a microphone, but everybody else was miked, including the three witches.

SB: [Laughs]

JL: He refused to wear it. So everybody, you could hear everybody, and when Christopher would come on, you couldn’t hear him [laughs]! So, you know the reviewers that have to—because they review…

SB: [Laughs] You were probably having a heart attack! [Laughs]

JL: … But what could you do? He was Macbeth! [Laugh] And [inaudible] was pulling the curtain…and Barry and Fran were pulling her…and they would come down into my office, and just sit there for a while.

You know, it was very…

SB: I hope this is not a typical story.

JL: No, no! But you were saying, what were the memorable ones?

SB: Memorable!

JL: But this was a memorable one.

And, and one of the other wonderful ones, was Julie Harris in a show called *Lettuce and Lovage* which is a wonderful play.

SB: One of my favorites.

JL: Yeah, I adore that, and Julie. And she was just—there were some icons there that were just so wonderful. Wendy Wasserstein, who just died in the fall. Opening night—we did *Heidi Chronicles*. And she and her whole family came…..

SB: How special.

JL: And, and now, only her, the mother is alive. Wendi died last fall and….

SB: Of course. That was special.

JL: Yeah so it just—and August Wilson, you know, it just breaks my heart, we’ve lost two of our major, major playwrights this year. And they were both young. So yeah I—there were, there were a lot of great memories. And we were, we were just around the
corner from the Yale Rep [Yale Repertory Theatre], and we knew all the folks there, and
we did—you know, a lot together.

SB: Did the students come?

JL: Oh yeah, yeah.

SB: That’s great.

JL: And Lloyd Richards was the head of the Yale Rep at that time. And he did a lot of
August Wilson’s work and, Athol Fugard…

SB: How wonderful.

JL: Yeah, so it, it was just, it was…. 

SB: Memorable…

JL: …a wonderful time.

And that’s where we—I started opera there too. At the Shubert. I had an opera
company called the Shubert Opera Company because New Haven didn’t have an opera
company. And so we did it, as I tried to do it here—with the New Haven Symphony
Orchestra.

Not going to get me going about that!

[Both laugh]

JL: Please!

And it was so successful. And it really helped the New Haven Symphony
Orchestra—it put them on—because they put it on their subscription, and they also had a
master series there, where they, they brought in guest orchestras. And so, what happened
is that, it made the New Haven Symphony Orchestra do not only their own work, but now
they were doing opera and these great, other great orchestras. And so they really sold a
lot more subscriptions, and they, and it did so much to help them.

And so we wound up—and then we also, we did, we did three productions a year
with them, and then we would do one with the Yale School of Music, their Master’s
program. Then we would put theirs on our subscription too…

SB: Great idea.

JL: …and it was very successful. We did that for about eight years before I left.

But when I left, two years later, they stopped the whole program. And, and they
brought in these awful operas, you know, that toured, that are really pretty terrible. And
that’s why, I want, when I leave here, I want to make sure that there’s an endowment to
support…
SB: Sure.

JL: …real opera, you know?

SB: What brought you here? Like, how did you hear about it?

JL: What brought me here—its’ a couple things. Well, see a lot of people in Tampa probably don’t know this, but when this place opened, it was on the cover of every professional journal. Because…

SB: I didn’t know that.

JL: …it, it was incredible, what was happening down here. And none of us, in New York [laughs], even knew where Tampa was!

[Both laugh]

JL: And we all called it Tampa Bay. Because with the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. But we had heard that they’re building this incredible place in Tampa Bay, and so I—and I…

SB: In New York you heard this?

JL: Oh yeah, yeah. Everybody heard it.

SB: In Connecticut?

JL: Yeah, everybody.

SB: Interesting.

JL: It was, a big, a big time thing. You have to understand, because there was no place like this in—we didn’t even know where Florida was, let alone Tampa. [Laughs]

So anyway, when I got this—I used to get a lot of calls from headhunters. But I, when I was very happy where I was, but my kids were at a point in their lives—my son, was just graduating from high school. And I got this call—and my sister had just moved to Sarasota, and we’re very close. But the, but the other contributing factor, which is a personal thing, is I have asthma, and my doctors at Yale said, you, this is the worst possible climate for you.

So when I got this call—and I didn’t really entertain a lot of headhunter calls, but I had heard so much about the place, and my sister was living here, so I said, look, I’ll go down, but I don’t want to be considered a candidate, and I want to pay my own way. I don’t like when you get these headhunter calls and they’re wining and dining you, and then you feel like they’re pulling you in—and I like being independent.

So I said, and I’ll be happy to meet with the search committee, but I don’t want to be considered a candidate. And I said, I’ll go down to see my sister, and that will be—if
you accept on those terms, I’ll come and meet with the search committee. As long as they know I’m not a candidate. [Laughs], I said that like five times.

