

**Interview with David Thompson**

**Interviewed by Professor Clarke A. Chambers  
University of Minnesota**

**Interviewed on July 13, 1994  
University of Minnesota Campus**

David Thompson                   - DT  
Clarke A. Chambers           - CAC

CAC: This is July 13, 1994, a Wednesday. I'm Clarke Chambers doing the interviewing of a colleague, and friend, and neighbor, as a matter of fact, in 1666 Coffman Building, David Thompson, who for many years was an important, crucial part of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Minnesota for a number of years, starting, really, in January 1947.

Let's start, David . . . can you say a few things about how you were attracted to the theater as a young undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota? What kind of career choices did you make? Why did you go to Cornell? What was the nature of the department when you came back to it in January 1947?

DT: My career choices are so obscure until it dawned on me that the theater and the church, through history, have been very closely interwoven, sometimes working together and sometimes bitter enemies. I, when I finished high school, was going to go to Seabury Seminary in Northwestern and become an Episcopal minister. I said to my sponsor, the local pastor, "I'll just go to the university and find out a little about general humanities." Well, that was fatal. [laughter]

CAC: [laughter]

DT: I rigorously did not go near the theater during the first two quarters of my freshman year. I thought I'd better get good grades—and I did. I'd gone to Marshall, and the high school teacher of drama there was awfully good, and she had recommended we go to the university's Scott Hall and see the plays; so, in my junior/ senior years, I'd seen astonishingly good plays at the Scott Hall. When I was approaching my sophomore year, I felt able to go over and try out for a play and I did. There it goes. I didn't ever want to go to Broadway. I was interested in the theater

as a means of education and I still think it is the greatest. Perhaps, today the whole media thing really has taken over education and educators don't know it . . . because media has the drama.

CAC: Oh, I think we know it and regret it.

DT: Yes, it's a shock.

CAC: We'll come back to that.

DT: When I found that I could have a good time in Theatre, and Speech, and Drama, especially Dramatic Literature, that was for me and bye, bye Seabury. [laughter]

CAC: A great loss to the church.

DT: I went on with the bachelor's at Minnesota. I was double major always Theatre and English, and the master's also, and the Ph.D. the same. Then, when I finished the doctorate and . . .

CAC: You went to Cornell because it had a national reputation?

DT: Yes. Alexander Magnus Drummond . . . now there's a name.

CAC: [laughter]

DT: He was a fellow student of Alexander Woollcott's at the wonderful college in upstate New York—I can't tell you the name—and a great teacher. He was to Cornell what Professor Frank Rarig was to Minnesota . . . the great man in the field up there. Then, Cornell was close enough to New York so that you could get all of that. The war, in between, along with my doctorate . . . . It seemed pretty good when Professor Rarig called me and said, "Frank Whiting wants you to come back as an assistant professor." The pay was pitiful; but, in a sense, I was coming home. People came for very little. The boom came in the 1950s.

CAC: Some great departments do, indeed, have a person or a small group of persons that creates and molds. Frank Rarig is certainly one. After all, we name a building for him.

DT: Yes.

CAC: Your friend from Utah was the other.

DT: C. Lowell Lees, later on here.

CAC: Why don't you say something about Mr. Rarig and also about the other director who was here, Whiting.

DT: In James Gray's previous history [*University of Minnesota: 1851-1951*] of the university, the two people in Theatre, when he picks up his chapter on the arts at the university . . . Rarig is one and the other is Oscar Firkins who had been in English.

CAC: Oh, yes.

DT: There were three tyros in English, the Shakespeare man, [Elmer Edgar] Stoll, a great Shakespeare critic, and Firkins, who was interested in modern drama and performance, the theater. Every year he went to New York and came back and gave lectures at the Schubert Club and all around town—well attended . . . my mother went to them—on what's new in New York and in London. [He was] very witty intelligent and he wrote plays all on literary subjects, the Brownings and so on. As Gray says, "From Firkins, the people, not just on campus but the Twin Cities community, got a sophisticated sense of dramatic literature as an adult interest."

CAC: That's a persisting tradition of Theatre Arts and we'll come to that at the outreach to the community.

DT: And from Rarig, they got the thing that combated provincial, partly moralistic and partly inhibited, kind of emotional lives or something . . . that it was perfectly logical, and enjoyable, and important that if you have something to say, young man, rear back and say it, say it well. That's why Hubert Humphrey never finished talking about Rarig's influence on him.

CAC: I see.

DT: The great senator who moves to the state of Washington—I've forgotten his name—a very important senator was a student of Rarig's.

CAC: Skip Jackson?

DT: No.

CAC: I'm sorry.

DT: Rarig took the curse of exhibitionism and immorality off dramatic presentation. It was an art. It wasn't exhibitionism and so on; and it related, of course, to rhetoric and to literature. His great field was the oral interpretation of poetry. Through Rarig, literature became not sissified but a scholarly, and performance oriented, and respectable endeavor. Gray talks about this up to 1951. Rarig retired in 1948, and Whiting wanted me as a director of plays, and I did become that. Rarig wanted me back as one of his ex students who could carry on . . .

CAC: That tradition.

DT: . . . that oral interpretation of literature, yes.

CAC: When you came Frank Whiting was then chair?

DT: Yes. When I was a student here in 1937—this is all in the Gray . . . A. Dale Riley, up through there—there was an excellent Theatre program in the 1930s; but, it wasn't academically respectable. The moralists still found that . . . what about the behavior of those young people after hours rehearsing all night?

CAC: But you couldn't challenge a good Mormon like Frank Whiting?

DT: Exactly! When Riley died, the Theatre spent a year just with students sort of and no discipline, Rarig brought in C. Lowell Lees, who had his doctorate from Wisconsin and was a good Mormon. He brought about three other Mormons. [laughter]

CAC: I see.

DT: So, [there was] a whole tribe of good upstanding family oriented people with a strong tradition in drama because every ward—it's called in the Mormon church—has a little player's group. It's how they train their missionaries to speak well.

CAC: So, the youth get introduced to the dramatic form very early?

DT: Yes. It's perfectly all right and Lees . . .

CAC: Of course, the story of the Mormons itself is pretty dramatic. That's a narrative more than it is theology.

DT: Exactly. Then, starting in 1937 on through about 1942, C. Lowell Lees was the head man and, then, during the war, Lees got the call to go back to Salt Lake City and become head. Whiting had been here second in command to Lees. When Rarig, still the chairman, started the search to replace Lees, decided that Whiting who had meanwhile earned his doctorate was the best man. He was and he knew the scene; so, Whiting became the director of the University Theatre.

CAC: Frank Whiting remained as chair for a long time?

DT: He was never chair of this tripartite department; but, he was [Theatre] director at the university and head of the university [Theatre] third of the department.

