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### Interview with Albert Williams, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

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## Albert Williams

*It is March 20th, 1998, and this is an interview with Albert Williams of the Music Department.*

**So can you, can we start out by asking how you came to the College?**

OK, my name is Albert Williams, everybody calls me Al. And I came to the College a little bit circuitously. A friend of mine from grade school named Chuck Folic had known William Russo, the composer, just because their families knew each other. And I had dropped out of contact with Chuck—because I went to Evanston High School when he stayed in Chicago—but when we both went to college, we both sort of renewed the contact and this was in '68, '69. And I'm a theater person and Chuck knew that and we were chatting and he said, "You know, I think you should check out this guy Bill Russo, see what he's doing." Chuck had done some of Bill's work too just because, you know, they were neighbors. And Chuck took me to a performance of the Free Theater, which was the musical theater company that Bill Russo directed under the sponsorship of Columbia College; partly a student thing but it was also community people, so it wasn't just a school project. But it was a Columbia College-sponsored free theater. And the Center for New Music was the parent organization; that was the Music Department. Back then, the Music and Theater departments were separate. This was '69, '70 when I saw this work and I was blown away by it. What Bill Russo was doing at that point, and, you know, not by himself but with all these talented

young people, were multimedia rock operas that mostly were written by him. Bill was a well-known jazz composer, but in the late '60s he had started to venture into electric rock music. And he was doing some really interesting things with rock. It was multimedia, visual, projections on the wall; they strung up sheets and projected movies and slides. And the music that Bill was writing was hard rock and it was a new generation of musicians. That partly was, of course, a way to recruit music students to Columbia College, so it was a clever thing and something Bill was really interested in exploring. And you know, this was the era of Tommy and Jesus Christ Superstar and all that stuff. These shows were not so elaborate. They were always only about an hour long, very intense, one-act performances mostly based on classical or biblical sources. Although the first one, actually, was called—the one that set the whole thing off was called *The Civil War*, which was a brilliant piece and really a prophetic piece. It was based on a series of poems by a New Mexico poet/playwright named Paul Horgan called *Songs after Lincoln*, and they were just sort of Whitman-esque poems about the Civil War and Lincoln. And Bill was reading these poems and he saw in them a parallel between the era and the politics they were discussing with what was going on in Chicago in the 1960s. But you must understand that he conceived of this before Martin Luther King was killed and before the Democratic Convention riots. By the time the show actually got on the boards, things were so electric and so hot that there really was a sense of a civil war being fought

in the streets, especially in Chicago, but of course nationwide too. So *The Civil War*, through the use of multimedia and the way it was performed—with a chorus and a lead singer and involving, incorporating theater games, pantomime, almost a ritualistic theatrical style with this hard rock style—made very blunt parallels between the murder of Lincoln and the murder of King; the Civil War and the civil war of the anti-war, Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement in the '60s.

And that was the first piece that really got them going. It was electric and it was very successful and Columbia was behind it. It was done at various locations, not on the Columbia campus, here and there, in Old Town and then at the Body Politic Theater, and, at one point, in a church—the Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church on Fullerton. And then that launched this idea of the Free Theater. The



notion was that they would be free; they didn't charge anything although, of course, they took donations. They solicited donations but they didn't charge an admissions fee. Columbia was on the right way. But what Columbia was seeing in it was it was a good way to raise its profile and to recruit new students, music and theater students. And I think it was very successful because I saw the shows and I thought they were very interesting and very exciting. And at the time, I was at Indiana University, but I dropped out of Indiana for a number of reasons, came back to Chicago, and started working, first of all at the Free Theater as a community member, and then in 1970, the Fall of 1970, I was a music student at Columbia. And [I] worked very closely with Bill Russo. And my entry into Columbia in the Fall of 1970 coincided with Columbia actually establishing a Music building. I don't remember if they bought it or rented it but it was at 3357 North Sheffield; it was the Columbia College Center for Music, a.k.a. The Free Theater. That's where all the shows were done. It was, I don't know if anybody's ever told you about this building...