[Both laugh]

JL: So, so I came down and I couldn’t believe what they’d built down here! I said, oh my God, I said, this is even bigger and better than what we thought! [Laughs] And they’d worked so hard here, and you know, they just were having such a hard time—financial problem—I said, this can’t be! I said, they’ve built this magnificent place!

And when I came here, I met the search committee. They were the nicest people. They were just so nice!

SB: Who, who were? Who were the people on it?

JL: It was, well, H.L. Culbreath, Hinks Shimberg, Gene Taylor—I don’t know if you remember Gene, but he used to be the head of, at that time, Nations Bank. Wonderful, wonderful man. And Winkie Howell—and just, lovely people. And they had worked so hard to make this place happen. And I just said, well have we tried this, have you tried that? I said, maybe this might work… they said, oh, no. I said, and I said one thing to them. I said, “you know,” I said, “When I, I’m a professional. When I came here, I drove right past it because there’s no signage on here.” And they said, oh! They said, “We didn’t think we should put signage on here because it’s a performing arts center.” And I thought, well, it might be good to put some signs [laughs]! You’re right next to I-275!

SB: Oh my goodness!

JL: But I, because I think they thought it was a very, kind of a sacred place and they didn’t want to, you know, kind of junk it up with signage. Which I can understand, but I said, you know, for nothing, you know, whoever you hire, you might want to think about doing something to show the community where it is and, and that sort of thing. Anyway, I really liked them a lot.

So when I went back home, and I talked to Ernie, I said, you know, this is, it’s calling to me. I said, I, I really think, you know, there are some important things can happen there. I don’t know what and I don’t know how right now, but, I said, It’s a great community. It’s a growing community. Even though, at that time, you have to understand, in, in the northeast, we had, we had negative growth there. And here it’s…

SB: That’s right.

JL: …and here the growth was, this is like after the ’87 crash, you know, nothing was happening. And here they were only at 6% growth. They thought that was down.

[Both laugh]

JL: Everything is relative, you know?

So, I said, would you come down and take a look at it? Now he had been in the
corporate world for like 25 years. And he—or 22 years I guess. So, and his big program, he had started a wonderful MBA program in Human Resources and Leadership Development in Manhattanville College. And that was, that was hard for him—and he didn’t actually leave that. He ran that program for six years while we were, no—eleven years, until 9/11/2001. He ran that program up there.

But we thought, you know what? If we ever leave, this is the right time to do it because both of our children were in transition. My daughter was in college. My son was just about to go. And we thought this probably, my sister was here…

SB: Timing was…

JL: …the timing was just right. And it was a wonderful move. We’ve been very happy here, we love the community, you know—this place was not hard to turn around. I…

SB: How, how did you approach the committee, and sort of say…

JL: Well it was so funny because I, I—they were all—I mean, I have to say, the one thing I said to them when I came down is, the first thing we’re going to—I said, I thought I was coming to work at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. Everything I read in the paper says, ‘the financially challenged Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center…’ I said the first thing we’re going to do is get rid of that! [Laughs]

SB: The public invasions…

JL: And there, everybody was—there was such gloom and doom. I said, no, no, no, that—we can’t have that. And so, you know, again, what I [did was], mounted a big subscription campaign that year, and I saw the shows that they were—that were coming here. They were not the Class A shows. And you know, it’s all—I don’t care how great a building is, anywhere. It’s programming, programming, programming. If people want to see something, they’ll go. They’ll come to see a building one time. And it’s true of performing arts centers…

SB: It’s true…

JL: …it’s true of museums, it’s true of stores! It’s true of churches, it’s true of anything. It’s not the building. They’ll come once to see the building. They’ll come back because of what’s happening inside the building.

So, so we really had to change a lot of the programming. You know, they were doing a lot of classical stuff here, and a lot of stuff they were doing it for too long. And, you have to start where a community is. You can’t force-feed it. When you curate, you have to start where people are. And you have to offer a broad range because you’re dealing with many different people in a community. You’re not dealing with one monolithic…

So we kind of broke it down and we upgraded some of the things that should be doing well and could be the money-makers, and added other things that weren’t being offered. For example, the Jaeb Theatre, they had this beautiful gem of a theatre that was
not used. I think it was used 20 times a year! Well, that was a good entry level—for like, a cabaret, a more less expensive ticket price, a great place for people to start who had never been to theater before. It was casual. We started with *Forever Plaid* which was a small musical that was very accessible, and we would do shows like that and *Shear Madness* and all of our, what we call our “decade shows.” You know, that were easy to take—things like *Satchmo*, that were very appealing to people. And now, it runs 52 weeks a year! And it’s our biggest moneymaker!

SB: That’s extraordinary.

JL: After Broadway, that show was our biggest moneymaker. And this year we started a Club Jaeb on Monday nights, which is all these emerging artists that come on. So that theater is Monday through Sunday. Every single week.

SB: Extraordinary.

