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P. George Bird Oral History Interview, 2016 April 22

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Alexis Braun Marks (ABM): All right, I am here with Professor George Bird April 22nd, he wants to tell me one thing.

George Bird (GB): In the back of Quirk workshop there is a little alcove, and in that alcove there is room for a chair and a tiny table. And we used to sit back there and drink coffee. So, one night I am back there, this is on the second floor, way up, way up high. And I am sitting there drinking my cup of coffee, and all of a sudden a 22, 24 pound piece of concrete came through the window, missed me by about 3 inches and landed on the floor. Obviously, somebody was trying to kill somebody, that happened. It happened right in my lap.

ABM: Was that the late sixties that that happened?

GB: What?

ABM: Was that the late sixties that that happened in Quirk?

GB: That’s the first, no I wouldn’t say that no...because the windows on the west side were probably all gone by then. But no, that’s the first attack on a person there that I know of. Because I was the person who was attacked. But they didn’t know it was me, maybe they did. Maybe they didn’t get their grade changed...

ABM: That’s right, maybe they took your History of Theatre class...

GB: Maybe that’s the answer.

ABM: That must have been incredibly frightening

GB: Scared the hell out of me. It did, well you know it is such a shock, BOOM, through the window kaboom then at my feet.

ABM: So when did they take the windows out, was that when they put the Sponberg addition on?

GB: No, that had been there all along. No, that had always been there.
ABM: The windows or the alcove?

GB: Both, both.

ABM: But you had mentioned that they had taken the windows out?

GB: Yes, well the only reason it was there was so that you could sit down and drink a cup of coffee in the evening.

ABM: I have, mostly what I have this afternoon are just some prompts of things that I want to ask questions about, so I don’t have a set of questions the same way I did the last time.

GB: That’s okay, ask what you want to ask and I will try to answer them and if I can’t I won’t.

ABM: Alright them. On Tuesday when we talked, you talked about the 1976 season as sort of being a turning point, when we talked about all of the unrest on campus and the fear. And we talked about it being the point when things started to move forward in a positive direction. So I went and looked through the Eastern Echo’s for that year, and that was the year that you did *Mourning Become Electra*

GB: Yes it was...

ABM: And so I would like to ask you a series of question about that. The first of that being, what on earth possessed you to do the entire Eugene O’Neil trilogy in one fell swoop over two weekends.

GB: Should I tell you?

ABM: Yes, I am so curious...

GB: It is a wonderful melodrama. That is exactly what it is. Is it a tragedy? NO. Is it a comedy? NO. Is it a melodrama? You bet and it’s a damn good one and that is the reason I wanted to do it and maybe it’s the best one ever written in this country, maybe, and I thought that was reason enough to do it, and so I did! And somehow Ken Stevens let me do it. He thought, ha, ha, ha that will be the funniest dress rehearsal I ever saw... it will be about 10 hours long.

ABM: Was Ken Stevens the department head at the time?

GB: No.

Laura Bird (LB): Artistic Director
ABM: Artistic director?

GB: No, he was definitely never the...

LB: No, that could be a lie, he was just arts management at that point wasn't he?

GB: Right.

ABM: Ok...

GB: Do you want this? [hands LB transcript of April 20th interview]

ABM: That is a copy of our conversation from Tuesday.

LB: Tell her how he advertised it. How did Ken Stevens advertise that show?

GB: Well he was sure to get good attendance by doing it this way. The longest play ever written...that will get 'em in. We had a good deal though that you could take a break in the middle and go get dinner and come back.

ABM: That's right...that is what it was billed as. Started at 5, ended at midnight, with an hour-long dinner break.

GB: That's right...

ABM: I think the Echo article said, vegetables, rolls and other entrees served.

GB: could be...anyway...that part did not work terribly well.

ABM: Was it well attended?

GB: I’d say, average. Well, would people really drag to go see the longest play ever written? No. They aren't going to go see that. The best play ever written? Well they might. Oedipus Rex, I don't think so. Anyway, that's beside the point. The point is, it didn't work terribly well.

ABM: You don't think so?

GB: Well I think it got people moving in a direction, that part is true I think. Schmidt’s Antiques for example, went out there, and said with the bicentennial and all this stuff...bu, bu, bu, bubu...you can take anything you want we'll deliver it, we’ll set it up, we'll bring it back, we’ll take care of it clean it up, it'll all be perfect and it won’t cost you a penny. Now they did that and that was a big step in our direction. Because that is a five set show and I needed five sets of furniture, to say nothing of five sets
ABM: That is a nice little advertisement for them...

GB: It certainly is and they have always been very good to us. Very good to us indeed. And it is nice to have somebody local who will do that. And there aren’t a lot of locals who will do that. Because stuff gets broken. Here is the deal I made with Schmidt’s. And by god I kept it. I am surprised that I did...if we wreck anything, if we break anything, if we split anything, we will pay for it, you will not have to pay for it. So the first thing that I borrowed, or rented from them, was a tall clock, grandfather clock, the first thing I did was split the door. So now I got a two-piece grandfather clock. So I go back to Chuck Schmidt’s and say look what we did. He said, ‘Hmmm, tell Schmidt’s…” I said yep. How much is it gonna cost to pay for it...’nothing’ end of discussion. That was that.

ABM: How did that relationship start between you and Schmidt’s Antiques?

GB: Well they knew they were going to get paid...and no, they did...well, ok, let’s go back further, you wanna go back further?

ABM: Let’s go back as far as you want...

GB: This is interesting I think. Schmidt’s had had some unfortunate dealings with the University of Michigan borrowing furniture, props what have you, and they didn’t want to do it anymore. So they said to Michigan, okay you can borrow anything you want to up to 10,000 dollars, but you will have to give us the 10,000 dollars. You bring the furniture back and we will give you back the 10,000, well that is exactly what they did do. And uh, and that’s how it worked out for us. ‘You wanna bring in 10,000 dollars?’ No why would I want to do that? What do I want to do, just take it and bring it back when you are done with it.”

ABM: Why do you think they were willing to work with you in a way that they weren’t willing to work with Michigan? Did you have a relationship outside with them, aside from just borrowing...

GB: Well, I am a collector of antiques...as you can see from the junk around here [gestures to modern furniture in the hospice residence]...but uh, I had purchased things from them for years I guess, I don’t know how many years but a lot of years...