CAC: All right. That brings us to this funny tripartite bureaucratic arrangement when you came in 1946, 1947. Say something about that. It was Speech, and Theatre Arts, and something you called Speech Pathology?

DT: Yes.

CAC: They were all together?

DT: Bryng Bryngelson was the big man in Speech Pathology or Speech Correction.

CAC: Ahhh, of course.

DT: Rarig was in Speech proper and Whiting in 1946; but, when I was a student, Lees was the Theatre person.

CAC: That must have made for some strange departmental meetings?

DT: The Speech scientists were busy with their highly technical work and didn't want to be chairmen—they wanted someone. Speech, which included Communication, and Rhetoric, and Interpretation of Poetry, was the center and, then, Theatre, again, was as technical in its artistic way as Speech Correction was technical in its scientific way.

CAC: So, the political core was really out of the Speech side . . . Rhetoric?

DT: Yes. Those three wildly . . . especially the two wings, the Theatre and the Speech Path, so separate to artistic and scientific, were united by the great communicators. For one thing, you can't be in Speech if you don't talk, and enjoy talking, and talking together.

CAC: [laughter] And listening.

DT: It worked. It sounds implausible but it worked. Everything got bigger there in the 1950s and Speech Path by the 1960s was so scientific. By joining the Medical School, they acquired their own kind of dignity.

CAC: Was there a differential access to funding on the three parts?

DT: Yes.

CAC: I was thinking of external funding.

DT: Especially, when the second split of Speech Communication . . . They took on the word communication which was a link with journalism and with the social sciences. People who took their doctorates in Speech minored in the other . . . sociology of this and the behavior of Political Science. People in Theatre always took the other arts or usually in Dramatic Lit[erature] in English. Increasingly, when things got specialized at the doctoral level—there were doctoral programs in all three tribes—then the language ceased to be sort of universal *Frank Rarig communicative* or good talk. He preferred the word speech for talking together; but later, communication became the word, and pathology the word, and artistic the word.

CAC: It's in the late 1950s and early 1960s that this disparate parts take up separate housekeeping?

DT: Yes. Back to your question, of course it had academic pulls. It must have had . . . and funding pulls. Rarig retired in 1948 and then [E.W.] Ziebarth was chair and [William S.] Howell was chair. The Rarig *keeping both ends together* persisted and it was continuingly a struggle.

CAC: It's interesting, as you talk, that it was in 1962, 1963 that the basic scientific disciplines abdicated from the Arts College.

DT: There you are.

CAC: They were the Science, Literature, and the Arts.

DT: That's right.

CAC: And they pull into the Institute of Technology. Speech Pathology pulls into the Medical School.

DT: That's the larger picture of this smaller . . .

CAC: Speech and Communications goes into the Arts College Social Science Division and Theatre Arts is left in the Humanities.

DT: Yes, yes.

CAC: This fragmentation is taking place everywhere right at the same time; but, I suspect that people who were there didn't know this?

DT: Oh, no.

CAC: It was your own province that you had to worry about after all.

DT: Sure.

CAC: God! that's engaging.

DT: One of the things pulling the Theatre away was that in 1940—this is in the James Gray—there were very careful plans for a new theater. President [Guy Stanton] Ford, in 1940, asked the architectural adviser on campus to draw up a plan for a new theater building. Then, the war intervened . . . boom! and nothing came of that. Do you realize where the University Theater was? It was in the music building, Scott Hall.

CAC: That was thought of primarily as the music performance . . .

DT: Of course, and the auditorium there was for music, and organ recitals, and organ practice all day long. Only at 6:30 p.m. could the Theatre get in there. They had offices and the tiny little ten foot proscenium stage studio downstairs.

CAC: Does this last all the way into the building of the Rarig Center?

DT: Yes. It's incredible.

CAC: You were still using Scott Hall all through the 1960s and 1970s?

DT: Up until 1972 or 1973, whenever it was—which became a national scandal. The Guthrie [Theater] had opened up in 1963. Frank Whiting was one of the major pulls to get Guthrie to come. Everybody was bidding for [Tyrone] Guthrie to come after his Stratford [Shakespearean Festival], Ontario. When he came [there was] the great expansion to the Guthrie fellowship and a whole increase in professionalism in the Theatre Department; and then, people from all over the country came partly to study here on Guthrie fellowships, and they saw the Theatre Arts Department . . . the founder of all of this. It didn't become a department until it moved across the river. Then, it became the Guthrie and the separate department of Theatre Arts . . . all happened in the 1970s. They found, when they came from 1963 on, this Theatre division of the Speech Department housed on borrowed time in a borrowed place in the music building at one end of it. They couldn't believe it.

CAC: How on earth do you account for the authority, then, that the Theatre Arts program had to attract Mr. Guthrie and, then, everything that went with it?

DT: You mean why did Frank Whiting succeed in adding . . . ?

CAC: Yes.

DT: Under Lees—Gray refers to this . . . Gray runs up to 1951—from 1937 on and after him, Frank Whiting offered a program of general interest punctuated by moments of brilliance. Some of the plays, the Shaw . . .

CAC: This would have been known in the theater community nationwide?

DT: Right! Guthrie came, and looked, and talked to the theater reviewers. Theater productions were reviewed not only by the *Minnesota Daily*, which never has done that for twenty years, but all of the papers in both cities. They sent their reviews. Before the Guthrie, the University Theatre was the community theater of the Twin Cities. All the mushrooming of theaters which has occurred since is a result of so many of those Guthrie fellows who came here and took their

MFA's [Master of Fine Arts] and then stayed and opened theaters; so, the success of that is what killed the University Theater. [laughter]

CAC: I see. We'll come to the ironies later. Frank Whiting must have had to have contact or someone help him get the proper liaison to the foundations and wealthy philanthropists who would also join the crusade to get Guthrie here? It took a lot of money. How much did Frank do in that enterprise?

DT: He went to interminable meetings and talked to everybody.

CAC: He had to talk to the philanthropists, and the foundation folks, and the arts folks?

DT: Oh, yes. I remember sitting with big donors of the Twin Cities at dinners given up in the Campus Club. The Theatre faculty and our wives would be sprinkled among all of these potential big donors.

CAC: You were involved yourself in that?

DT: Oh, yes.

CAC: What kind of direction did you have? Were you told who these folks were and what their soft points might be or was it just . . . ?

DT: They were important and they were names. You know the Pillsburys. If you live here, you know these people. [laughter]

CAC: Some people do.

DT: Brown and Bigelow, and the Pillsburys, and the big one in St. Paul . . . the Griggs Cooper. You know all of those.

CAC: Who is managing this? Who is putting it together?

DT: I think very early what became the Guthrie Board when there was a Guthrie. . . those people early. People like Peter Seisler were hired. I can't remember the exact chronology. Guthrie came and liked the size of the Twin Cities. It was not as rural as Stratford, Ontario, and there was a university here, and he had an adjunct professorship.