**I've heard about it. That's the building on the southeast corner...no...**

Northeast, no, southeast corner, you're right, southeast corner of Sheffield and School. It had been, originally, back in the twenties perhaps, the International Order of Fraternal Vikings. It was a Viking lodge hall, a Swedish, like a Masonic type of Elks. It was a wonderful old building, old is the word for it, but it was really wonderful and it, of course, had all of these Viking insignias all over

the place, you know, decorations of Thor; it was quite cool. The first floor was just a big area that we used mostly for storage and some hanging out areas—we sometimes would have parties there, rent it out for political parties. I remember Dawn Clark Netsch's first big campaign as a State Legislator was in our basement. The second floor was a huge auditorium/gym like you would find in any community center like that. And that's where we did our performances; it had a built-in stage—which sometimes we used but sometimes we just blocked it off and then moved the play area into another side of the room—so it was a very flexible space for us. It had a mezzanine balcony which was perfect for the lighting and the sound people, the multimedia people. And then on the top part—this was our favorite part of it—there were a few little rooms here and there which we used for classrooms and Bill Russo had his office there, but the bulk of the floor was a square room, a gigantic square room, with seating all around the wall, the perimeter of the room, like a little raised seating area. And then this whole square room—which the seating looked at, like a square—obviously a ritual room, that was obviously what its intention was, for brotherhood rituals of the Vikings. But this suited us to a tee, because the kind of work that we were doing in the Free Theater and the Music Department, at that point, tended to be very oriented towards the productions of the Free Theater. And as I said, after The Civil War especially, all of the shows tended to be about religious, classical, biblical themes. There was a very ritualized quality to them; this was the '60s and the early '70s. They were all rock and roll, all original rock and roll. For example, we did

a piece called David, which was about David and Goliath; we did a piece called—well, one was called Liberation, which was a collage of Thomas Paine, Che Guevara, and Socrates. It was wonderful music. As I say, very stylized, like the open theater we were all performing at the same time; it was in that vein. And there was other work like this running in Chicago... But ours was the only one whose basis was music, musical pieces, rock operas. There was one called Summer Songs based on the Bible. I did one based on the poetry of Brecht, a little bit of a change of pace, one that I composed as a student project. I'm missing others. There was one called... which was more of a family piece but a lot of fun, very entertaining; a wonderful one called Joan of Arc which, unfortunately, we were gonna do as a revival this Spring but now I'm told that they're not gonna do it. You know, the point is that we also did a lot of workshops in the classes to prepare for these shows and they were, a lot of them were rituals and theater games, falling circles, circles where you'd have people fall around a circle, you know, trust exercises, leading the blind, carrying people. I mean, it was like Hair, I guess is what I'm trying to say here. And that square ritual room was a dynamite place for us. We also had regular things there like parties and then, of course, actual sitting down classes, lecture classes, that sort of thing. But it was a great space for us and that was the Fall of 1970.

I graduated from Columbia in 1973 but stayed on for a year and I took an extra class or two and helped teach too, as a teaching assistant. And, at the same time, the Theater Department was in a separate building, it was a separate department. It was at 1034 Barry,

right down the street on Sheffield and Barry. But later that space became Moming, the Dance and Arts Center. But now, that's all gone, I don't know what's there anymore. So the Theater Department and the Music Department were very separate, but we did have relations. And I, in fact, went over to the Theater Department, sort of on loan a few times, to help coach women who were doing musicals. The kind of musicals that they did, you know, all the stuff that the Free Theater did, that the Music Department did, were all original works and then the Theater was doing musicals. We did Threepenny Opera, for example. I helped them coach that with Vanessa Davis, I don't know if you know her; she's a very well-known blues singer in Chicago. She played the street singer. And Henry Threadgill, the jazz musician, arranged the score. These were all people who were students or at least, you know, semi-teachers at Columbia College. I met David Mamet there for the first time; he was teaching in their Theater Department.

**Really?**

Yeah. He said they were all very proud of him because he was this young guy, he was about two years older than me, and he had just written his first major play which was being done at little theaters called Sexual Perversity in Chicago, which later, of course, became the movie *About Last Night*, starring Rob Lowe. Things haven't changed. So I went over there and worked, you know, for them a bit and they sometimes...

**This is while you were still a student or were you an actor?**  
Both, right. And then sometimes,

some of the Theater people would come over to the Music Department and help us put together shows. In 1974, a show that Bill Russo and I co-wrote—I wrote the lyrics and he composed the music—played in New York. This was in the era when a lot of Chicago shows were trying to go to New York and make it in New York because *Grease* had done that in 1970. And of course *Grease* became this gigantic phenomenon out of a little Lincoln Avenue storefront theater, so people said, "We're gonna do the next *Grease*." The Organic Theater tried, some other theaters, and we did. We took, actually, two or three different productions to New York between '70 and '74. One was called *Aesop's Fables*—well, I guess what we did is we took two productions of *Aesop's Fables*, two different years, to New York off-Broadway. And they made it so florid, but I mean, it didn't become the next *Grease*, that's for sure. And then in '74, a piece that Bill and I wrote together called *Isabella's Fortune* and *Petralina's Revenge*, which went to New York. And, again, with a cast of mixed semi-professionals and students or students, who were emerging into professionalism. When the show played there and it had its run, some of us stayed and some of us came back. Bill Russo came back, of course, to work at Columbia. I stayed in New York for a year. And then, some friends of mine...