LB: Well, you told it to me this way. Uh, that the first time you borrowed something from them, you sent it back repaired, you repaired it. Not the clock, but you tightened up a chair or something...

ABM: Oh, so you sent it back better than how you had gotten it

LB: ...Better than you got it...
GB: If you say so, I don’t remember...

LB: Okay...you also were a very good customer...

GB: I used to be, I ain’t no more.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Yeah...

LB: Yeah...you don’t think that, I uh...Mourning Become Electric, going back to that...uh so, sales weren’t good. But how did you feel about it as an artistic thing?

GB: Well, to be honest...there are only five characters. Four of them were very, very good. The fifth one was adequate and the fifth one was adequate. That is how I felt about the production. I thought 80% of it was very, very worth it...well first of all I think the darn thing is worth doing. I think it is very important to do it if we can...but uh, the way the economic situation is right now, there is no way you are going to sell that.

LB: How did you feel that first night...on opening night...

GB: Tired.

LB: Yeah, but weren’t you concerned because there was something that happens in the first play, that comes back around in the last play, and you were wondering if they would be paying attention...did they?

GB: I will never, no matter how long I live, which wont be long, forget that. There is something that happens in the very, very first play, quite early in the first play, and it is something as simple as that [touches hand to head gently] believe it or not and it...is anybody going to catch that? Of course not, good god man, they aren’t going to be watching that closely! 4.5-5 hours later sitting there and...uhhhh [gasps]

LB: He heard the gasp...

ABM: Really...

GB: They listened. We got people who listened. I didn’t know we had anybody who ever listened. Yep. It was uh, uh fascinating moment for me, I will never forget it...and I wonder, I have always wondered and I have never asked this if Terry Heck ever figured it out, because she is the one who did the bit...

ABM: That’s right, she was the lead. Right? She played Livinia? Did I get that right?
LB: Mmhmm...

GB: You did.

ABM: I did my homework...

GB: Good lady, good lady. Anyway, yes she did and uh, she got the response I don’t know if she ever recognized that she got the response...and I’ll never ask her...but I sure did, I thought oh boy we have an audience that actually listens to the play. I didn't know that actually happened anymore.

ABM: Can you remember where you were in the theatre when that happened?

GB: What's that?

ABM: Were you standing in the house when that happened?

GB: Yeah.

ABM: Did you always watch from the back of the house on opening night?

GB: I watched every play that was done in that darn theatre from the left stollway, leaning against the wall.

ABM: That was a long time to stand, that night at least.

GB: It was a long time to stand but I saw some nice plays, but I also saw some crummy ones. But that is besides the point. I did watch every play from that back stollway. Why? I don’t know. Did I do that at Wisconsin? Yes. Why did I do that? I don't know.

ABM: Same spot?

GB: Because I know who did...

LB: Mr. Burke?

GB: No. You know better than that...Mrs. Ms.

LB: I don’t know...Be concrete

GB: Doesn’t matter it’s not important

ABM: So, um, I want to go a little bit before your time in Madison...
GB: Oh, there is no time before me in Madison... go ahead...

ABM: That's not true... I am really curious to find out why you went into the theatre, and what it was that sort of drew you to the dramatic arts or a life in the theatre.

GB: Well there are some things about the building of Quirk that I want to talk to you about, but not necessarily today... but I do want to talk to you about them because I think they ought to be recorded... anyway that's beside the point. The point at the moment is what? What are we digging at here?

ABM: How you got into theatre...

GB: How I got back into the theatre?

ABM: Not back into the theatre...

GB: No, how I got in to it in the first place? Uh, I was a student in Wisconsin. [University of Wisconsin Madison] I was taking a class in speech and there was a woman who, an instructor, graduate instructor, and she was in the hopes of being and did turn out to be a very fine actress. And uh, she said to me one day 'you are doing very well in this class.' ‘thank you, very much’ I said... ‘I am enjoying it.’ She said, ‘You know what you ought to do is take a walk down to Union theatre, just right now the hill here and uh, you know we are in Bascom, you can walk down the hill, I'll walk down with you and introduce you to a couple of people, you might enjoy going down there and working... and I went down there and looked, looked around and thought this is going to work out, none of this is going to stand up, it's just all going to fall over, why are they building all of this for? Well why don't you just wait and see.' So I did and I kept going back, going back, and going back and I thought if I weren't dying I would be doing it right now.

ABM: Were you naturally handy?

GB: No.

ABM: No. You learned on the job?

GB: No. I had to learn everything from scratch. I didn't know nothin' I was about to say I didn't know poop but I knew that. I didn't know anything! I had to start absolutely from nowhere. And I did, and I felt it very fun. And I recommend it to everybody.

LB: He did some performing in high school...

GB: I can't hear you...
ABM: You performed in high school Laura said...

GB: I what...

ABM: You performed in high school?

GB: Oh sure.

ABM: What do you mean, oh sure. Not everybody performs in high school...

GB: I thought everybody performed in high school...

ABM: Not everyone is lucky enough to perform in high school...

GB: Well I did. I did as a freshman...

ABM: Were you the leading man?

GB: No.

ABM: No? What did you play, do you remember?

GB: Sure I do. The happy journey...the old man.

LB: to Camden...the old man? That is a Wilder one act. Also, Grandpa in You Can’t Take it With You?

GB: I played grandpa in you can’t take it with you. I did.

ABM: You got type cast...old man, grandpa...

GB: That's not all. I was broken legs guy...uh, comes to save the man who came to dinner...

LB: Yeah,

GB: Who breaks his legs and stays forever. I played that one too...that was in high school. So I played three major roles in high school which never could have happened, but it did. Thank heavens it did. I enjoyed every one of them.

LB: How did you earn extra money in high school and college?

GB: How did I earn extra money? Well, my parents were, you know, we would be considered poor. Except we didn't consider ourselves poor because everyone was
poor. Nobody had any money, it was the recession, boom, nobody had any money. So we all had the same, we had this much money and that much money and everyone is the same, Jones, Smith, they are all about the same, it doesn’t matter, because that is the way that it was and it didn't matter that everyone was poor. What I could have financially was, if I was lucky was one movie a week, and one nickel bag of popcorn, if I was lucky. If I wasn’t lucky, I didn't get either one.

LB: But when you were older you started doing magic, right?