CAC: But you still had to build a theater for him.

DT: yes.

CAC: That took money.



DT: Yes, exactly.

CAC: Did the Minnesota Foundation play any part in that, do you know?

DT: I think it did . . . and the others before that, the Bush and the McKnight.

CAC: But the Theatre Arts staff generally had to . . .

DT: Oh, we were at dinners and meetings and the people came to see the plays.

CAC: It was a whole decade between the coming of Guthrie and the building of the Rarig Center; so, you had your own theater.

DT: Isn't that astonishing? It took time and there was the whole difficulty of the 1960s, you know.

CAC: There was lots of money in the 1960s for lots of things. Then, there had to be a will. Once, these things happen in Central Administration either of the college or of Morrill Hall, the university, where did one find political support within the university for Rarig Center and for keeping the excellence of the theater?

DT: As soon as it was on that level of Sir Tyrone Guthrie, then, everyone was respectful. Here, was a plum. Deans, and colleagues, and the English Department helped tremendously, tremendously.

CAC: So, it didn't require a moving force in Morrill Hall to move . . . everybody was in favor?

DT: Right. It's a big thing. When they brought the man on the [*Minneapolis*] *Star* who said . . . the Gideon Seymour Foundation, they said, "We can get T. S. Eliot." Everybody was so excited and came out . . . talk about publicity!

CAC: And poor T. S. Eliot did it in the Field House.

DT: With an extension to several other auditoriums.

CAC: That was a one shot affair.

DT: But it was like that. So, Tyrone Guthrie was the name, the catalyst that brought all of this sort of into instant flowering. He came and saw the city. He talked to people. He liked it here. He could have built a Guthrie Theater in New York or Los Angeles; but, this was the right sized population. All through the 1930s and the 1940s—Rarig as the father of it all—Lees and Whiting had built this . . . Minneapolis was a good theater town. Touring shows, repeatedly, were astonished. You don't remember the old Met, the old Metropolitan downtown where Ethel

Barrymore came, and John Barrymore, and Lionel Barrymore, all of them . . . Minneapolis was a good theater town, professional theater.

CAC: And without a major theater except the University [Theater]?

DT: Yes, and that in one end of the music building.

CAC: Yes. [laughter]

DT: [laughter] People couldn't believe it.

CAC: I want to come back, at the end of our conversation, to reflect on this tradition is sustained and how it falls, etcetera. For the moment, let's continue with kind of this internal look. Members of faculty of the Theatre Department or Division of this combined, and then when you became autonomous, shared in undergraduate instruction, graduate instruction, the direction of plays?

DT: Yes.

CAC: Say something about the latter, about the curriculum, and what kind of students were attracted, and what your responsibility was in that, and the direction of these plays, what kind of plays, etcetera.

DT: In a way, it was a classical theater, in that Shakespeare, and Shaw, and Ibsen, and the Greeks, Sophocles, Aristophanes . . .

CAC: Chekhov, I hope.

DT: Chekhov. Those were the main ones and, occasionally, a modern play. But with the modern plays, you had to pay royalty.

CAC: Of course, they weren't in the public domain.

DT: They weren't being taught in English courses. The plays that were taught on campus were tremendous links with . . .

CAC: You didn't do Tennessee Williams then, for example?

DT: They did one or two in the later years.

CAC: How would the staff decide or would students participate in what kind of play they wanted to be in?

DT: Originally, the directors chose whatever they wanted to do.

CAC: So, if you were on for the winter quarter, you say, "I'd like to do . . ." zip.

DT: Zip. Then, the director of the Theatre would say whether it fit into the season or not. Shakespeare isn't done anymore but there was always a Shakespeare play. The students were bused in. It ran for a week . . . matinees and evening everyday for a week. The buses were all lining 15th Avenue.

CAC: This would be high school kids being brought in?

DT: High school kids. In that sense, it was serving what the Guthrie began to serve.

CAC: How would undergraduates know the excellence? You must have had lots of undergraduate persons who participated in these plays who had no ambition of becoming a professional actor or was that the attraction, that they all hoped they might? Just like playing football, you might be a . . .

DT: They were often other majors.

CAC: What would attract them then to the performance, do you suppose? They got credit for it, of course, being in a play?

DT: Only if they were in a Theatre course that required you to be in a play. In an acting course, you had to be in a play. We had people from many departments who'd come. This business of the high school students . . . Gray mentions way back with the [Mr. and Mrs. George Edgar] Vincents, they had actors going touring around the state. Whiting sent out two different troops. He would send whole productions touring and, then, he would send the high school assembly quartet, two men and two women. They would go and do scenes, and skits, and dances.

CAC: Throughout the whole state?

DT: Throughout the whole state. The high school students learned about the University of Minnesota Theater; so, they grew up and came here.

CAC: Did you get your leads from graduate students, I mean, leading parts?

DT: Usually.

CAC: But undergraduates, occasionally? Were they up to it?

DT: Yes. Oh, yes.

CAC: It was not like a repertory theater. When you directed plays, it was a different bunch of students, undergraduate and graduate, every play you did?

DT: At the tryouts, you'd have several hundred of the students.

CAC: You'd have to winnow it down to twelve?

DT: You'd know thirty or forty of them because you'd seen them in all the plays.

CAC: Did undergraduate students tend, in one play if they were good, to play in lots of plays, subsequently, then?

DT: Oh, yes.

CAC: Then, they graduate quickly. If you get into this by the time you're a junior, by the time you're a senior you're gone.

DT: That's true.

CAC: What I'm leading toward is the director of a university theater program of that sort has an enormous responsibility to train almost from scratch, the cast, for a given play?

DT: No, if they were juniors and seniors and were Theatre majors, they would have had their freshmen and sophomore years in scenes, and skits, and classes. Some would stay on for the MFA. You had the feeling of a company, in a way, that would last three or four . . .

CAC: In the 1960s and 1970s, how many students would you think, at any given time, were part of this known community?

DT: Who might be in plays?

CAC: And would know each other . . . sixty, eighty, a hundred?

DT: There would be over 200 Theatre majors.

CAC: Would there be a core that would be repeaters and kind of an inside . . . ?

DT: Oh, yes, there would be over 100 . . . the inner group that were in all of the plays.

CAC: Forgive me for interrupting you so much. Many departments with many majors—we know the basic disciplines in the liberal arts would have 200, 300 and so does Theatre Art—have a terribly difficult time getting any sense of community within their own undergraduate or even graduate student body.

DT: They come take courses, and pass the exams, and go. You don't have that, "Let's try it again" rehearsing [unclear].

CAC: These young men and women must have had a sense of working together with each other?

DT: Oh, yes.

CAC: Can you think of any other nook or cranny of the university where that would take place?