JL: And then the Broadway shows, we upgraded all of those, and then, I had said to the Board when I came on that, *if I solved the debt problem, can we do opera?* Because when I walked out on Carol Morsani stage, which was called Festival Hall at the time, I realized they built an opera house. That’s what it is. Glorious acoustics, huge stage—you could do anything on there. But they built it in the horseshoe design that all the great operas and the stacked seating—it’s an opera house.

So they said, *well if you solve the debt problem, you can do anything, whenever you want!*

[Both laugh]

JL: *How about opera?* [Laughs]

SB: Yeah.

JL: So we started doing opera in 1995.

SB: And you came in ’92?


SB: So it took like three years for you to solve the…

JL: Well actually it was just two—an even two years, but before we started it, I had to do a lot of planning first. Because I, I’m a firm believer in starting slow and, and building. And the first few years we only did one per year. Because I’d rather get it right—because you know, you’ve heard me say, *the only thing worse than no opera is bad opera.*

So, and an opera is a very demanding. It’s the most demanding of all art forms. Because you’re, you have a huge symphonic orchestra, and then you’ve got this huge chorus, huge sets, and you’ve got, you know, usually a dance component, very often a
children’s component. And it’s like putting together this enormous, enormous production.

So I thought really—and I wanted to do it at a time when I could link it, from a marketing perspective to something we were doing in Broadway. And that’s why I picked—that was the year 1995, when we were doing Miss Saigon which was a retelling of, of Madame Butterfly. But, but it was set in Vietnam, whereas Madame Butterfly was set in Japan. So I thought that would be an interesting angle for the press. And Madame Butterfly is a very popular opera anyway. But we sold a package, Miss Saigon and Madame Butterfly, and we sold out. That first year, I couldn’t believe it.

So, so we only did one opera a year for about three years. And then we went—and we just grew very, very…

SB: Slowly…

JL: …slowly…

SB: …but surely…

JL: …And, and steady. Yeah.

SB: What is the program today?

JL: Today we do three operas and a concert artist. And we’ve had everyone from Renee Fleming to José Carreras, Denyce Graves. Next year we’re having Deborah Voight who is…

SB: Which, which year did you start bringing individual artists, performing on their own without the art…?

JL: I think that was about 2000. So we’ve been doing it about six years.

SB: And that’s been very successful.

JL: Yeah, that always sells out. Kathy Battle we’ve had a couple of times. So, so that yeah that does very well.

SB: And, and how is Broadway doing?

JL: Jessye Norman, we’ve had here.

Broadway is doing great! Broadway—we are the highest grossing one-week Broadway market in the country. And we are one of the, in terms of audiences and a number of performances, and a gross attendance, we are one of the largest ten performing arts centers in the country.

Carol Morsani, this is Pollstar, is number three in the country, according to Pollstar, which is our kind of industrial journal. And according to Pollstar, number nine in the world!
SB: [Laughs]

JL: Which—I, I wouldn’t hold my breath on that one, but that’s what Pollstar said. [Laughs]

SB: That’s quite amazing.

JL: So it’s, it’s a very active…

SB: That’s amazing.

JL: …very active, very active facility.

SB: And you took the subscription, for Broadway from…?

JL: Nine-hundred when I first came here, and it’s—it varies between ten and twelve thousand a year, depending on, on…

SB: That’s incredible.

JL: Yeah.

SB: And it’s still growing?

JL: Still growing, yeah.

SB: Still growing.

JL: Yeah, yeah, we’re doing very well with that.

SB: You have made it so successful. The community is incredibly impressive and appreciative. What are your goals for the community for TPAC?

JL: Well, my goals for the Performing Arts Center are directly related to the goals for Tampa and the arts. You can’t, you really can’t separate them. And sometimes I, the only thing that discourages me is not anything about the Performing Arts Center, and the board or our audiences. What discourages me is, there’s a lack of cohesion regarding the arts in this community. And I’ve been here now for almost 14 years, and it doesn’t seem—that doesn’t seem to get any better. It’s like everything is separate from each other. Rather than looking at ourselves as a whole arts community—which is how we should be looking at each other.

I always said, the problem is, I think what happens, I’d always say this about, about the arts—it’s like Victor Hugo said in Les Miserables, *the only thing worse than the miserable rich are the miserable poor*. And I think arts organizations are always struggling so hard, that they can’t get to that point where they look at themselves as a
whole and how working together in collaboration with each other, it could be better than just individually. *This is all about me, and I deserve this, and I should have this*, and, and whining. And, and I, I can’t—I have no patience for anybody that whines or says, *poor me*. You have to prove yourself. You have to go out there, and you have to just get the job done. Nobody owes anybody anything. And, and so you get this self-interested…

SB: Are you comparing it some to St. Pete…

JL: …kind of thing going…

SB: …in terms of, as a community, what they’re doing?