GB: Well, I found if I stood outside of the popcorn machine and all of a sudden it evaporated, people would pay a nickel or a dime to see it evaporate...and I started doing little bitty things out there and pretty soon I started to do a little bit bigger things. But I never got to do the really big stuff, because I never wanted to...that is a lie, I did want to do it! I wanted to do the woman in the box...

ABM: That’s right, we talked about his favorite magic trick the last time...

LB: SO you know about Berdini the magnificent...

ABM: I didn’t know that that was your stage name, no, Berdini the Magnificent, but we did talk about the woman in the box. How it was the best trick, not magic, trick. Right? But that actually goes to one of the uh, things I wanted to ask you. Did you know Marcello Truzzi?

GB: Oh sure, Of course I did.

ABM: When you were on campus...

GB: Of course I did, we were good friends.

ABM: Did you exchange a love of circus?

GB: Absolutely. But, did you know him?

ABM: Well, I worked on his papers and I have spoken to his wife...last summer, or summer before last...when we finished those

GB: His was billed by Ringling as the world’s greatest juggler. But he said, ‘I am not, I am the second world’s greatest juggler...this is the world’s greatest juggler...’

ABM: Meaning you?

GB: No, no, I am not the world’s greatest juggler, I couldn’t juggle bean. No, he was a Russian but I do not know his name. But it is probably in his records...
ABM: probably somewhere...he kept...

GB: Yeah, Marcello and I talked a lot about the circus. He thought the circus was dead when the railroad circus was gone, he thought that was the end there was no more truck circus, no, no, no, there would be no more circus. Well, he is almost right, said but true...but he was a great guy to sit down and drink coffee with and maybe even a half of glass, well a quarter glass, of beer, and just plain talk...because he knew so, so many people in the whole circus world that I had never even heard of. I mean I have free tickets to practically every circus there was...so what I didn't use them, why would I, I could walk into anywhere I wanted to. All I had to do was flip the tickets...

ABM: Yeah, he had quite a love of the circus and of magic.

GB: That is true and I think that is...they are both similar. I mean, if you come right down to it....you look at a farmers field and then you come back ten hours later and there is a circus in it. That's magic, it can't happen, but it does happen. And if you get there at 5 o'clock in the morning you smell baking bread! Oh, boy, baking bread at five in the morning, oh boy! You can't beat it...

ABM: How did you are Marcello meet? Because you weren't in the same department.

GB: That's a great question and I am not really sure that I know the answer...how did we meet? I think it must have been that we worked in the same department otherwise I don't think that we would have meet...

ABM: I thought he was in psychology...did you teach in the psychology department? Did you serve on a committee together?

GB: Maybe? I...this...you got one there I can't answer.

ABM: Well then I stumped you, we will move on to my next one. Do you remember Marion Stowe?

GB: No one will ever forget Marion Stowe.

ABM: Do you have any good stories about here?

GB: I am sure that I do...I was a pallbearer, I was one of her pallbearers. Yeah. The one thing that pops immediately to mind is the fact that Marion Stowe insisted that when you drag, drew on your eyebrow, it must never be perfect, it must always, it's got to be crooked somehow.

ABM: Why is that?
GB: Because that is the way that it is...period. That is Marion Stowe and that's the way it is. Do you remember Marion Stowe? **Time Stamp 25:50**

ABM: Well we have some of her scrapbooks that she kept...because she taught some of the earliest classes in Dramatic Arts, um, when it was still in the main building, which is where Pierce is now...and so I have never heard any stories about here. And I saw that you were in the department at the same time, and I would have hated myself for not asking...

GB: Well, she did have that idea about the eyebrow, I do remember that distinctly...what else do I remember about her...I do remember I was her pall bearer...I do remember that she was the Church of England...

ABM: Did you ever have an opportunity to talk to her about the changes that were taking place in the department?

GB: Yes, Yes I did. When we hired, who did we hire next...? Hmm..

LB: What decade are you in right now?

ABM: Marion Stowe was there from the, oh man, the very early nineteen hundreds through the late 1950s, 1960s. I think she was there at least the first four or five years that you were on faculty...

GB: Well I know she came to ask me, about the person she wanted to hire to replace her and I thought about it for at least five seconds and said ‘for heavens sakes hire her, you won't do any better’ and she did and that was...[gesturing to LB]

ABM: That was that....

GB: Of course you know...but I can't articulate it...

LB: George...I was not born in the 50s.

GB: But it is prenatal birth...

[all laugh]

LB: I know you think I am smart but...

GB: But you should know about that...good heavens.

LB: Yeah, I am really smart...
ABM: It was a pretty big department by then... By the late 50s, because by then it was Speech and Dramatic Arts. Because by then you would have been split from the English department and would have been Speech and Dramatic arts by the late 50s.

GB: We were not a big department...

ABM: Well...

GB: That was one of the things we were most afraid of... that we were going to get swallowed up... excuse me for a moment...

[paused 28:44-29:00]

ABM: So you were saying that you were going to get swallowed up. Do you mean the Drama portion was going to get swallowed up? Or...

GB: No... what we were afraid of. The English Department was big. The History department was big, as you know. Uh... I am sure there were other departments that were big too... but on the other hand, we were very small and our concern was that these larger ones would simply out vote us with everything. And they probably would, and why not, they had the people, we didn’t.

LB: So, when it became Speech and Theatre... did you feel safer?

GB: Speech and Theatre?

ABM: It was Speech and Dramatic Arts. So there was a split, it used to be English and Speech, and then it was split into Speech and Dramatic Arts separate from English. Did you feel safer when there was that split?

GB: No.

ABM: No.

GB: No. We never thought that we were going to amount to much. Well...

ABM: Well...

GB: Go ahead...

ABM: No you go...

GB: Well, I was going to take it into a totally different direction.
ABM: Take it there, I was too. I’m curious to see which direction you were going to go.

GB: I was going to talk about the direction in which the Sponberg was built.

ABM: Oh good, that is on my list.

GB: Is that okay?

ABM: Yeah, and maybe you could tell me about the things that you wanted to tell me about Quirk too.

GB: Well...

ABM: Start where you wish.

GB: We should start with Quirk first because it is the most important probably. What do you want to know, just ask a general questions and I will blow out all kinds of lies.

ABM: Well the question that I had on my list was the impetus to build Sponberg, really not that much later than Quirk had been built.