DT: No. In fact, the deans used to speak about that, saying, "You have the most extraordinary sense of community over there." The deans would come to the award ceremony each spring, which is staged as a gala and the best actor, and the best actress, and the best design . . . Again and again, Frank Sorauf and other deans would say, "How do you get this sense of esprit de corps?" Because, you can't have a theater department without it. You can't.

CAC: You can't have a good theater department.

DT: Yes, a live one.

CAC: Now, we talk about making the university student friendly, user friendly.

DT: [laughter] That's like a machine.

CAC: That's what you're talking about. It's a bad term. But, it was friendly to the these people. They knew each other. They worked together. They saw each other. They shared an experience. In my Department of History, there would not be a core of that sort . . . advanced graduate students in a given field, probably; but not with undergraduates.

DT: You rehearse a play for five weeks.

CAC: It's a very intense experience.

DT: Very intense, and emotional, and shared, as you said. The performance will not succeed unless you've learned to trust and work with the eight other actors in it.

CAC: Another important ingredient would have to be the skill, and the commitment, and the engagement of faculty who were serving as directors.

DT: Oh, yes.

CAC: You must have had a sense of community as well?

DT: Oh, yes.

CAC: How many faculty, in over a three year period, would be involved in the direction of student plays? Was it ten, twelve, fourteen? Some would be down with Design and Costuming, or Dance with Bob Moulton later.

DT: Yes. But always for each production, we would have the technical faculty. Everybody got involved.

CAC: You had to call on your colleagues for this kind of backup support?

DT: Yes. In our faculty meetings, we'd talk about . . . that student is good as an actor; but, he's not studying as a student.

CAC: Ahhh.

DT: We'd keep a constant tab on them in all respects.

CAC: That's remarkable commentary.

DT: When my wife and I got married as seniors in 1938—we graduated in 1939—they gave us a shower in the studio theater underneath that end of the music building. [laughter] We still have stuff we still use . . . all our kitchen stuff came from that shower. That was fifty-six years ago.

CAC: I'm wondering whether in Music or whether in Studio Art there comes the . . .

DT: In Studio Art, each one can go off in their own studio . . . quite a bit in Music, especially choral.

CAC: And symphonic.

DT: This whole business of educational theater and education music . . . you can't do theater without teaching. You can't do it. You said, "You have to teach them what they need to know." It's the way Goethe started from scratch in Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. [The accurate reference should be Weimar.] First, do not spit on the stage. He had to start with that.

CAC: [laughter]

DT: Because of that strong high school outreach, we didn't have to begin with that; but, a lot else, we did teach.

CAC: I should imagine that is one is doing a Shakespeare play, or a Chekhov, or what have you, the doing of it may be a more profound learning experience about Shakespeare or Chekhov in a humanistic, in a scholarly sense, than a set course . . .

DT: A lecture and pass an exam.

CAC: on the historic plays of Shakespeare and what have you? You've done both.

DT: They're complementary. Remember, I said that all the way through, I was a double major, Theatre and Dramatic Lit?

CAC: Yes.

DT: To be a major in Theatre, you had to have a Shakespeare course in English. You had a have Modern Drama course in English and you had to have Psych.

CAC: But you might have some students coming to a given play without having had that particular course and background?

DT: Coming to audition and tryout for a play, right.

CAC: In which case, they have to learn the playwright, and the drama, and the cultural setting for that play and that's the director's responsibility to teach with hands-on?

DT: Yes. That's one of the things in casting them . . . if they were a student that you didn't know from the inner theater experience, in tryouts, you really looked for and you might actually talk to him and quiz him a little about this general background.

CAC: It seems to me this whole process is clearly extraordinarily demanding of time, energy, motion, etcetera; but, there's also an expectation of scholarship, published scholarship?

DT: Yes.

CAC: How did staff members work that in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s?

DT: When you teach all day and you rehearse all night, it's extraordinary.

CAC: Then, meet with philanthropists to get money.

DT: Philanthropists, and go to the professional meetings for the Association of . . .

CAC: Is there a different expectation in the performing arts of scholarly production?

DT: That was one of the things, when I was on the promotion and tenure committee for CLA [College of Liberal Arts] or SLA [Science, Literature, and the Arts]—I was on the college's committee for years, as well as always in the department and I was director of graduate study in the department . . . all of those head things—that's what that committee in SLA worked out was that artistic creativity publicly shown counts as publication. I, you, write a poem and sit on it, no . . . it should be published.

CAC: Was this a difficult sell to people from Political Science, Anthropology, Economics?

DT: There was a wave in the country recognizing this.

CAC: And the wave came in the 1960s?

DT: Yes.

CAC: Because of the cultural tumult of the 1960s?

DT: Yes.

CAC: Of course, we had street theater in the 1960s.

DT: Of course . . . in the classroom, practically. [laughter]

CAC: You bet.

DT: They'd take over the president's office. Yes, it was all theater . . . theater politics, theater religion, theater literature. It's so enmeshed.

CAC: But it was an easier sell for promotion and tenure to the college with faculty to whom this would have been different, if not downright odd?

DT: Yes.

CAC: You're suggesting that it was the culture climate of the 1960s that helped in that sell? You had to carry this point of view to college committees?

DT: Sure.

CAC: Where did you get support from other faculties? I mean, were there persons more responsive to this than others?

DT: Remember, of Bryce Crawford's different group committees, the one where this counted was the group committee for Humanities and Fine Arts. There were other departments in there



anxious for this. Could he paint pictures, and have an exhibit, and move from assistant to associate professor?

CAC: It was the college committee that was reviewing tenure and promotion not the graduate committee?

DT: That's right. That's right. The graduate committee of the Humanities and the Arts was involved in setting up graduate programs.

CAC: And what would be admissible for, I suppose, written and preliminary oral examinations for the graduate degree?

DT: For the different degrees, yes.

CAC: So, in either setting, you and others were required to speak frequently of the philosophy, the difference, expectations of different disciplines? And yet, your Department of Theatre Arts and English still held to a traditional scholarly expectation, too, that there are articles as well as production?

DT: Right. You could do either artistic creative work, give a public performance, or a scholarly publication.

CAC: Oh, I see. Did individual faculty choose to go down one path and another?

DT: As we got more faculty, the people who taught History, the Theater as a speciality, they didn't direct plays.

CAC: Okay. This differentiation comes with the larger . . . ?

DT: Yes.

CAC: When does your staff grow in size to make this really division possible?

DT: By the time we had fifteen faculty of various professors, plus all these . . .

CAC: Adjuncts.

DT: We were a department. That comes up by 1970.

CAC: As I talk with other persons, regardless of their field, the 1960s changes everything.

DT: That's right.

CAC: It's philosophical and it's community activism; but, there are things going on internal to different disciplines that occur in the 1960s. It's kind of like parallel play . . . things are happening.