JL: Well, I think, yes—well, I don’t just think St. Pete, I think we, we have to look at ourselves with St. Pete!

I don’t, I mean, when I say the arts community—it’s the arts community in Tampa, but it’s the arts community in Tampa Bay. We’re one region. We should not be—and I think, sadly, what happens very often is our arts institutions, and people in the arts—they have inherited this competition between the two counties or the two cities. It’s almost thicker than they are, you know? And so even if you come in to the community with a big openness, you find that you’re being sucked into this whether, whether you like it or not.

SB: Or even, believing it.

JL: Yes. And, and so that’s not a healthy thing. Because even when I was in Minneapolis, I mean, I went to school in Minneapolis, we lived in St. Paul, and those cities are much closer to each other—you just go across a street and you’re…. And I never remember that kind of competitiveness that, that, that we have here. So I, I just don’t—I think that’s a real drain, it really…..

SB: Do you feel you can make a difference, with that?

JL: No, I really don’t. I’ve, I’ve tried. But I, that’s why—I mean, we’re open to making a difference. But…

SB: Yes, I understand.

JL: …Very often you look at a place like, like this, and we’re kind of an extension of what the cultural, community mindset is. But for example, I’m having lunch with Robert Freedman of Ruth Eckerd, and we’re going to talk again [about] how we can do more together, and how we can…

SB: That is wonderful.

JL: …support each other. So it’s not that we’re not trying, but, but you—we keep trying to figure it out, but we keep realizing [laughs]…
And I just don’t think it’s good for any of the communities, and then, and then the arts institutions are just extensions of that, so, that’s….
And then I look at Tampa and I think we’ve got so many really terrific—we’ve got a terrific arts community. But again, we’re doing—we don’t do anything…

SB: As a whole…

JL: …to show and express all that we have here. And, and again, you try to move that, and you find—and sometimes I just get discouraged and say, *look, I’ll just take care of my garden, and, you know*…. Because you realize, even though I’ve been here [for] 14 years, I still find a powerlessness to be able to take it to that next level in terms of, of the community. And it could very well be, you know, they look at us as the 800 pound gorilla, and sometimes they don’t want—they say, *well you’re the, you’re the big guy, so*…. That’s true, but, but it doesn’t matter. All we have is more zeros. That means we just have more bills to pay.

[Both laugh]

JL: Yeah, but we’ve all been zeros. We have to raise money!

SB: Well, but you do have a responsibility obviously, because the performing arts center is so highly thought of.

JL: Yes…

SB: And…

JL: …but, and so I just got—I wish we could find—I wish we could have a, a community committee, made up of people that are on the different boards. And, and say, *look, we’ve got to make the arts be this in Tampa*.

SB: This would be great for you to start.

JL: But I can’t because I’m [inaudible]

SB: You’re support!

JL: Somebody else has to start this!

But I think—because they want the same thing. I think, I think everybody wants the arts to be recognized, and if we unite and come together, that that’s our objective. I just think it could happen…

SB: And I have heard you say this many times.

JL: You know?
SB: And this type of leadership, I think is what has made—allowed you to make a difference in the community thus far. And will continue to allow you to make a difference in the community. So it is a continual challenge for you.

JL: It is! And it is a challenge!

SB: In the meantime…. I’m sure!

JL: One reason I stay here is [that] I still have lots of challenges!

SB: Which is great, which is great.

JL: Yeah.

SB: But in terms of your tenure here, most—some memorable experiences that you have—highlights. Highlights?

JL: Well, I’ll tell you one—see, when you’re in theatre, you always remember the disasters [laughs]. Because the highlights are great, but you know, they’re not the things—you’re just so happy when the curtain goes up and everything happens the way they see it. We don’t delight in our successes. We, we remember the near misses.

This was, I will tell you this one. Opening night of *Phantom of the Opera*, which is a—which was a big huge deal in 1994. I’ll do this very fast.

Opening night, we had this big gala, and I—and of course we have four theatre—four theatres—we have five now. And before it everybody was so excited, I mean we were dressed to the nines, and everybody was happy inside. And the curtain came up, and I just waited until the chandelier did its trick. But then, we were doing another show at the Jaeb Theatre, and I wanted to go see how that one was doing. So everything was fine, and I went to the Jaeb. I was watching that show. I don’t even remember what the show was. And all of a sudden, it was during Act Two, [and] the lights went out in the Jaeb. And I said, *what happened?* And I, I ran to the light booth, and they said…. 

[End Tape 2, Side A]

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[Tape 2, Side B]

JL: Well, just as a reprise as we say in theatre [laughs], it was opening night at *Phantom*, the biggest show ever, here. After a big gala, everybody’s in, and I—at Act Two, I went to see what was happening in one of out other theatres. And all of a sudden, I was in one of our small theatres, and the lights went out. And I thought it was just that theatre, ran to the light booth, and the electrician said, *no it’s not just here, it's the whole Performing Arts Center*. At which point, it hit me—like an electric light bulb, *oh my God! Phantom of the Opera!*

SB: [Laughs]
JL: So I ran—and you know how big this place is, all the way, and sure enough, all the lights were out in Act Two!