GB: Oh lordy if I get into that I could lose my head, but that might be kind of fun....I will do it [laughs]. The building of Sponberg...is anybody listening...was a terrible mistake.

ABM: Why do you say that?

GB: From beginning to end...number one, it should never have been built. Number two, it was badly designed. Number three, is was badly built, number four it was very expensive, number five it was a mess from the beginning, number six it is always going to be a mess. Other than that it is fine, but that’s the truth. It is a very, very, bad theatre and it never should have been built. We did not need a second theatre, in fact we needed no second theatre...in fact what we needed was a scene shop so that we didn’t have to build the set in the middle of the stage...but with no scene shop we had to build everything right on stage...

LB: which is why you supported it...

GB: Pardon?

LB: By getting the Sponberg though, you also got the new scene shop.
GB: Now, that’s the game I played. The other people played the other game, but I played that one. I said well, okay, ugh, I suppose…I suppose a theatre could be built, but it would have to be built after the new scene shop because we wouldn’t be able to do two plays, no it couldn’t be done, oh well maybe you are right…okay we will build the scene shop first…and they did.

ABM: So who is the driving force behind building Sponberg?
GB: What’s that?

ABM: I mean who came into campus with their bag full of money and said you will build another theatre?

GB: Good question…I haven’t the faintest idea who did that. If anybody did. But somehow the money appear, and that I don’t understand either because we didn’t have any money, we never had any money.

LB: Who in the department was for it?

GB: What? In the department?

ABM: Who was pro new theatre in the department?

GB: Well of course Ken Stevens was, obviously because he wanted to be department head and eventually was. Uh…who else would have been for it.

ABM: Was [John] Sattler still department head at the time, or had he stepped back to...

LB: Sattler was gone by then. Beagan wanted it [Dennis Beagan]

GB: Yeah, oh yes…well you know everyone wanted a new theatre except me. I wanted a new scene shop. Everybody else wanted a new theatre. Oh great! A New Theatre! Yeah, sure, great, let’s build one! Good idea huh?

ABM: Did you get to sit at the table when designing it? Did you get to take part in another long expensive trip around?

GB: I will now tell you exactly what happened and then I will tell you exactly two things that I shouldn’t tell you…but I will tell you one of them anyway. One, about, I would guess, it is a guess, nine o’clock in the morning, Ken Stevens came into my…my what, I guess it was my office and said that ‘we are going to get a new theatre’ I said ‘we are….?’ He said ‘Yeah! You know that open space there, for the outdoor theatre?’ ‘yeah I know it’…‘well we are going to close that and make a theatre out of that.’ ‘We are?’ ‘Yeah’ ‘Oh, well that’s a thought.’ ‘Would you design something for us, for that space there?’ ‘Sure I suppose I could do that…when does it have to be done?’
...‘How about an hour, can you do it in an hour?’ ‘I am not sure I can do it quite in an hour, how about an hour and a half?’ ‘Go ahead, do it, just go ahead and jot it down, it doesn't mean anything. It is just a start in the right direction. I’ll give it to the architect...’ So that is exactly what I did. I sat down for an hour and I sketched out, to scale...the space and that is what I did. And then I said ‘okay, here it is, give it to the architect...’ and he said ‘okay I’ll do that.’ And he did give it to the architect. And then he came back and showed me what he had done...he hadn't done a damn thing!

ABM: It was exactly your drawing?

GB: It was exactly what I had drawn. That's all it was. He never designed anything.

ABM: I am sure he submitted a really nice bill...

GB: I was not pleased. I realized that we were not dealing with a terribly efficient architect. And I was even more displeased when I found the outside of the theater on the inside of the theatre. Time stamp 37:08

ABM: The outside of the theatre on the inside of the theatre...

GB: Well, the uh, the open space there was inclined up, and it was all sand and we got a terrible, terrible rain storm...and all of the sand, and I mean tons of it came into the theatre, came right into the back wall of the theatre. The whole works came down.

LB: Was that during construction?

GB: Sure.

ABM: Oh my goodness.

LB: I remember that now.

GB: It was during a mess that’s what it was. We waded through that stuff for weeks! Sure. That was not a lot of fun, but we realized at that point that we had an architect that didn’t know beans from bologna. And uh, and there was the other side, and I should get into this too but I don’t think I...

ABM: Go for it, what do you got to lose?

GB: What’s that...

ABM: What have you got to lose, go for it.
GB: Okay, I will. The problem was, and it was a problem that had nothing to do with me but with other people...was that the architect was black and that there were people who wanted a black architect and people who didn’t want a black architect...so where do you go? Get a great one...I don’t know. Anyway, we got a black architect and he wasn’t any good. But he wasn’t any good because he was black, he wasn’t any good because he wasn’t any good! Period.

ABM: So you mentioned that there was an outdoor theatre? I don’t think that I have ever heard any mention of an outdoor theatre.

GB: Laura have you ever heard of one?

LB: I have seen slides of productions in there. Um, wasn’t there a story about the caduceus going flying?

GB: What’s that?

LB: Didn’t [Jim] Gussef have a production that had a caduceus up on the ceiling, or up on the roof of Quirk?

GB: Yes.

LB: Did that go flying somewhere?

GB: Yeah, across the street into the dormitory.

LB: How did that happen...I don't remember how that happened.

GB: Pulled the string. It had its own string on it. It was supposed to just go, plump, but it went across the street...and it ended up in the dormitory...

LB: that was a Greek play? Or was it Aristophanes?

GB: I haven't any idea. I don’t remember what the play way, I just remember the fun of the thing.

LB: Yeah....

ABM: So was the outdoor theatre part of your original design of Quirk was to have an outdoor theatre space or was it sort of happenstance?

GB: You ask difficult questions. I would rather have much easy ones.

ABM: I will give you a softball the next time...
GB: I don’t know the answer to that. I do know that I was never pleased with the design of the outside of all of Quirk theatre.

LB: Why?

GB: Why? It could not have a good ingress and egress, besides you couldn’t get in you couldn’t get out.

LB: So the amphitheater was in the U of the old lobby of Quirk and then the hallway by the theatre office and the classroom 101 I think it is there...and that created a U shaped thing on the outside and there was a hill...and I don’t know if this was true...Was it something that Jim Gussef invented?

GB: Was what?