DT: Yes. In that climate of loosening, and destroying, and so on, it was a great ferment period and that's when the Guthrie Theater opened, in 1963. It was very paradoxical.

CAC: You had a chance to observe, from the inside, this jumbled tripartite division when you came. Then, it breaks into its parts. But, you also had a chance to observe the English Department as you were going along, as well, because you quite regularly taught regular courses with an English rubric?

DT: Yes, I filled in whenever they needed someone for the Modern Drama course.

CAC: But you were filling in frequently? Did you participate in the governance of the English Department?

DT: No, not at all. No, no.

CAC: But, you had a chance to observe the English Department?

DT: Yes.

CAC: We may come back to that because I am struck, as we're meandering through these stories, that it was in this period by general observation, not universal agreement, that the English Department lost a good deal of its quality in the 1960s and 1970s and the Theatre Arts persisted in its excellence through that period at least; so, I kind of want to come back to that the end. Is that okay?

DT: Yes.

CAC: The rise and fall of excellence in quality and the differing ways these judgments are made is important to the rise, and fall, and development as we go along.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

CAC: The *Showboat* was not as dramatic a community outreach as the relationships with the Guthrie; but, say something about the *Showboat*. Where did that come from and what were the hoped for consequences of having a *Showboat* associated . . . go ahead.

DT: You mentioned outreach there. It really was, Clarke. The earlier references I made to the strong outreach to the Minnesota high schools all over the state . . . We went out and judged their plays out there in the high schools.

CAC: Ah.

DT: The faculty was known all over the state just as much as the Ag-Experiment people out and around.

CAC: Good.

DT: The *Showboat* was a natural consequence of that then, something that would feature the river. It was Frank Whiting, a fertile mind . . . [laughter] His mind just, let's do this, let's do that and, then, he would rush in where a wiser person would not have rushed; but, he would often carry it off. In 1948, which was the Territorial Centennial for the territory of Minnesota, James Aliferis in Music and David Thompson in Theatre were commissioned to do a pageant . . .

CAC: Oh, my heavens sakes!

DT: . . . in Northrop Auditorium . . .

CAC: [gasp]

DT: . . . to celebrate the Territorial Centennial of Minnesota.

CAC: You're just barely here.

DT: That's right.

CAC: You know Minnesota because you are a native?

DT: I had come back in 1947. We got Graduate School grants to spend the summer of 1947 getting ready for a 1948 production and we went out to the lake, two families. I had done library work on the Indians of Minnesota and I read all of William Watts Folwell four volumes [*A History of Minnesota*]. We were focusing on 1848. I wrote the script. It was called *Rifle, Ax, and Plow*, which are the symbols on the state seal. Jim wrote the music. We had Indians in it. We had settlers. We had [Henry] Rice, and [Henry] Sibley, and [Franklin] Steele, [Alexander] Ramsey, and all of those people.

CAC: I'm guessing you're having white students make believe they're Indians?

DT: Yes. That was pre-ethnic authenticity. If we'd found them on the reservation, they couldn't act on Northrop stage. This was . . .

CAC: Now, they would still be having trouble finding . . .

DT: Yes. Everyone in Theatre was in it. Everyone that was near the Theatre was cast. There were huge sets and drops. The University Symphony Orchestra and Aliferis's 300 chorus . . . [laughter] They were settlers. The great voice teacher, Roy Schuessler, in Music and his wife, Elaine and their daughter were in it, and Bob Moulton and his wife. Everybody was in it. Weren't you in it? No?

CAC: I wasn't here. I came in 1951.

DT: You had to be connected to Theatre, or English, or Music.

CAC: That's a story I've never heard. That shows my shortcoming.

DT: Can you picture the stage at Northrop Auditorium?

CAC: Very quickly, what I picture is this was the last pageant done in the entire United States. This was an art form of the 1930s.

DT: Right.

CAC: WPA [Works Progress Administration] theater . . . very close to pageant.

DT: You're right. That was the model. [unclear] of the federal theater.

CAC: This was the last hurrah, David.

DT: I guess it was. But, it was a big hurrah on campus and in the state and it made friends.

CAC: I'll bet.

DT: You're talking about outreach.

CAC: But, you never did it again?

DT: The pageant? No, but the *Showboat* was like that. It came in 1958, the state's centennial. We picked up on both of those centennials and it was a dramatic tah dah. Frank talked to the powers that be and, I suppose, we did it in 1948, don't you want to do it again in 1958? Of course, they did. The money was found and the *Showboat* was purchased.

CAC: Now, it's a different art form. You're doing olio and doing old melodramas.

DT: But the public connectedness and the university's backing and the linking to the state—it is a state university, you know—was worth incredible political mileage. The *Showboat* then grew . . .

CAC: Not as good as a winning football team but almost.

DT: Almost. The delight of the people . . . thinking this was for a state centennial, they'd go listen to some people in dark suits making speeches. They went and saw the olios, Bob Moulton's olios, and the melodramas, and all the rest.

CAC: Was there a learning expectation there, too? What does one learn from doing melodramas and olios?

DT: You learn a lot about the culture of America because those were fundamental.

CAC: A small segment of Nineteenth Century culture . . .

DT: The history. But the popularity of it . . . We're so corrupted by commercial popularity now; but, that in the Nineteenth Century was largely . . . The people did it in their living rooms, and in their tent shows, and chautauqua. You know the history of all of that.

CAC: I'm baiting you a bit. I should think there would be come-down from Shakespeare, Chekhov, or Shaw to training your students to do dime store melodramas.

DT: Everybody knew how. Melodrama is universal. That's why it's on TV all the time. It's just a natural. When people can't write real tragedy, they write melodrama and people who attend melodrama—it's like reading mystery thrillers—don't attend tragic performances. No. The melodrama is not the poor man's but the poor *imaginationer's* tragedy.

CAC: I'm being a bad interviewer. I'm baiting you a bit on this. Would the persons who were selected or selected themselves to do a summer production do it with enthusiasm, with irony, with distance. . . ?

DT: On the *Showboat*?

CAC: Yes . . . with good humor? You didn't think it was a come-down to do this as distinguished from Ibsen?

DT: It's like, is a big novel always better than a small short story? They're different but the short story can in its way be better than the big novel. That's different in length. It's a different

thing. A large part of theater is the audience and nothing connects with an audience like those Nineteenth Century forms that played right out over the footlights.

CAC: How many summers did you sustain that?

DT: Until the boat began to leak.

CAC: You were still popular as a summer community outreach?

DT: Up through last summer, as far as I know.

CAC: Did it come to play a different function . . . I mean, politically?

DT: It lost that whole linkage. That was only 1958. Then, again, it was the summer theater from 1958 till the Guthrie opened in 1963. The *Showboat* was *the* summer theater in the Twin Cities. Things change. It was highly respectable and thoroughly enjoyable and with Whiting and Moulton both pouring all their energies into it.