**What were you doing in New York?**

Oh, various things, trying to make money. I was an assistant for the Joffrey Ballet at one point, worked with a composer named Al Carmines who was an off-Broadway composer, sort of a cult figure actually; we all thought of him as the Bill Russo of New York. He was

very well involved in New York, but he wouldn't work outside of it. Some of our people actually went to work for him. I knocked around for a year. And then some friends of mine who had stayed in Chicago, that I knew from Columbia, started a rock and roll band and they asked me to come back and sing with them. So I came back to Chicago, this was about '75, '76. We had made a contact with Bill Russo and was working on the band—which was called *Freeze*—and the band was together from '76 to '79 with a lot of changes... But it, certainly at the beginning, was somewhat of a Columbia outgrowth. And, in fact, the summer of '76, Bill hired us to accompany the graduation. I'll talk a little bit about the graduations here.

**Yeah.**

Back then, they were held in the auditorium of the Prudential Building. I don't know what it seated but there was a whole lot less people than now. And the music, the entertainment was always—Bill Russo put together the music and it was usually stuff from his show, so it was a lot of rock and roll stuff, you know, like songs from his works. And it was a very low-key affair, pretty casual, for a graduation it was real casual...

**What went on at these graduations?**

Well, I mean, the standard thing. Well, I'll never forget the first one I went to, which was the summer of '71, which was the first one that I played in. I was singing in it. You know, the auditorium of the Prudential Building is a long, rectangular room so there's this audience out there, several hundred people at most were all that needed to be seated there. Columbia was a very small school then. And I

should point out that even more so than now, it was spread out among different campuses. I mean, now, of course, Columbia has many more buildings, but increasingly it's located here in the South Loop. But back then, you know, the Music Department was at Sheffield, the Theater Department was at Barry, the Dance Center at that point—I don't know if that would have even been created because I remember taking dance classes in the main building of Columbia, which was 540 North Lake Shore Drive, that little warehouse which is now condos. And then the graduation in the Prudential Building, so this... from a very small college. And up in the front, where the auditorium was, the officers would sit up there like they do now. Mike Alexandroff, the President, would sit there and the featured speakers would come and speak. And it was quite exciting because when Mike Alexandroff gave the President's address, it was the first time that I ever heard that the President of the College was more radical than the students. I knew Mike vaguely because he was very involved in the student body; he was also very good friends with Bill Russo, so he took a real close interest in the Music Department. He came to all of our shows; he was very nice, very supportive, so we would get to know him. He was busy, so he wasn't, like, hanging out with the students, but he did get to know them. You know, this old man with this nice white beard, this sort of Santa Claus figure. And then he gets up and makes this speech straight out of the '30s New Left, really: That you have to fight for social equality and social justice, that it's a shitty world out there—he didn't swear, but, you know—it's a hard life out there, and of

course this was during the Vietnam War, which we were very concerned about. And some of my performances, for example, had been benefits for anti-war causes and so forth. And he really just laid down the line about, you got to go out there and change the world. That's the basic message, you know. You've had it too easy in your lives, you know, you've worked here, you've experimented, but now you really have to go out there and realize that it's a hard life. But it wasn't, you know, "You have to make money and, you know, support the nation." It was, "You have to change the nation, you have to change the world." It was very exciting.

**This was unexpected to you when you heard it?**

To me it was unexpected. Later I found out that he said this a lot of times, every year comes Mike's challenge to the world again. But that's the role of the College President, to sort of deliver the same consistent message every year. But to me, it was sort of startling.

**Do you think it was startling, you said some people had heard this before...**

The parents, perhaps so, I don't know.

**I was just wondering how this played with the students. I mean, did this attract them in the first place or were they shocked?**

I think that the image of Columbia doing that did attract them. I mean, you didn't need President Alexandroff to make the speech; Columbia was an alternative school, it had an alternative viewpoint back then, of course, because it was actually a culture in a counterculture. Now, of course, it's just all this special interests and cable channels. But back then, you know,

it was mainstream culture which was very reactionary and very embattled, and, you know, Watergate didn't come out of nowhere. You know, Nixon was near the top of the iceberg in that respect. A sideline, I remember a piece of graffiti scrawled, spray painted on the side of our building at Sheffield: "You wouldn't change dicks in the middle of a screw so vote for Nixon in '72." I don't think a student put that there, they might have, probably just somebody in the neighborhood. There was a sense, yes, of one group of people trying to hold on to the status quo and then a new group of people trying to change the world through politics and through art. And Columbia, of course, was more towards the latter; it wasn't a political school, it was a communications school, an arts school, TV, film, music, theater were the big things then. I mean, they still are but that was, other things have come up since then.