LB: The outdoor theatre. Was it Jim Gussef’s idea?

GB: Okay, you got a good question there. Jim Gussef had a lot of experience at Northwestern doing outdoor theatre. He did outdoor theatre every summer there and he wanted to do the same thing at Eastern. And the whole idea at Northwestern is that you set the set up and if it rained you brought the set indoor and did the show indoors...which you could do. But that of course was expensive, so we couldn’t do it that way. What we had to do is if it rained, we had to some how cancel or do something strange about running the thing and that never worked out well. But that’s what he wanted to do. And when it worked, it worked very, very well except that somebody stole all the seats...

LB: So my best guess, is that it was the architecture and landscape combined that created that outdoor theatre space.

ABM: So was that, the Portable Players? [See Echo February 1976]

GB: That’s got nothing to do with the Portable Players. The Portable Players simply were available to go to classrooms and do bits from plays that they were going to do in Quirk.

ABM: Oh, okay.

GB: And that was an excellent, excellent idea but they ran out of money. It was, they got financial, they got money from the government for that project and...it worked very, very well for the instructors and the students and everybody except for the fact that we didn’t have enough money to do it...

ABM: For very long...
GB: What’s that...

ABM: You didn’t have enough money to do it for very long? Or do you remember...

GB: It went for a couple of years and it gave scholarships to everyone of the kids who performed, which was a good deal for them too.

ABM: Yeah. Was that about the same time that they were doing dinner theatre? In McKenny...or do you not want to have anything to do with the dinner theatre in McKenny?

Time Stamp 44:30

GB: I don’t think it had much to do with the dinner theatre, no. Dinner theatre was something, quite, quite different I thought and you are right I wasn’t interested in it. I was an educator...ho, ho, ho.

ABM: What about the lab theatre.

GB: What about it.

ABM: I am just curious. Your involvement, your interest, disinterest.

GB: I could tell you a lot about the lab theatre, some of which I should not tell you about the lab theatre, and probably won’t. But some of which I will. And I will tell you one thing right now, the ventilation in it was terrible. Absolutely terrible. [laughs] I am afraid I did a bad thing. I went to the President and I said ‘look, if somebody fart in there at the beginning of the show, it is going to be there at the end of the show.’ ‘Ok, we’ll get some ventilation in...’

ABM: Did it help?

GB: That is a true, I did that. But it was true to! It was a stinkin’ place [laughs]

ABM: So the lab theatre was mostly for students to showcase...did I get that right? You grimaced, so I am guessing not.

GB: Oh lordy...we’re going to get into something her that is going to et very, very, very, very complicated....and I don’t know that we want to do it today, but we could. The lab theatre, as it now stands, is never the lab theatre that was supposed to be there, never!

ABM: So what was supposed to be there?
GB: What was supposed to be there was the lab theatre that you see, and then a second shelf above that running all the way back into the hall where the offices are now. Running all the way back there, up about ten, feet, high. Now if you go into the lab theatre, and be sure the door is open, take a look at the west wall and you will see that the bricks do not bind together, they end. All you have to do is hit that with a sledge hammer and you would have a two story theatre...now that is what we intended to do...

ABM: Why didn’t they do that?

GB: Why didn’t we do that?

ABM: Not enough money?

GB: Why didn’t we do it? There was no need to do it, because we had enough room down below for anyone who wanted to go. There was no need to do it, maybe there should have been, but there wasn’t...Oh thank you so kind [directed at Laura who just gave him coffee]...Now the whole idea was not that students only could produce in there, anybody could produce in there and Jim Gussef did some very, very good thing in there as did Bob McElay, both of them, very good things. And they were very very well attended and very exciting things and uh, Bob McElay especially got very creative in there and did a lot of good stuff and we enjoyed it a lot but it didn’t work out well in the log run.

ABM: Bob McElay, that's, his first name is actually Mitchell, correct?

GB: Yes

ABM: I just wanted to confirm that, I noticed too in the course catalog that you are listed as George P. Bird, P. George Bird, George Bird...so just for the record it is P. George Bird?

GB: P. George..I, I couldn't care less.

ABM: Why didn’t...P is for Paul right?

GB: Why not? We'll that’s easy because my mom said one Paul is this house is enough, I don’t want another one.

LB: His dad’s name was Paul

ABM: Oh, your dad’s name, so you are a junior?

GB: Yeah...
ABM: That makes sense...

LB: The middle names are not the same.

ABM: Oh, your middle names are not the same, just the first names?

GB: Yeah, that’s right...

ABM: And you have a son Paul? Is he George too?

GB: I do

LB: He is Ramsey, for his mother’s maiden name.

ABM: Okay. So if you are willing, I would like to talk more about some of the Department Heads that you worked under, if you are willing.

GB: I don’t mind, but I would like to do one thing first, because I think it is important.

ABM: Have a cookie?

GB: That’s not important...uh,

LB: You want to talk about Quirk?

GB: We were struggling with Jim Green...we’ve been through Jim Green before with his snowplow and the glass...what?

LB: Go on...

GB: Oh, okay. You remember he was snow plowing the glass out of the...

ABM: Yes, after you came out of rehearsal, you and 15 students.

GB: That was, that was the day after the President had decided the production would not be cancelled and would be done. And so Jim Green got out the snowplow and we got the glass out of the street anyway, some of it, but that is beside the point. The point is, we were having very serious arguments with Jim Green about money, what else. No there is not money for that, no there is not money for that, no there is not money for that no we can not afford that, no we are not going to be able to do that, no we aren’t going to be able to do that...so Bill Work and I got together and said, what are we going to do about this? We certainly weren’t going to build a theatre without a theatre consultant. No, we have to go hire one...who could we hire? Who do we know that we could hire that’s really good? Oh, what about the guy
that did the theatre at Ohio State and just did two theatres in Alaska what about him? Oh you mean Fred Burke? Yeah, you know Fred, yeah, yeah, I know Fred, I know Fred. We’re both friends with Fred so let’s call Fred and see if he would like to be a consultant for us. So we called up Fred to see if he would want to be a consultant and he said sure. I said how much you want to charge? He said, $50 a day. I said $50 dollars a day, holy man up a tree Fred are you Crazy? He said, yeah, me crazy you crazy...so okay we hired him for $50 dollars a day. The only deal was ‘You call me before you have any meetings with any of these administrators and you tell me what questions to ask so that I can ask all the right questions and get the right answers...okay?’ ‘Okay, for $50 dollars?’ ‘Yeah for $50 dollars.’ ‘Okay, we’ll do it.’ So, we get into one of the last meetings, and this is a biggie one and we say okay let’s go at this where are we financial wise and Jim Green says we cannot spend any one more penny, not one penny more, this is it the absolute ned no more, no more.’ ‘Okay, we understand we can’t spend any more. Okay.’ Fred got up, and he walked over to Jim and he says ‘are you having running water in this building?’ ‘Of course we are having running water in this building!” He says oh, okay then you are having an elevated floor stage,’ He sat back down and that was the end of the discussion of that and that’s how we got it.