[Both laugh]

JL: But it was during the portion of the show, in Act Two, where there are these candelabras, and we had just enough generator support for those lights. And then—but then they had to re-cue everything. And the audience was just wonderful. It was, it took about 20 minutes, and they just sat there…

SB: Isn’t that just wonderful.

JL: …and they applauded when it started again, and we did not get one letter of complaint.

SB: Amazing.

JL: But it was, it was, one of the most scary things.

SB: Memorable [laughs].

JL: The other one, when we had opening night of a show called *Tommy*, which was a kind of a rock opera. And again, we were the second stop, and it had this huge truss and all of these—it had all these television monitors on it. And it was opening night again, and I was sitting—I always sit in the back in case I have to run out. And I looked up, and the whole truss went like—you can’t see this on the tape, but it just started angling way, swinging way over, and I could just see somebody getting hurt or killed or whatever.

And, fortunately, they pulled the curtain down, and I ran backstage, and they had—they had to spend a half an hour bringing the truss back, making sure it was secure so it wouldn’t go—and again, that was opening night.

Sometimes, they [inaudible] opening night!

[Both laugh]

JL: The other wasn’t our fault. That was the electric company. But this, this one was the, was the show’s fault.

And my latest one was last year, we were doing *Aida*, the opera, big huge opera, beautiful soprano, Marquita Lister. And her big, big aria in the end, when they’re dying in the tomb. I mean, it’s the ultimate, ultimate duet—and somehow she inhaled something, some dust or something [laughs]…and she couldn’t sing!

And we’re—I’m sitting in the audience and poor Maestro Coppola is in the pit, and she just walked right off the stage!

[Both laugh]
JL: And he’s there with his baton, watching his soprano just [laughs] walk off the stage!

SB: What did he do?

JL: Well, we all, we, we pulled the curtain down, and we all ran backstage, and the person who was playing Amneris, who was the mezzo-soprano, she said she would sing it off stage while Martina continued to, to do the staging of it, and that’s how we got through the end of it. And, it was—fortunately it was right at the end of the opera, and again the audience….

   Audiences are, you know in live performance…

SB: I, I always…

JL: …they’re very understanding…

SB: They were great…

JL: …they were really great…

SB: I was there …

JL: …we had a couple of complaints to that, and it was…

SB: …it was fabulous.

JL: …like we planned that! You know, like…

   [Both laugh]

SB: Oh gosh.

JL: …like we put the dust up there for her to inhale, you know [laughs]!

SB: Could I impose this one other thought? I know how widely thought of you are in New York. A lot of people don’t realize that in Tampa Bay because we, a lot of people don’t interact with, with New York in any way, shape or form. Could you tell us your role with the League and what a difference you’ve made there?

JL: Well, sure. I’d be happy to.

   The League of American Theatres and Producers is Broadway’s trade organization, if you will. And I’ve been a member of the league since 1983, as I mentioned when I started at the, at the Shubert. And in early 1983, it was just, there was a—there really wasn’t an acknowledgement of the road at all. It was mostly the Broadway Theatre owners and producers. We always say between 57th and 42nd, most people in New York think that’s where everything takes place. They don’t know there is anything west of that—or east.
So we had—and all we knew at that point was, they did keep where the shows were touring, but people on the road didn’t even know who, who each other were. So we had—there was one, our first biannual conference was in 1985. And I pulled together a group—I said, *you know, let’s pull together a group of all the road people who are coming to that.* And it was the first time we actually looked at each other and saw each other and realized how many of us there were out there. And it was our first opportunity to network. So we formed this little group called the National Touring Theatre Council. Which was like a subsidiary of the league, but just for the road.

And then we had our first conference for it, the road people and the marketing people, in 1986 or ’87. And I chaired that. I chaired the first seven of those. And it was wonderful because you saw this whole new field really coming together, emerging, as the road was emerging. And if I wasn’t there, somebody else would have done it. You know? I mean, it was just one of those things that it’s, its time was there.

So then in 1993, no, I’m sorry, 1995, we had a new person come on as Executive Director, Jed Bernstein. And Jed—and we had our first biannual conference in Tampa. His first one was in Tampa. And I, I had kind of politicked for that. Because it’s great. Because I wanted all those producers and theatre owners to see what we have down there. I mean, they all knew me at that point, but I needed them to see what we had. So it was very successful. And, and that was the year—I had been on the Board of Governors since 1985, but that was the first year I was the first woman invited onto the Executive Committee.

So I’ve been on the Executive Committee of the League of American Theatres for twelve—twelve, is that—1985—eleven years.