**What else did students do at Columbia at that time? What were they like?**  
The students?

**Yeah.**

Well, God. First of all, because this College was so spread out, I felt—I must say this might be part of my reaction to the graduation—we didn't have a lot of sense of the other students at Columbia College, even more so than now. You know, you pursued your one area of interest and you really didn't necessarily know who else was going to Columbia and what the other kids were like.

**Well, did you know people working in TV, for example?**

Very little. I knew Thaine Lyman, the chairman of the department.



But I really did not know the students; I mean, I saw them at graduation so that was the first time. So having said that, the students that I hung out with, or that I saw—which were the theater and music students on Sheffield Street—were hippies. What can I say? That's what they were; mostly white, hippies, rock and rollers, longhairs...

**From the city, suburbs?**

Well, from both the city and the suburbs; not from out of town. There were a lot of suburbanites. But many of them were recruited by the performances either at the Free Theater or at the Theater Department. I think a lot of the recruitment came from word of mouth. In fact, I must say, I remember, well, this is sort of funny, my mother worked with a woman whose son-in-law was one of the Chicago Seven. And through her, my mother said, when I dropped out of Indiana University because it was just this big music factory, she said, "You know, you ought to check out Columbia College. I hear it's a place where, you know, cool things are happening." And I heard this from the Chicago Seven. Well, that, it was only later that I realized that I already heard about the College... And that was just a sideline. The ironic part about all of this is that Chuck Folic—who had gone on to Yale—moved back to Chicago and is now Phil Klukoff's Executive Aid in the Continuing Education Department and before then had been Bill's Executive Assistant in the Music Department for years. Chuck came back to Chicago, worked with the Free Theater and Bill Russo again because of me. I brought him back into it after he had originally left. He was also a

musician and apparently that must have led to him starting to actually work in the Columbia College administration area and now he's a pretty big honcho here. But anyway, it was word of mouth.

**Did you spend much time at the building on 540 Lake Shore?**  
Very little, some.

**What did you do there when you went there?**

Well, it was a dance class that we had one time. Classes, I had a theater, an Irish drama class with James O'Riley, a name that I don't know means anything to you. He's dead now, he was a very well known Chicago Irish-American actor, a wonderful actor. But I mean, there was no reason to go there. It was so small, for one thing. You know, I went in once to visit President Alexandroff, but that's all. It was very spread out and it's not, you know, easily accessible if you're at Sheffield and School to come all the way down to 540 Lake Shore Drive.

**The building that you were mostly studying in, what kind of neighborhood was that then?**

Back then it was mostly Latino. And, in fact, we were burgled several times, the Music Department. You know, we have equipment there, amplifiers and lighting equipment. And two or three times I remember we were burgled, I would walk in one day and Bert Gall would be standing there with this very grim look on his face assessing the loss. Back then, you know, Bert was Mike Alexandroff's assistant. He was already essentially what he's doing now. But he was really the troubleshooter and he would go out. So he would be there and he said, you know, "It's gangs." And probably, the building we had been in had

sort of, before we moved into it, before Columbia took it over, been sort of a neighborhood community center. There were dances there so some of the kids resented losing that. Somebody sold the building, rented the building out or whatever. I never quite knew if we owned it or just rented it but we certainly made it our own. So, you know, it was a largely a Latino neighborhood. There were gang shootings on Belmont, I remember that. But, you know, some of us lived there too; it was a changing neighborhood. I mean, in a general sense like it is now. It was certainly very ethnically diverse, as it is now.

**Yeah, that's what I was wondering, how would students feel about the neighborhood, how did faculty feel about it, how did they connect...**

We connected to it. As I say, a lot of us moved into that neighborhood. I moved into an apartment on Newport and Clark. Another friend of mine lived on Sheffield. I mean, we made it our own. We used to go to Ann Sather's restaurant, but that was when Ann Sather's restaurant was really Ann Sather's restaurant. Ann still ran it and it was a diner no bigger than this room. Actually, in fact, one of our guest teachers who came in, a guest director who came in to direct one of our shows was Ronny Graham, he was a showbiz guy... a great songwriting guy. And he discovered Ann Sather's and drew us to it. Pat's Pizza, we would go into there. That of course is a nice big restaurant, back then it was just a basement place where we got sandwiches. There was never trouble, except for the burglars, but in terms of people like late at night being muggers, never any problems like that.