LB: Did you talk about taking measurements from the Union theatre [in Madison]?

ABM: No, we didn’t talk about the influence of the Union theatre on the design of Quirk.

GB: I suppose so, I don’t remember that, but it is probably true.

LB: I remember you telling me that George...

GB: Well then, it probably is true.

ABM: George told me about the long, and expensive trip they took to see a lot of bad theatres.

GB: Yeah, we did. That was Bill Works idea to go around the country and look at all the theatres and get ideas. And I would say you don’t need any ideas, go look at Quirk, it’s a great theatre.

LB: You mean the Union theatre

GB: What’s that?
LB: Quirk didn’t exist.

ABM: You mean the Union theatre.

GB: The Union theatre. Well the Union theatre is a very fine theatre

LB: The elevated floor stage is influenced by that and the calipers on the side is influenced by that...you will notice those are similar if you look at the ground plans.

GB: I don’t hear any of that but that’s okay...

LB: The side caliper stages by the proscenium, that’s out of the Union theatre, that idea...and definitely the elevator floor stage.

GB: Okay, well, Fred said, you take the elevator away from my theatre and I can’t work in it. Because storage was all in the sub basement, and I mean sub...deep

ABM: So one of the things that I noticed when looking through who was in the department at various times was and the evolution of departments. It seemed that you would have department heads who were there for long periods of time, longish tenures, over five years, and that they would step back into the faculty, and there would be a vacancy for a year and that somebody would come up from the faculty and serve as department head for a couple of years and then they would step back to the faculty and then you would have a vacancy and somebody else would step up. Do you think that is just because it is a thankless job?

GB: I don’t know. We had, and this was a terrible mistake. We had a course called integrated arts.

ABM: Okay.

GB: Have you come across that?

ABM: I have seen industrial arts, but I have never seen the course listing for integrated arts.

GB: We had a course for integrated arts. We had a section on painting, a section on acting, a section on writing, a section on this, a section on that and what would happen was a faculty member, who was a specialist in these areas would take that section.

ABM: Was it a yearlong offering?
GB: Yeah. That didn’t work at all because you didn’t want a specialist there. You wanted a generalist who could do it and we didn’t have any.

LB: What does that have to do with Department Chairs?

GB: What does that have to do with Department Chairs? It has a lot to do with department chairs.

LB: Can you connect it for us?

GB: I don’t know if I can or not…Some of the Department Chairs that we went through in those days were very much in favor of this, some were very much opposed to it…those who were opposed were right of course because they agreed with me, and those that were opposed were all wrong.

ABM: How much of it do you think had to do with, I mean some of the department heads that you had were not Theatre faculty...

GB: Oh, of course it did! Of course it did.

ABM: Do you think it had everything to do with it? OR just a small portion...

GB: It had quite a bit to do with it…I think it had quite a bit to do with it. Again, I can’t swear to that but...

LB: Well...

ABM: Some of it is personality too right?

GB: Indeed, yes.

LB: Talk about Donald Drummond, Don Drummond.

GB: Why should I talk about Don Drummond?

LB: Because you tell good stories about him.

GB: What should I tell about Donald Drummond.

LB: That he got dressed up in his wife’s purple dress...

GB: You are talking about the Dean...

LB: Oh, Dean Drummond. He wasn’t the Department Head he was the Dean...
ABM: The Dean of CAS [College of Arts and Science]

GB: He was the Dean of the College

LB: And before that gets on the official record that was for a vaudeville show...[laughs]

GB: That was only in the...the silly thing that Ken did.

LB: So he was never department chair...

GB: No, no

ABM: No, but like, um, when I was reading articles on Sattler [Department Head of English and Speech] they referred to him as ‘Papa John’ right?

LB: Oh, that’s what I got that...

ABM: They didn’t say where that came from...they just said...

GB: He was just about the best Department Head you could ever have.

LB: I was mixing Drummond and Sattler up

ABM: mmmhhmm

GB: He would defend everybody and attack every student. No, he would defend all his faculty until he got them alone and then, whoa. No, he was a very, very good department head.

ABM: Do you think that was because, what made him a good department head?

GB: I just told you. He would defend any faculty member against any student until the student was gone and then he would give them holy hell...

ABM: Right. Well there is always on faculty two pressures, right? There is the one that comes up from the students and defending you from the students is only half the game and defending you from upper administration is a whole different ball game...so did he play that game too?

GB: That’s true...but he was very good at doing both. You know, he was a very, very kind person.

LB: He gave you a lot of good advice, right?
GB: What’s that?

LB: You told me he gave you some good advice.

GB: Oh yeah. He told me not to bother to get the PhD. He said you don’t need it for anything?

ABM: Is that something you had wanted to do? Go back and get your PhD?

GB: Oh yeah

**Time stamp 1:01:27**

GB: Oh sure, that was going to happen, but it never did happen and it didn’t happen primarily because he told me not to do it. He told me not to get divorced, but I did that anyway. So yeah, I didn’t take all his advice. ‘He said, no you are making a big mistake, sit down here and talk to me now…’

LB: What was he like as a mentor? To you?

GB: What’s that?

LB: What was he like as a mentor to you, Sattler? Was he a mentor to you?

GB: I suppose, I suppose...he was department head when I came here, and Bill Work introduced me to him and then Bill Work went away and that was the end of that and John and I got along fine.

ABM: What did you think of his replacement?

GB: Who’s what, who is who?

ABM: John Murphy I think came in after Sattler...Did I get that right.