SB: And, and you chair the education?

JL: Yeah, we, yeah, we didn’t even have an education committee. So education came up in the Tampa conference, and we, we needed to form an education committee, because the producers—it’s not that they didn’t want to, they really just didn’t know how to do it. So I chaired the education committee since—I was a founding chair since 19—1995.

And since then, we do a lot of education programs. We have a lot of grants that we give out, in New York and on the road, and, and now we have a new—I was on the, I’m on two other very important committees. One is the new executive—there’s an executive committee—search committee, for the new executive director, because Jed is leaving. So I’m on that committee. And I was on the new strategic planning committee, and it was great because I could represent education, and we have a—now the education is a standing committee, and we have a whole new forward program for, for education.

SB: That’s wonderful.

JL: Yeah….

SB: Wonderful.

JL: …so it’s really, really…
SB: And how does that affect you, your performance here?

JL: Well, you know, it’s like anything else. Broadway is a very important—Broadway, as much as we do everything. We do over 750 performances a year now in our five theaters. But over 65% of our revenue is from Broadway. So you think about that—it’s enormous.

SB: Wow.

JL: So, as a business person I have to look at, what’s my biggest—and where do I have to give my time? I’ve got to be a player up there. Because if I’m a player up there, I’ll get the better shows. I know who to call. They know me. Everything’s about relationships. And, and you know, I am—I, people, I can get into any office in New York, and I can politick for Tampa. So that’s really why, why I stay so active there.

And I, we invest in shows because we need to. Because to me, it’s like research and development. We depend on these Broadway shows. So somewhere along the line, you’ve got to contribute back. And, and we’ve done very well on some, and not well on others. But it’s more about being the player in, in the field. I want to make sure I get a call for a good musical. I, I can say no a lot of times, but then I want to be able to say yes to some too, and if, and if you don’t…. So it’s really more about how that relates to what we do here in Tampa. That’s why I really take such an active, active role…

SB: Well, I know you have a luncheon engagement. I would love to talk—you, this has just been incredible!

JL: And one more thing I wanted to say before…

SB: Oh, I’m sorry, Judy, I’m sorry!

JL: No, no—this, this is, but you’re talking about the league, so, we had our last conference last, two weeks ago. And you know that, when we all come in, it’s, it’s also the Tony [Award] season time and a lot of us are Tony voters. And all the shows have luncheons and everything. So it was, The Color Purple, you know, was nominated for eleven Tony’s. And Scott Sanders, the producer, he asked me if I would sit at his table—with Oprah Winfrey!

SB: Oh my Goodness!

JL: So not only did I sit at his table, they put me right next to Oprah! So it was Gayle King, her best friend, Oprah, and me! [Laughs]

SB: Oh my gosh!

[Both laugh]
JL: So I want to make sure that goes in the archives!

[Both laugh]

SB: That’s great!
    It’s incredible who you interact with on a really, pretty regular basis.

JL: Oh yes. And I…

SB: And also…

JL: …that was, that was very exciting I have to say.

SB: That’s a personal, I’m sure, wonderful experience. But ultimately it really benefits Tampa Bay.

JL: Of course it does.

SB: And we really do thank you for that.

JL: Yeah, my pleasure.

SB: This has been great, just stay here forever!

JL: I didn’t talk about the conservatory. But I can’t now….

SB: You know, I kind of remember that. May we do it—we’ll continue?

JL: Yes. Yes, we’ll continue.

SB: We’ll continue.

JL: OK, alright.

SB: Thank you so much.

[End Interview]

[Begin Interview: continued with Suzette Berkman and Judy Lisi on June 19, 2006.]

SB: Judy, could you please elaborate on the Patel Conservatory?

JL: I would be thrilled to elaborate on the Patel Conservatory. The Conservatory really is a dream come true. And as we said earlier, my first inspiration really goes back to when I taught those young people and saw how empowered they were by their exposure to the
arts. And, and how it offered them a new way of viewing the world, and finding the power in themselves. So, we started our education programs here. When I got here fourteen years ago, we started them very small. They were mostly on school time—which, we invited schools to come and, and see children’s theatre and, and other performing arts with the schools coming here. We started to keep time program for parents and grandparents to be able to bring their children. And that worked very well, and it kept growing.

But we were also asked—the orchestra wasn’t able to continue with their youth orchestra. And they asked if we would be able to take them under our wing. And a wonderful, wonderful woman by the name of Bev Lauring, who really was the founder of the youth orchestra, just was desperate not to see it end because the orchestra couldn’t keep them anymore.

So we took that under our wing, and that was actually our first training program, was the—our wonderful youth orchestra which was a terrific, terrific group of talented young people. 300 kids in four different levels of orchestra now. And now it’s grown from—in the fourteen years from like, it was like 100 young people to over 300. Which also has a chamber orchestra now. They’ve played at Carnegie Hall, and they’ve been invited again to come to….