And I do remember that one of the shows I forgot to mention was called The Bacchae, which was based on Euripides' tragedy The Bacchae. But we did it rock and roll and dancing; it was an underground hit or, perhaps, overground because we had been on the second floor. But there were lines going downstairs and around the block. So we had people lining up, sort of like you see now, people line up down the street for the Vic, lining up for our shows. We had a very young crowd and that's why I say about the recruitment. We got a lot of people that way. Either them or their friends would hear about it, as was the case with me. There was a bar right across the street now, and there still is, it's called Sheffield's; it's a nice little sort of yuppie tavern. But back then, that bar was called Ed's. And Ed's was run by a bunch of American veterans, you know, Veterans of Foreign Wars types. Older, very conservative, I think they were hillbillies, Appalachian. And we moved in there in the Fall of 1970; we went to that place immediately, a place to go and get a beer after class, after performances or whatever. They had a little bowling machine, they had popcorn, we started hanging out there and they looked at us, you know, hippies. I mean, our hair was down to our butt. And they looked at us and said, "What the hell is this? The neighborhood's really going to seed," you know? But in about three weeks, we were all best friends with them. It was great, we spent a lot of money there. Money was cheap in those days, I mean, beer was sixty cents. But, you know, it was fun because we really sort of changed their hostility. I mean, it may have been purely commercial, but we had fun. It was our hangout. We'd go to this

place sometimes afterwards and they'd look around and this place was really like this little dive. They'd say, "This is where you go?" Ed's is all gone, unfortunately. But we always laughed, that was one of our favorite places.

**Well, so you came back from New York, in what year was that?**

'76, sometime in '76. Came back from New York and, actually, Bill asked me to come back and teach, like, one class in singing. It was a sort of specialty that I had that he sort of brought out in me, which was that I am a good singer; I was trained as a singer but a lot of people think that you have to go through all this training to be a singer, and I think if you're going to be a professional you do have to. But what I was into was helping people who were scared of singing get over that fear and find their own voices. So he asked me to come in and teach this class in singing for all kinds of people. For musicians, instrumentalists, you know, actors, people who were not used to singing. By then, the Theater Department and the Music Department had merged. The Theater Department had moved over into the Sheffield Building, the building on Barry was gone; they had cut out of there. There was a different chair, Paul Carter-Harrison, who is now our Playwright in Residence, but back then he was the chair of the newly combined Theater and Music Department.

**What was the logic of combining?**

It was financial. You know, you get more financial clout with the administration with one large department instead of two split-up ones, less competition for space. There may have been cutbacks in the College as far as how much rent they were paying, I don't know.

But it stayed that way, you know, since then. And then whenever they moved into the building on Meadow Street—I don't know, '79 or '80—which had been previously inhabited by the University of Illinois at Chicago theater department. It's an old theater building running back to the '20s. But UIC had been there and, of course, they moved over to where they are, so Columbia spent a lot of time renovating it. When I first went into that building, it was just a mess. I mean, the theater was just a disaster area. Anyways, so I came back, worked with, taught at Columbia a little bit, we played that graduation that I mentioned with my band. Then he hired us to play; we had to learn his music, not ours, but I mean, it was fun. And then I sort of moved away from Columbia for a few years because the band was on tour a lot and I sort of lost touch with all of that. Then, in 1980, I left the band to just being in Chicago all the time. I was looking for various things to do. I sort of turned to journalism for performing. I started writing for various papers, The Illinois Entertainer, other papers. I renewed contact with Bill Russo and by that point, Columbia had moved into the Eleventh Street Building. And Bill asked me to sing in an opera he had written that was being performed there and was being directed by A.T. Bauchers who was then—he was either a former or current member of the Steppenwolf Theater Company. And it was The Shepherd's Christmas, it was a Christmas opera... So The Shepherd's Christmas, lovely, you know, entertaining, quasi-classical piece... The Music Department, as a school, the school had become much more academic. In fact, it occurs to me that the year I graduated..