CAC: It was a natural for Bob Moulton, wasn't it?

DT: Yes. Of the kinds of theaters . . . the University Theater did *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and many *Macbeths* and *Othellos*. At the other end, here is melodrama on the *Showboat*. It's all theater. The audience relationship to theater . . . I don't want to get into TV . . .

CAC: Go ahead.

DT: . . . but that's the thing that's gone.

CAC: You can't have a theater response sitting with two or three people or by yourself before a TV—I can't.

DT: Even going to the movies, sitting among them . . . You don't need to respond for that film to keep running; but, there is a slight sense of participation.

CAC: While you raise the subject—this is really a grand question but I want to bring it back home to the University Theater program—in what ways has TV changed, for better or worse, live productions and their reception, and the choice of plays that will be made, and the way that they're put on, etcetera?

DT: There are people in the audience that won't go. People have told me, "I prefer the movies or I prefer renting the movie and taking it home." They have lost the whole social climate of

civility or how to make an audience, how to respond together. It's gone. The Guthrie suffers from it.

CAC: Do you think this is primarily that TV and movie [unclear]?

DT: Absolutely.

CAC: You think the Guthrie suffers from it also or any standard theater groups across the country?

DT: Live. They're on their shoestrings the way the museum galleries are, the symphony orchestras are. They have to sell T-shirts. They have to get more people in. They have to try and reach that audience that is perfectly comfy at home with thirty-six different channels to choose from. [laughter] There's no need to get dressed up and go out.

CAC: You can hear Itzhak Perlman on Channel 2.

DT: Yes. It's analogous to the fact that no one writes letters anymore. They pick up the phone. A few people like the Eighteenth Century great letter writers are going to be memorialized in their published letters. They are a vanishing race. The stationery companies are out of business, except for a few. It's like Cadillacs will always be made for the few.

CAC: But now we have Kinkos?

DT: Exactly. This is what happens when the mass production gets to the mass communication and the mass imagination. It can be standardized and what comes out of the box is a standardized product, by and large. There are unusual things, of course. We were talking about the need for the *multiply personed responding together audience* . . . that is dead! And the political parties suffer . . . whatever happened to the wards? Gone. That together, that cohesion, and enthusiasm . . . gone. It's the same fact.

CAC: You have a fragmentation of the audience as opposed to the making of a community at least for two hours for a performance.

DT: Exactly.

CAC: The same thing would be true by analogy with politics, that it's very rarely that you make an old fashioned appearance.

DT: Yes, live, in the flesh and when you do, you jump out of your limo and start shaking hands . . .

CAC: You can't help yourself but feel this as a terrible cultural loss?

DT: A loss. It hits theater, which is one of the most—James Gray—nearly universal in its appeal of all of the mature arts. It's fatal. It's gregarious, the theater, and when the audience no longer has that cohesion . . . The University Theater now is a good University Theater. Now, it has four theaters over there instead of that . . .

CAC: Do you suppose it means that over this forty, forty-five year period that the Theatre Arts program then has to concern itself more with the training of actors who will become professionals?

DT: That was the emphasis during the McKnight fellowships, the Bush fellowships.

CAC: Chronologically, these are in the late 1960s and 1970s?

DT: Yes . . . about twelve people from national competitions in huge auditions around the country would be selected, and come and get their MFA, and go to the Guthrie. Boy oh boy! the national publicity out of that was just astonishing.

CAC: But, it must have changed internally the agenda and the emphases internal to the program?

DT: Yes. Those MFAs were clearly the *crème de la crème* of the department. Yes! There were still undergrads, freshmen and sophomores, that wanted to be in plays but they knew that they could be in little scenes only.

CAC: That professionalization takes place in the non-performing disciplines as well.

DT: Really?

CAC: Yes. Specialization creeps in and the search for traditional academic quality at that level. If one is training historians—I'll join the conversation here—to be professional historians, that's one mode of learning. If one is using history as a mode of liberal education, it's quite a different mode and style.

DT: It's different, right.

CAC: It's my sense that in many disciplines, it is the professional, the specialized, from 1965, let us say, to 1990 that gradually takes over. It must be very destructive of the sense of community that you spoke of earlier with the students and the faculty?

DT: Where everybody was in it, and we'd eat together, and we'd rehearse together.

CAC: If you have all of these fellows who are thinking that they're going to be peripatetic professionals and if they're good they're going to be peripatetic.



DT: They will be.

CAC: They're going to move from one place to another.

DT: They've got to and not too attached anywhere.

CAC: They've got to think of TV and movies.

DT: Oh, absolutely, they've got to eat. Right. It's a different cat.

CAC: That's interesting.

DT: You know that by the 1990s, I think the late 1980s, that sending a dozen MFA interns to the Guthrie has shrunk down to about two. The funding was all cut back.

CAC: Does the Theatre program in the 1980s and 1990s still reach greater Minnesota? You spoke earlier of this outreach.

DT: Not the way it used to.

CAC: So, that's lost, too?

DT: Right.

CAC: It was more than a financial loss. If you want to set priorities and invest your money that way, you can do it?

DT: No, can't do it. They don't need . . .

CAC: There's not the demand?

DT: Right. They're not theater hungry out there. They've got TV. There used to be touring companies sent out. The last of that happened because nobody would book them. We don't need your assembly program. The Theatre Department now has shrunk back to a good university theater department but it's lost . . . On the *Showboat* . . . I wanted to add on a little thing there.

CAC: Okay.

DT: This year, the boat is too leaky. They can't use it. It's forbidden to be used. It's hanging fire whether it will be destroyed. It would take \$100,000 to redo it. You've heard the phrase virtual reality?

CAC: Yes.

DT: This is very important because in a sense, the theater always is a kind of virtual reality. It's real but they're pretending to be real. Virtual reality of the high-tech where you wear a helmet, that's that training pilots kind of thing.

CAC: I have a grandson who has done this and I have not.

DT: The virtual reality of the theater in live theater still had that live audience and live actors; so, though it was all pretend, it was with flesh and blood. I mean, you could faint . . . the intrusively real aspects of the human body were still present and being expressed. Because they can't use the *Showboat* this summer, they're having the *Showboat* in Rarig Center in the experimental theater. They have four theaters there, beautiful theaters. In the experimental theater, they've put up that Nineteenth Century type of design and it looks like the inside the *Showboat* and they'll do *Showboat* olios and a farce, I guess; so, it's a virtually real *Showboat*. [laughter] There will be a live audience. But, you see, it's just a step away. The picture for you, an historian, the Virginia battlefields of both the Civil and the Revolutionary War are there; but, it won't be virtually real until Disney makes the plastic versions and, then, the audience will come that have never come.

CAC: And pay very highly for it.

DT: Yes. That is what has happened in the latter stages; so that the Guthrie, too, is on the ropes.