Because one of the best orchestras really, youth orchestras in the country were actually commissioning work for youth orchestras now. And….

SB: What ages does that cover?

JL: The ages are 14-18. They’re high school.

These kids are getting into the best music schools, and they all excel academically too, which, which is really interesting…

SB: Aren’t there four different orchestras?

JL: Four different levels of orchestra, yeah.

So that, that was exciting. Then we had an opportunity to add to that, a classical ballet component, which we did. And there was no room here, so we renovated a warehouse in the then Channelside district, which was all just empty warehouses, because we didn’t have room here. And we started summer theatre camps. And we had the kids in wig rooms, and lobbies and—because we didn’t have any place. And the programs kept growing and growing and growing. Until we had about four or five hundred kids—and no place to put them.

We learned that the Channelside was being developed so we were going to have to get out of our studio there, and we finally went to the board in 1999, and we had a feasibility study done about what our needs were, and we had a desperate need for space for the growing training programs. These are programs that were growing by themselves. And the board was terrific. And not only were they willing to raise money for a conservatory, but also to raise money with an—for the capital program, with an endowment program, which was really—because it’s hard to raise just endowment
money. But when you put it together with a capital objective, it, it—they both really work together.

And we had planned—we launched the program in 2001 of all times, which was not easy. And we thought it would be a three-year campaign and it turned out to be a four-year campaign because we also ran into a recession as, as you know.

But they finished the campaign. We finished it, and we raised the money. The conservatory came in on time, under budget, and we now have over 1000 kids here, as we speak, taking summer courses again. And it’s just been a dream.

The idea of the conservatory too, the vision for it was not a conservatory that’s going to give you any kind of certificate. This was a place—I modeled it after the Neighborhood School of Music in, in New Haven, Connecticut, which was a place for children, adolescents, and adults to come and explore the arts—to have a safe place. I really feel people—everyone has an artistic urge, but we don’t have an opportunity very often, especially when we become adults, to really exercise it. And so it kind of gets hidden, and so we go to therapy. And I always say this is cheap therapy. Take an art course! Because it really helps you, look at the new world—the way we did when we were children, when we used to play or we used to imagine what could be. And, and when you are involved in a project like that, you get lost in it. And, and it’s amazing what starts coming out that doesn’t have a chance to come out.

So this is a safe place for imagination and creativity and fun. And we have two tracks. We have a professional track for young people who are, for example, who are in our youth orchestra and classical ballet program, and theatre programs who really are thinking about using this as a step to becoming a professional artist. But mostly, it’s students who want to just expand their view of life. And, and feel life again, and enjoy it.

And even the young people who don’t go on, the skills that they take from this, which is, in the performing arts, you, you have to dream, create, discover; you have to collaborate, you have to be disciplined, you have to present yourself—these are all skills, no matter where [or] what you do in your life, they’re going to be able, you’re going to be able to do it better for all the skills. And even our program now is all about working together, helping each other, supporting each other become better artists. If you’re a performing artist, there’s no better place. It’s not like sports when you compete. Artists have to—the more you support each other, the better everybody is. And so sure, there’s competitions, you know, when people are—when musicians are competing against each other. But in terms of collaboration, if you’re in orchestra, you need to work together. If you’re in a theatre, you need to work together. You need to—if that person can’t remember his line, you will help them with the line. Because you can’t take your line [laughs]…

So it’s just a great way, and there’s so many young people that, it’s—sports are great. But there’s so many young people that, they don’t relate to sports. But they will relate to something in the arts. And it just opens a door that they can never close again. So it’s, I always wanted to say, “The Patel Conservatory, the creative place.” That’s my, my little tag was—of course that didn’t turn out. But that’s how I look at it, as just a place to, safe place to create with other, with other people.

SB: So tell us about some of the classes.
JL: Oh, we have classes—all levels of music. We start with Suzuki with the kids and kinder music when they’re very little. And then of course we go all the way up through the youth orchestra.

Our theatre programs—we have all different types of theatre programs, different, different methods. We have beginner’s courses. Our summer programs we have our community arts ensemble, which is for young people who come from underserved areas, but we’ve expanded that program now to—there’s about 200 of them, but we have them in smaller groups now.

And we also have some people from USF who specialize in social service issues, because we realized some of the kids couldn’t succeed because they needed other help. And they would have to leave the program. But now we have this social service side so we can help them with these problems so that they can stay on track. And we have a wonderful classical ballet program and, that we’re partnering with Orlando School of Ballet, which is one of the best ballet schools.

We have contemporary dance, we have hip-hop, we have “on-camera,” where people can learn how to be on camera. And that’s helped a lot of, a lot of people who have to develop their skills, or they’re going to give—not, not just people who would like to be in film or TV, but people who are going to be on [inaudible] from one way or the other. So it, it really, it really is a pretty large scope.