**1973?**

Right, the year I graduated, by '73, was the first year that Columbia was accredited by North Central. That was a big thing, of course. When I went there it was a very small school, very loose school, very—academic requirements were not the thing that you went there for, it was to work with a Bill Russo or a Thaine Lyman in Television or some of the people in the Film Department. It was that kind of thing, it was an arts school. I want to come back to something about my graduation, which I'll tell you about... Anyway, by the time I did *The Shepherd's Christmas* with Bill in 1980, I was astonished at the changes in the school. Everything was much more centrally located down in the South Loop, except for the Dance Department. You know, they moved into the Eleventh Street Building, it was much more of a professional—with a capital P—oriented music program. They were doing *Shepherd's Christmas* but they were hiring professional singers—like myself and a woman name Carol Loverde, who was hired by Bill and is now the head of the Voice Program of the Music Department. A.T. Bauchers was directing and I remember that since he was at *Steppenwolf* and we had to get our costumes fitted, he got one of his friends to do our costumes: Glenne Headly, the actress who later starred in *Dick Tracy* with Warren Beatty. You know, I went by her theater one afternoon and she fitted me during her rehearsal break. It was fun. But that, anyway, brought me, sort of, back into the Columbia fold. But as I said, it was a noticeably different school, much more ambitious, much bigger, and I also believe much more racially diverse. It had

made a great effort to attract the black community. Because I think back in the '70s, I mean, I said that about the people around me and I don't want to say that was true of the entire school, but my impression of it was that it was largely a white hippie school. Well, the whole hippie mentality sort of went away and everybody just became, the whole culture became more diverse and less rigidly mainstream. The racial divisions became a lot less and the culture became a lot more integrated. I think back when I went to Columbia College, you know, in the Loop, and people were scared of going to the Loop because the Loop was, you know, black. And that's all changed..

**Really?**

Oh yeah, in the '60s... No, I'm talking about the whole city. I mean, that's not really relevant to Columbia, what I just said. But, you know, there was a lot more division and tension. You know, it was the late '60s and early '70s; there was a lot of violence. The culture had grown a lot more, well, a lot of the changes we were pushing for had happened, I guess is what I'm saying. People had realized that Vietnam was a mistake, people, you know, had made a lot of changes in the black community and the whole city had become a lot more empowered and integrated into the fabric of the whole culture. So, Columbia certainly reflected that. I remember, certainly, being struck by how many more black faces there were at Columbia than there were when I had gone there—and later Latino. But back then, I especially noticed the increase in black students. And, more professional, that was, Columbia's whole thrust had become a more professional one and, of course, the academic entity of it was increasing. And also, of

course, the fundraising was increasing, the whole job of the President became to really go out and raise a lot of money to buy more buildings, to accommodate a growing student body and a growingly diverse student body and to locate it in the central part of the city, to the South Loop. So by then, it was more accessible to the whole city; not just the North Siders, that was a factor. And also, to make Columbia economically stronger by having real estate, that basic financial solidness.

So I got back and Bill Russo did *The Shepherd's Christmas* and we stayed in touch. And in 1983, he asked me to work with him on a musical piece he was writing. It was a children's musical fairy tale—sort of like a *Peter the Wolf* thing—for orchestra, not rock band anymore or even a jazz band; full orchestra, dancers, singers, and a narrator. And it was called *The Golden Bird*. And Columbia sponsored it for production at the Chicago Symphony, not the main season, but their family concerts—it was a very nice thing. So I came back and got involved with Columbia through that, and then, about a year later, Bill asked me to come and teach at Columbia. Again, the thing I was doing which was teaching non-singers not to be scared of singing. Columbia had singing classes, of course, but they were all for people who had already gone through a certain amount of musical training—which they didn't used to worry about. I was brought in to offer an alternative to that for the Theater students.

**Now, had you been doing much teaching before this?**

No, I'd never taught. Well, I taught once at a place called Rand



Camp but in terms of any college, I had never taught anywhere except Columbia. I mean, I have never taught anywhere except Columbia. I was a journalist, primarily, back then, a part-time journalist. And Bill brought me in as a part-time teacher. And the funny thing was that another teacher at the Theater Department was Estelle Specter, Estelle is here. Now, Estelle was somebody—I had mentioned I had taught at this place called Rand Camp, except that Estelle had been my teacher when I was a child at Rand Camp. And Estelle co-choreographed *The Golden Bird* when we did it at Orchestra Hall. So, Estelle and I hadn't seen each other in fifteen years. And now, she and I co-teach and are, in fact, the co-facilitators of the Musical Theater Program at Columbia, which is jointly run by the Theater, Music, and Dance departments, and has been around since about 1989. I was brought in originally to teach, as I said, *Singing for Non-Singers* but then the musical theater programs, there was more and more interest in that and so Estelle and I became the teachers in charge of it, facilitators of it. So part of our work is involved with teaching students who, in fact, do have a lot of musical training, and a big part of it is teaching actors who don't have the musical training about singing. It's sort of funny because this week, as we speak, Columbia's doing—Estelle just directed a workshop production of *Company*, the Stephen Sondheim musical. When I was at Columbia in 1970 and it was all rock and roll, *Company* opened on Broadway and I loved it because—well, I had never seen it but I bought the record. And I was the only person there who knew who Sondheim was and I would take this record around to my fellow students, I'd play it at