LB: Tom

ABM: Tom Murphy

LB: Murray, Murray

ABM: Tom Murray, thank you

GB: I thought he was a little weak toed and I didn’t think he was going to wade in, he would tip toe in and I was right. Sad but true.
LB: He got ousted no confidence vote right?

GB: You want to hear that story, that is a terrible story.

ABM: I do.

GB: Well Tom had made some enemies in the department. Simply because he refused to do what they told him to do. I don’t know that I will mention who the people were [gestures to Laura] you probably could, I don’t think you should. Anyway...he said ‘I tell you what I am going to do, ladies and gentlemen at this meeting we are going to talk about this. I am going to put up a no confidence vote and if you vote no confidence I will quit, and if you vote confidence I will stay, fair enough?’ ‘fair enough, we will do it.’ So the vote was proposed, and what did I do? I walked across the street, which was all it was, over to the Deans office and there I found the Dean, sitting in his chair, you’re not going to believe this, but it was on a platform, he has a platform...

ABM: a raised platform for his chair?

GB: A raised platform with an American flag behind it sitting behind him, he looked like a god damn fool if you pardon my saying so. There he sat and he said look, ‘I don’t’ agree with this vote.’ I think Tom is a very good department head and I think he should be retained’ and I said ‘I think so too’ but he said ‘I can’t do it’ ‘why not?’ ‘He set up the rules and there they are I’m afraid he is gone, good bye, end of discussion.’

LB: And he moved back down into the faculty.

ABM: right

GB: That was it, before he left

ABM: What do you...

GB: I think it was a big mistake, I think he could have done quite well there, but it didn’t work that way.

ABM: What do you think led to the vote of no confidence?

GB: Why do I what?

ABM: Why do you think there was a vote for no confidence?

GB: They didn’t like him, period!
LB: Why didn't they like him?

GB: Cause he wasn't John Sattler, that's why, and what are you going to do about that? You can't do a heck of a lot about that. What are you going to do, you do what you do.

ABM: Yeah, you do what you do. What were your thoughts when the faculty decided to unionize.

GB: What were my thoughts. Well once again, I find myself with my mentor, he hated it. Lock step, left, right, left, right, dollar, dollar ten cents, ten cents, ten cents, he hated it.

ABM: But what about you?

GB: I could not see any reason for that faculty to do that. I could not see a reason to do that. Now there may have been lots of reasons I didn't know anything about, why not, but I didn't know any.

ABM: And the longer the union stayed on campus, I mean cause you were there for the later years of your tenure...

GB: Well I didn't like the idea of it. Those of us who were not union members, we didn't have to become, but we had to pay a fee. That did not go down well, anything but. But nevertheless I guess we don't have to do that anymore....

LB: and they laid him off during spring break to get the fee out of him. So he wouldn’t pay the union dues...

ABM: and they laid you off?

GB: Oh yeah...sure

LB: For exactly the amount of time as the union dues...down to a partial day.

ABM: that is crazy...

GB: So you just didn’t get paid that is all.

ABM: right.

**Time stamp 1:08:00**

GB: Did I like that, no I didn’t like that, did it bother me [shrugs]
ABM: Your funds were diverted...

GB: I wasn’t making any money at that point...

LB: You were spending spring break building the next set...

GB: That is true

LB: Not getting paid

ABM: Did you know the other non-organized faculty? Did you guys have a coffee hour, cause you couldn’t have been alone.

GB: Oh sure, oh sure we talked to each other. In particular the trumpet teacher over in the music department who was a great, great player and a nice guy...oh how he hated that union. But uh, he is the only one that I really remember being terribly opposed to the union. Just hated it! Maybe it was because he was AFoFM

ABM: One of the only other prompts that I have on my list, and then anything else that you want to share today, um, as I was having a conversation with our current University photographer Randy Masharka, he was at the library taking our photographs yesterday and he is an alum of the university and one of the things in passing because I asked him if he knew the new incoming President and what he thought about him and he said, ‘he can’t be any worse than Sheldon and what Sheldon did to this poor University and then left.’ So I was like, I should ask George what he thinks about Sheldon, because I asked you all about Sponberg and Elliot, but Sheldon and Porter are really the only two president’s who had that kind of length of tenure.

GB: I was not a fan...let’s just leave it at that. No, I wasn’t a fan, he called me up to his office one day...’what can I do for you?’ ‘why do you want to do anything for me for?’ ‘Well you are a full professor, can I do anything for you?’ ‘I said ‘sure’ ‘He said what?’ ‘I said, give me a place to park,’ he says ‘oh, okay’ took out a piece of paper and wrote down ‘park’ and handed it back to me and said take this to the guy in front of my door he’ll let you in...

LB: Well, and he got a special permit to park in the loading dock of Quirk. And I think Sheldon called him into his office because he was the longest serving professor at that point, so that was the oh, you are the longest serving professor what can I do for you and George asked for a parking pass. And that made [Dennis] Beagan so mad that you go the special parking pass. He was angry...

GB: Who was?

LB: Dennis Began
GB: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, he was really mad about that.

[all laugh]

GB: It was good for him. Well anyway... I got one more thing I want to get into this today and I think it ought to get in here because it is very, very important. How in the world did we ever, ever, ever get the theatre built. How could it possibly have happened? Well, I will tell you how it happened. It is a very simple question and a very complicated answer. In the old Quirk building...

LB: Do you mean Roosevelt?

GB: There is a bathroom is the far back corner. I will bet it is still there. Do you know?

ABM: I don't know.

GB: Well anyway, it was there. We used to paint with a glue that was animal glue and it smelled badly after a few days and so we put her in this bathroom and we locked the door so that nobody could get in there and get at it. Get at the stuff and stink up the joint, because it really did smell awful. Anyway, there it was, the door was locked always locked, you never unlocked the door. Right, right, okay, okay, the door is always locked. And there it sits, solemn puss. Anyway we are playing Hedda Gobbler, of all plays and Hedda is about to shoot herself just about to go Boom, Boom and the final line, 'good heavens people don’t do such things’ and the play is over and the audience, well I was quite surprised, they were quite amused, up high the President was there and he was pretty excited and I thought ‘wonderful that’s great’ and just at that moment when she is about to shoot herself the door opened and Boom!

LB: The pot exploded? What Boomed? Finish the Story...

ABM: What exploded, what made the noise?