SB: Do you have to audition for…?

JL: Some you audition for in terms of placement. Because there’s nobody really that’s turned away. The only people that would be turned away are people who aren’t really serious about it. And they kind of just leave anyway.

But no, there’s not really…. For example in the youth orchestra you have to audition to see where you’re, where you’re placed. Obviously there might be some—if they can’t read music or something, then they, they couldn’t you know, they could be placed. But for the most part, it’s about placement rather than being accepted.

SB: You mentioned that you felt there should be an endowment as well. What type of endowment did you have?

JL: Well we have 30 million now. And there’s a rule of thumb for endowment. Our, our—that’s the—you’re hearing that thump is one of our studios [laughs]

The rule of thumb is that the endowment should be three times your operating budget. And our operating budget is between 30 and 35 [million], and ever growing.

So we’re looking at a total [of] 90 million dollars in ten years. We have 30 million, so we’re looking at 60 million. And we have the opportunity to name the entire Performing Arts Center for 25 or 30 [million]. If we’re successful in doing that, and we think we might have an opportunity for that, then that leaves us another 30 million to raise. So over ten years we would do like three or four year campaigns of ten million each.

A lot of it is going to come from people’s estates, and so it’s important that we have people try to understand what we’re doing and how we’re serving the communities when they start making those choices, of how they would like—what they would like to
have happen with, with their money and their legacy, that they would think about, about us. And that’s going to be an important part of how, of how we, we raise the money.

So we think it’s achievable. And we have to act as if it is achievable.

SB: But you did, you opened without that. Which is….

JL: Yeah, but we’ve had…

SB: …extraordinary.

JL: …we have no debt. Actually, we haven’t had any debt for many years now.

SB: That’s wonderful

JL: So, and, and we are very careful about doing that. And still we’ve been able to expand.

SB: Speaking of a legacy, would you, would you like to explain or tell us what you would like the legacy to be of the, of the Performing Arts Center? And your own personal legacy? For the community perhaps?

JL: You know, I, I think what would be my hope and, and my legacy is going to be the Performing Arts Center’s legacy. There’s not really a difference.

Is that people in Tampa feel that the performing arts is such an integrated part of their life. That they don’t think of it as anything extraordinary at all. It’s part of being human. And part of their fully participating, in, in life—I just think the arts make you a happier person. And if that could happen, that would be great.

One of the things that we want to do with the Performing Arts Center Conservatory is that even though we have this building here, where we’re really going to grow it, is about taking these programs out into the community. So we can take it to North Tampa and South Tampa and East Tampa. Because we already have these teachers, we have these programs—we know not everybody can go to us. But we can build this program so we can take it out to these other young people who might not have these opportunities. And that’s how we’re going to grow these programs here….

SB: That’s wonderful. That’s quite a legacy.

JL: We call it “the conservatory to go.”

[Both laugh]

SB: I love it.

Can you think of anything else you would like to say in regard to the overall facility?
JL: Well I think, the only thing I have to say it’s, it’s really beyond just the Performing Arts Center. I think I am involved with the Performing Arts Center. But I think all of the arts here in Tampa are important. And it’s how we build an arts friendly culture here in Tampa, so that the way—I said, look, my legacy and the Performing Arts Center legacy would be, it’s for people to feel comfortable with the performing arts. I also want them to feel comfortable with, with the museum. With the children’s museum, with the photography museum, with—so that people know that, that art—we learn through the arts. Through all the arts, not just the performing arts. That just happens to be the discipline that I’m involved in. But it just makes a community much richer, and, and more, I think more stable, and more creative and better employees. And you get people to stay here, and our children to stay here. They don’t have to go to New York. They don’t have to go to Chicago. Artists can be here because there will be a place for them in an arts friendly community.

SB: Speaking of staying here, I know a lot of people who have, who love the arts, who have not really moved from Tampa because the Performing Arts Center is here. They can see a John O’Hurley coming to play in Chicago, right here in Tampa or any of the major artists. And you—that has made quite a difference to, to people.

JL: And that’s our argument for, sometimes when people say the, well, you know, it’s elitist to put all this money into—well no! Because the people with wealth can go to New York, they can go to London. They could access! It’s the people who don’t have money that can’t go to those places. So we feel, we want Tampa to be able to offer these things to all, all citizens.

SB: Well you’ve done a magnificent job. I can’t thank you enough. I, I’m sort of in awe of all that you’ve accomplished here, and I know people listening to this interview will be delighted to know a little bit more about you, yourself personally as well.

JL: Well thank you Suzette. I feel taking an hour just talking about me has really been a tad indulgent! [laughs]

SB: Well it’s, it’s about what you’ve accomplished as well…

JL: Well…

SB: And we are very, very grateful.

JL: Thank you so much…

SB: Thank you so much.

JL: …for giving me the opportunity.
SB: You’re very welcome.

[End interview]