parties and listen to it and say, "It's so musical comedy, it's so weird, it's so brittle, it's so, you know, artificial." They really didn't get it, I mean, they didn't understand it at all. And one of our students was a guy named Louie Rosen, back in '72, '73. Louie was a South Sider, came up to school, he wanted to be the next Jackson Browne. He actually looked a lot like Jackson Browne. He would sit at the piano and play these very intense singer/songwriter type songs. And I and a friend of mine—a woman who, actually, he dated—turned him on to Steven Sondheim and Louie ended up going to New York and studied with Sondheim. So, we sort of pushed him into that direction. And, you know, the people at Columbia back in the '70s were like, "Who's Steven Sondheim? What's this?" Now we're doing his shows. In fact, last year Bill Russo produced *Night Music*... so times have changed. I was gonna speak somewhat about my graduation, it was sort of interesting.

**Oh yeah.**

I said that I first started playing graduations, they were held at the Prudential auditorium. And the year I graduated was the first year that they were held at the Auditorium; they moved to the Auditorium because they had outgrown the Prudential. So, that was a really clear sign that Columbia's growing. You know, the amount of audience, the amount of parents that they had to accommodate, they couldn't fit into the Prudential auditorium anymore. So, we moved to the Auditorium Theater, and, in fact, the year I graduated—which was '73—one of the guests, you know, the doctorates, the people with honorary degrees, was Bob Fosse—director/choreographer. They had contacted Bob because his costume

designer—a woman by the name of Patricia Zipkov—was the sister of Connie Zonka. Connie was, then, the publicist for Columbia College. And so, you know, she made contacts with Fosse and we gave him an honorary degree. You know, the whole thing about honorary degrees is they bring attention to the College and so forth. That was a big year for Fosse because he had just won the Oscar for *Cabaret* and the Tony for *Chicago*, and he was becoming very well known. And I was assigned to sort of co-chaperon him around Chicago because I was the protege, like the high-profile music student, but it was me and then a woman named Kate Budakie, who was Bill Russo's assistant. She never went to Columbia but she was one of the people who came in to work in the Free Theater—like a high school, suburban high school kid who saw the rock shows and wanted to be a part of all that. And later, actually, she worked for Bill Russo as his executive assistant and also taught some music classes at Columbia. Now, of course, she is a very well known straight actress, she was on Broadway. But, anyway, so she was Bill's secretary, executive assistant at the time, and so she and I took Fosse around, I mean, picked him up at the airport and took him to the Ambassador East. And then after the graduation, we took him around to the parties. Back then we were like at The Blues Brothers Bar in Old Town and running around late at night. I don't know if they do that anymore.

**I don't know. I'll have to ask some other folks. I have a question about graduation or related to graduation. One is, how many people graduated, do you think, when you were a student?**

Oh, I have no idea.

**I mean, did you have any sense of the people who came, most people expected to graduate or most people expected not to and just take some courses?**

Oh no, I don't think it was that. I think it was most people who came to Columbia were going for their degrees. I just don't think there were that many of them compared to what there are now. I mean, the whole student body, I mean, I don't know, I don't know how many it was. But it was not like a community college where people just took a few courses. I suppose there was some of that. Of course, back then the whole thing was that virtually every teacher was a part-timer who was also a practicing professional. You know, of course there's still a lot of part-timers, but increasingly they are professional teachers as opposed to professional theater people—that's not true, most of them are still working outside as directors and designers. But, you know, there's the academic... Columbia's grown.

**Which has grown.**

You know, we have a whole body of teachers, people whose profession is teaching, not, you know, acting or whatever.

**Let me ask you about being an alumnus. When did you get the first fund-raising appeal in the mail?**

I can't remember, I really can't, I mean...

**Have you gotten them?**

No, no.

**I ask because you were mentioning that at a certain point in the late '70s that fundraising became a higher-profile...**

Right, I was thinking more in terms of, you know, outside donarism and the like, Mike Alexandroff

standing at the door and bringing out people who were willing to kick in more money. I must say, I don't remember seeing fundraising stuff to me as an alumnus in the mail until the mid '80s—when I started teaching here, you know? Maybe that's just because they got my address again. I think that's when they also kicked in their fundraising. I do know that Columbia was a really weak school about alumni relations...

**Alumni, it was...**

It was not formal. Right, it was just people I worked with, like the band. No, the administration did not have a strong alumni fundraising operation until probably the last half of the '80s. And, of course, it got really strong in the '90s.