CAC: And we all know the Minnesota Symphony.

DT: Exactly, and the St. Paul Chamber nearly died last year.

CAC: Yes. So, it's a wide-spread phenomenon. I'm thinking from many things you said earlier and not always on tape—after all, you and I converse generally in other non-recorded places—of the educational dimension of this, that there are various ways in which our undergraduate students and graduate students, who are not going to become professionals, learn. I'm going to converse for a moment. I chaired the college committee in 1979, 1980 to revise the standard groupings for a liberal education in the Arts College. There was a majority on that small task force that wanted to credit performance as one way to satisfy certain groups; that is, if one had a public showing of sculpture or paintings, if one participated in a musical performance, chamber music group, for example, if one got credit for a course in a play, they would get credit toward the appropriate group. It was a slim majority on the committee and when we got to the college assembly, faculty generally were leaning opposed to the crediting of any performance as satisfying any group. I spoke, I hope with some eloquence but I'm not sure of that, and others in the committee did as well, including Nils Hasselmo. He was on that committee task force.

DT: Isn't that wonderful?

CAC: We carried, however, only, when several scientists, theoretical physicists, mathematicians, who were themselves musicians—they played the oboe or they played the violin— . . .

DT: [whispered] Isn't that wonderful?

CAC: . . . got up to testify on what one learned from the performance. And once they had spoken, then we carried the majority of the votes; so, we were back to the crediting of that experience. I introduce that as a way to ask you to comment about the theater as a learning experience . . . it's the body, it's the voice, it's the intellect, etcetera. Say something more about that.

DT: Yes. You don't have to be professional. You wouldn't have to be a Theatre major. Many students may start with Speech fundamentals and then take Beginning Acting, or something like that. It trains not only the body. The body language is our first language; but then, we all have voices. Can we use the voice adequately, and efficiently, and pleasantly? [whispered] There are so many voices that are so ugly.

CAC: Many of them on TV.

DT: Yes. The other thing that we were talking about is the empathy between people that make audiences. This is practice in that. If you're going into law, or into teaching, or whatever . . . how to present what you are trying to present to an audience and read the feed back. You have to be able to read it. It's a life talent. [laughter] It's how you live.

CAC: There's real wholeness in it, yes.

DT: It isn't for money and it isn't stardom or anything. It's to be a sense of a whole person involved in the whole culture.

CAC: Yes. So much of our learning, in a formal sense, at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere is chopped up into small pieces.

DT: The terrible thing is that in small bites and so on is the mode now of intensive, distractive TV.

CAC: Yes.

DT: The worst kind of TV is this . . . they don't want you to think about that commercial. They want to grab you and titillate. Now, wait a minute, do I really want to invest in that? It's shattering to the poise of the person, which performance requires. You cannot play in a string quartet without a certain command of your whole person. Mozart will be shattered in ways that he should not be. It's throughout the world in the arts . . . back to the Greeks who included it with gymnastics, and the tragedies, and the comedies, the games.

CAC: I'm thinking about the vitality of the dance culturally, at this moment . . . this kind of running against what we're talking about now.

DT: I think it's filling a vacuum. It's precisely that reason.

CAC: I know you've been retired six, seven years?

DT: Since 1985.

CAC: That's nine years.

DT: Ten years, next year. [laughter]

CAC: You do keep in touch with your colleagues?

DT: Not as closely as I thought I would. Once you're away from the university, especially if you've been so active with the students . . . they're all gone.

CAC: Do you get any sense in the performing arts, music, theater, dance, at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere nationally that the uneasiness, even the dis-ease that you're talking about is widely shared with younger professors? Do they see this?

DT: Yes.

CAC: You talk with them?

DT: Yes.

CAC: What is the feeling there?

DT: They're quite tense about it. They pretend not to care; so, then they go off into that obscure . . . the theater of cruelty or they go off into odd boxed-in kind of specialities, which only makes the alienation worse, actually. They refuse to see the whole picture.

CAC: But at some level they do, as you suggest?

DT: They try to.

CAC: They do see what the dilemma is?

DT: Yes, and that worries them.

CAC: For the moment, you see no way out of this dilemma?

DT: [whispered] I don't know. I don't know what you do.

CAC: I'm very reluctant to have two elderly gentlemen here talking about the good old days with a kind of nostalgia.

DT: And that everything from here on is going to be awful.

CAC: Yet, from our own shared experience, what you're saying strikes a response with me, that the theater played a different role in 1950 or as late as 1970 than it does now.

DT: Yes, in this community.

CAC: In the national community, in the North Atlantic community of nations.

DT: The most popular theater and the only Native American theater is the musical comedy.

CAC: Yes.

DT: Now, the most popular touring shows in New York are musicals; but, they're not musical comedies, they're musical spectacles, the visual orientation. It's as if we've lost our ears.

CAC: Most of them are revivals.

DT: Yes.

CAC: There's not really very many.

DT: They're big socko block busters. Musical comedies . . . you remember the wit in the lyrics?

CAC: Sure. Did our theater ever do a musical comedy?

DT: Oh, yes, Moulton did many of them.

CAC: I see, good.

DT: And did them well, yes. We spoke about Lees and Whiting carrying on with real strength and creativity after Rarig's magnificent launching. When you get a group like Whiting, and Ken Graham, and Moulton, and Wendel Josal . . .

CAC: Arthur Ballet.

DT: . . . and Arthur Ballet, and Charles Nolte . . .

CAC: And David Thompson. That's quite a bunch.

DT: . . . you've got seven or eight very lively people who were working. I was the director of graduate study. I was on the Graduate School committees. I was the prime mover in this other hands across . . . talk about outreach. We used to do the language plays as part of the University Theatre season: Spanish, French, German, Italian.

CAC: Bravo!

DT: Talk about building friends.

CAC: Yes.

DT: And it died. I directed Herman Ramras in the [unclear] German place. [laughter] Difficult but enjoyable.

CAC: Why do you think that faded? It's a good way to learn the language purely in a technical . . .

DT: It's the way links to the English Department faded. We used to be very close. Robert Penn Warren there, Gray mentions, came to the theater and here's my play—it was the play before *All the King's Men*. There is a great man theory of history?

CAC: Yes.

DT: And it's usually a general or Alexander the Great. Rarig retired in 1948. I just named you six or eight people who knew Rarig, who had been students of Rarig, and consciously carried on.

CAC: But they were working in a supportive and responsive culture.

DT: Yes, it paid back. Right. There's no live theater without that. There is none.