GB: The bathroom in the back of the theatre all of a sudden the door opened. And when the door opened what happened to the gas, it exploded, Bang! And what did the audience do? Shows over bang! Bang! No good. It killed the show, absolutely murdered it and the next day I got a note from the president saying there will be a new theatre built and you know the really strange part about this whole thing...no body ever knows who opened that door, there is no idea who opened the door, not the faintest idea.

ABM: Was that play in Roosevelt, or Pease?
GB: It was in Roosevelt...

ABM: I was going to say, if that was in Pease I hear there is a ghost that lives there?

GB: Is there, you will find it there...

LB: I heard the story differently...you told me that you, oh, that ‘somebody’ left the glue pot on and...

GB: That’s a different story, a different story. I can tell you that story. This is not a glue pot story...

LB: Oh, okay...

ABM: What’s the glue pot story.

LB: Well wait, wait a minute. This, so what smelled so bad?

GB: The paint!

LB: Oh, the paint...

GB: Cause the paint had the glue in it

LB: Oh, it had the glue in it. Tell her the glue pot story.

**Time stamp 1:16:01**

GB: Oh well, the glue pot story isn’t so wonderful except it is typical Eastern. They got no money for nothin’ of course and the uh, glue pot eventually burned out. Now what it is, is a glue pot that will heat the glue to whatever degree you set it at and then it turns off, but uh, it just turns off period. Nothing will ever leak...but if you don’t turn it off it will burn, and burn, and burn. And uh, the comptroller had his office right below the president’s and I went down to him and said ‘we need to get a new glue pot, this is burned out.’ He said ‘no you don’t, you just take two glue pots and you fill the outside one with water and the inside one with glue and you put them in there and let them go...

LB: A double boiler.

GB: ‘Okay, we’ll do that. But if it evaporates, we are just going to burn up the glue and it is going to stink something terrible.’ ‘Naw, it will be alright, don’t worry, its okay.’ So uh, Gary Decker, remember Gary Decker? He and I used to eat lunch at that little place on the corner, I don’t know where the little place is anymore, it ain’t there no more. Anyway, we used to eat lunch every, because it had the greatest,
greatest soup you can imagine. And we ate lunch there, we came out of there and
looked around the corner, and I looked around the corner down below where the
glue pot had been and I said ‘oh Gary look we got a new glue pot.’ He said ‘what do
you mean.’ And I said ‘look, oh yeah we got one, there is a new fire truck there and
an ambulance.’ [all laugh] Is that the story you were thinking of?

LB: Yeah, sort of...

GB: Sort of...well that’s pretty accurate, that is exactly what did happen. And that is
exactly how we got the new glue pot, which we still have. IT wouldn’t surprise me if
it’s still kicking around somewhere.

LB: Naw, as soon as you left they got rid of it. They got rid of all the dry pigment

GB: Oh they did? Well they made a big mistake when they did that. But that is beside
the point too. Well...anymore lies I can tell?

ABM: I think I will save you from today. If you are okay with that...unless you have
other stories that you want to tell.

GB: What’s that?

ABM: Unless you have other stories you want to tell.

GB: I don’t think there are any other stories...

ABM: I think the only thing that I wanted to be sure I asked you about today was
your [1997] 97 award for service to the University.

GB: Yes, what about it?

ABM: Well it says that you served the University but it never says how.

GB: Well, he, he. I will tell you what I said at the reception, which I think was pretty
accurate. That the University students thought I was the janitor and the university
students were quite right. Because that is what I did, cleaned up the mess, day after
day after day. Did I mind that, of course not. It was fun.

ABM: So that was it? Just your service to the building, of Quirk...

GB: Well I could tell you all sorts of stories about the building of Quirk but...there is
no reason to go into a lot of that stuff.
ABM: No I mean that was the only thing you did for the university? There had to have been other reasons that that for them to give you that award. And don’t be modest...

GB: Well, I directed probably 40-50 plays, I designed over 300 sets, I lit over 300 sets, I propped over 300 sets, I worked with impossible directors, I worked with great directors, I worked with all kinds of students. What else do you want me to say, I will tell lies if you want me to.

ABM: Who was your favorite director?

GB: Who, what?

ABM: Who was your favorite director to work with? Director, at Eastern.

GB: At Eastern, my favorite director at Eastern?

ABM: I wont share it around, so no one will get offended if their name isn’t mentioned.

GB: Well, the one that will produce the best would be Jim Gussef.

LB: He could also produce the worst.

GB: What’s that? Oh yeah.

LB: Because he was a risk taker...

GB: Oh yeah,

LB: That is why he did so well, and so badly...

GB: He was a brilliant director when he got on the right track, when he got on the wrong track, not quite so good. On the other hand Parker Zellers if he got on the wrong track never got off it...but if he got the exact right show he would be an excellent director. You know its too hard to do this simply that way, its just too darn hard.

LB: yeah, Parker Zellers was the hardest working laziest man I had ever met.

GB: Probably so. Probably so. He would come in in the evening, about, hmmm, seven o’clock and say ‘I think we are done for the night.’ ‘but you just started.’ ‘Yeah, but we got everything done that we needed to get done, so we are done.’ And he would go home... ‘I am going to take a nap,’ its probably not a bad idea if I have a cookie...
ABM: Is there any play you wish they had done one last night while you were still on faculty? So that you could redesign it, re-light it...

GB: There were dozens of them...

ABM: Top five

GB: I... I do not recall doing a bad design that I would like to re-do, because I think I would make it worse. So I don't think so. You know, I think I have had a great time at Eastern and I think I have enjoyed about 90 percent of it.

ABM: Well we can talk about the other 10 percent the next time we chat...

GB: But there is never anything as exciting for a theatre person, ever, as building a theatre...

ABM: That was a really nice gift they gave you from the beginning.

GB: And very few of us get the chance to do it...

LB: And you gave them a gift back because you designed a heck of a theatre. You designed a great theatre, you and Fred Burke, in spite of the architects.

GB: Fred, was the architect, and he never got credit for it, never got it on the sign, 50 dollars, that is what they paid him. Jim Green tight.

LB: So you are coming back?

ABM: Well, only, only if you want me to. That is up to you.

GB: That is up to you... you have more questions you wanna come back with sometime?

ABM: Only if you have more stories to tell, but I think you might be done with all your stories though...

GB: Ha, Ha, Ha...

ABM: Okay, I am going to turn this off for today...