CAC: I'm reluctant to end on another note; but, I know that for many years you were associated with the English Department, although, never politically. You didn't have to attend their department meetings and so forth; but, you had a unique opportunity, therefore, to observe critically. One of the assumptions that many observers have made the last twenty-five years—I'm not speaking for myself at all but from talking with many people and keeping my ears open—is that the theater sustained itself for reasons you've suggested down into the late 1970s and into the 1980s and, then, culture and educational things began to work against it. But the English Department for other reasons—we think of the great Department of English as 1925 to 1955, 1960—then . . . people shake their heads and say, "English didn't sustain itself." This may be

cultural? It may be bureaucratic? I don't know. What is your sense? First, let me say, do you share that kind of sense that there was a decline in the quality and the impact of the department?

DT: Yes. I think it's cultural. The reason why Oscar Firkins had to go to Comparative Literature was that two great men, Rarig and Stoll, could be in the same department. He had literary Stoll and Rarig was performance oriented but Oscar Firkins was both literary and performance; so, he had to start with Comparative Literature. After them came many people. Samuel H. Monk, one of the great . . .

CAC: A great scholar.

DT: . . . great lecturers. I never heard a better lecturer in the classroom. He published, yes, but he didn't function the way Firkins did and the way [James Warren] Beech did in the community.

CAC: Do you mean the community of scholars and the community more broadly?

DT: And the Twin City community, which, of course, Theatre did. It had to. If it doesn't function in a community, it has no audience; so, for awhile there, that kept going. [Eric] Bentley came, and he linked to Theatre, and functioned in the community, speaking, talking . . . down to Carleton and off here and known. The irony is that though there's no theater performance without performing theater—you've got to do it for it to exist—the English Department somewhere, and I think it's cultural, lost the idea that there is no English language unless you're exhibiting it. You have to do it, you see. They did it. Monk was a great lecturer. Others, ceased to be . . .

CAC: We speak to smaller audiences.

DT: That's it, smaller audiences.

CAC: We talk to each other.

DT: Yes.

CAC: Do you think that's what happened in the English Department . . . one thing?

DT: [Huntington] Brown in English was the Shakespeare scholar who succeeded Stoll. Stoll came into the classroom and addressed the audience. He had a public, and social, and communicative mode. Brown sat up there—a dear sweet man, lovely man— . . .

CAC: Quite learned.

DT: . . . but Shakespeare dribbled down off his chin and you couldn't hear him beyond the first row. Now, that's appalling! More and more of that happened. Then, the fashions hit us where

some of the newcomers . . . We'll teach the literature of film rather than the literature of literature. [laughter] These are all the latter day splinterings in the subject matter. Then, English had that terrible split between Composition and Literature. Oh, it was just terrible. In came Harold Allen with the Communication program to try and take care of that; but, it didn't heal it. Harold Allen in Communication and Linguistics was a great fan of the theater; but, he didn't build any bridges to Literature. I think Literature ceases to be taught as a live function when it ceases to be at least read. Elizabeth Jackson was a great reader in the classroom.

CAC: Have you ever talked with students of yours who listen to John Berryman, for example, read poetry?

DT: Yes, yes.

CAC: There's a person who had the dramatic . . .

DT: Right, exactly.

CAC: Just in the last three months, I've talked with three older students I've met in the community who remember Berryman's course in poetry as the high point of their career and he never said anything analytical at all. What he did was come in, and interpret with a voice, and with explication de texte [unclear] Greek; but, that was his mode, talking and reading.

DT: [Allen] Tate was a great reader. You never heard him read publicly but in the classroom.

CAC: What you're talking about David is . . . I've been talking with lots of people, obviously, with this project and many complain, whether they're from Education, or the Arts, or the Social Sciences, at the fragmentation that occurs at an accelerated pace beginning in the mid 1960s. It's always there but really accelerating in the 1970s and 1980s. You're saying some of the same things.

DT: Yes. We lost our audience or we killed our audience by becoming specialists. It's too bad. [whispered] It's too bad. Now, literature and poetry is about as far from the center of American culture as you can imagine. TV would be a perfect medium for Berryman to read his poems. It's not done.

CAC: Mr. Thompson, that was a delightful exchange and one that throws lights on lots of important things in the college, and the university, and in education, and in theater. Do you have any final thoughts that you want to share for posterity? This will be here for another 100 years for people if they wish.

DT: [laughter] I don't want to harp on TV; but, I heard a wonderful example of how TV is, in a way, the measure of our culture. They were talking to someone in Georgia—this was on radio—"How bad are the floods there in Albany, Georgia?" The person said, "Bad! These floods



are so bad that they drove the O.J. Simpson [trial] right off the TV." That's how bad the floods are . . . nothing about the height of the water. [laughter]

I wrote this: I assume there will, of course, always be an interest in drama and the other arts by a few people; but, they will not be big audiences because only large audiences will be in the simplification of TV, which is our bread and circus yet today, isn't it? It's the Roman . . . We're not going to have any revolution in this country as long as . . . You see, bread alone would not keep . . . you've got to give them circuses. Circuses alone won't do it either because they do have to eat. If you give them bread and circuses or Wheaties and soap opera . . . So, who's angry? "The university will be the monastery of the future," says my wife.

CAC: Ah! What does she mean by that? That's what we were originally.

DT: The nucleus.

CAC: An enclave?

DT: Yes. Keep the letters alive. It's gloomy.

CAC: We won't take vows of poverty and chastity, I'll tell you.

DT: No, no. [laughter]

CAC: Thank you very much, David.

DT: It's a great university. As I told you before we started, I was so impressed by the James Gray handling 100 years. This one will be about fifty years, don't you think?

CAC: It's from 1951 to 2001.

DT: Yes.

CAC: And 2001 is still seven years off. What I agreed to do is create a body of information and reflections and, then, whoever will take on the task in the year 1999, 2000 to do a sequel . . .

DT: And actually write it.

CAC: Yes. Of course, that scholar, whoever she or he is, will do what historians do, they'll look at the printed and manuscript records as well. I felt particularly that in a large institution that the way things happen informally and truly is an important segment . . . that we can't do it for 1776.

DT: No. The great idea, the tone . . . how close to the tone of voice.

CAC: Yes. If we were doing it . . . It would get too boring with video. It would be better because being a person in theater, you were articulate with your posture, and your gestures, and your facial expressions as well.

DT: One does.

CAC: Some have . . . some don't. That's all missed with the spoken voice.

DT: One little footnote, Clarke. Though I've talked of decline, decline, decline, the place of this university in the state continues to amaze me . . . I mean, the regard with which people view this institution.

CAC: Many people who are close to it are saying that politically. it doesn't find the same expression it did forty years ago.

DT: That's true.

CAC: The state university system politically is a growing influence in the state legislature to be competition for funds.

DT: Yes.

CAC: That's one of the things that we face in retrenchment and reallocation, and Commitment to Focus, and University 2000 is finding the funds to continue what you, and I, and thousands thought to be important. Let's close down. With many thanks again.

DT: Yes.

Transcribed by:

Hermes Transcribing and Research Service  
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, Apple Valley, MN 55124  
(612) 953-0730