**So you came to teach in '85 and you were teaching, at first, part-time...**

I was teaching part-time and then, I suppose in '88, I was offered a full-time contract—not a full-time, but Artist in Residence contract, which is semi-full-time; not quite as much money, doesn't have a pension. The Theater Department—which is where my contract is—they have only a couple of full-timers but a lot of Artists in Residence, as opposed to some other departments that have a number of full-timers but almost no Artists in Residence. And then, of course, we have a lot of part-timers too. But the Artist in Residence contract is better because it's for people who really are still working in other areas. Although, of course, you know, increasingly our job is fuller than full-time because of all the administrative work that we've had to take on in the past few years: the meetings, the committee work, the registration. Which I think is good stuff, I mean, I think that the idea of

having the teachers do that or the whole argument that it bonds them with the students, I think is true. My explanation is that students see us so often they realize how beleaguered we are, they sympathize with us.

**Well, now you taught for three years part-time in the mid '80s...**

And then just stayed on and became full-time Artist in Residence. In fact, my Artist in Residence coincided with the musical theater program developing. Columbia only had—when I started teaching here, there was one course in musical theater. It was like a style course in the Theater Department; just like studying Chekhov or studying Shakespeare, you studied musical theater. I knew Bill Russo since 1970 and so he's the reason I'm at Columbia, there's no question about that. But, you know, once I got here, it turned out... 1963 and Estelle Specter and I became very close colleagues—which has been a greatly rewarding experience: somebody that you sort of, you know, had a crush on when you were a kid and she was our teacher and now you work together as colleagues. It was a very rewarding experience. And we developed this program together, she and I, this musical theater program with the involvement of especially Sheldon Patinkin, the Theater chair. So that, that in part is why I became Artist in Residence, to take over the facilitation job of that as well, the administrative side of it, the curriculum development side of it.

**Let me ask you a big question about the mission of the College. How would you describe it in relation to, well, first of all, American society?**

Oh, well, actually I should go back,

because when we were talking about how students got in here, recruitment, and it was a hip college... but also the fact that it was open admissions was, you know, a big thing. For people who couldn't get into anywhere else—either for academic reasons or because they sort of experimented a lot in high school but now they were starting to get serious—it was a place where they could catch up with their ambitions. And, you know, a lot of people who excelled in high school ended up becoming sort of drones. And a lot of people who, in high school, were experimenting with their lives, you know, needed a place, like a college, where they got sort of semi-motivated. And, because no one was standing over them, it was something that they were choosing themselves. But, you know, they couldn't get into... Julliard because it was academically very high. They were able to get into a Columbia College and sort of catch up and make it their own. And I think that that attracted even people like me who could have gone anywhere else. I went to a more academically demanding school: Indiana University. So the open admissions thing is very important. And, as I said, back then, of course, there was really a sense of the mainstream society and the counterculture. And, as that has changed, the school system, the high school system, I mean, isn't very good. And I think as a result of that, Columbia becomes more and more important as an open admissions school. But also, as the school has gotten more professionalized, professionally oriented, certainly the arts programs, that people who come in in need of remedial work, the College has to pay more attention to that. The College back then

did not used to pay much attention to that.

**Did not need to or it just...**

I don't think it was qualified to. So I don't know if it didn't need to or it just didn't bother with it, but it was not what they were about. But, you know, in the '80s we started to get more and more students who, you know, simply were not up to any college work. So they couldn't even focus on school at Columbia, which was supposed to help people function who had not fit into the old systems; couldn't even help them when they got here because, you know, they couldn't read well and they certainly couldn't write well, and you just develop a hostility if you can't... if you're uptight about your speaking, your communication skills, in a communications college. You know, I do know that Columbia has had to grapple with that issue. You know, is it still open admissions? It's got to be. You know, placement exams—which I think are good ideas because as the school has gotten bigger and attracted a lot more students, you don't want to hamper the more academically strong ones and you don't want to make them compete, in a sense, with the less academically strong ones. It's not good for either of them. You've got to pull back the academically strong ones, make them wait while you teach the other people how to get up to their level and you don't want to make the academically weak ones resent their classmates. So I gather that the placement exams are about just putting people into groups where they're all on the same footing. And I think that that's probably great. I do know that it was something that would have never occurred to them when I went to Columbia College but, you know, maybe it should have.

**What about the mission of Columbia College with respect to American higher education?**

**Where does it fit? Has it had an impact?**

I don't know, I really don't know. You mean the mission of the school in terms of open admissions and communication arts?

**Yeah, and also the model of the working professionals who are teachers...**

The working professionals? I think if more colleges are becoming like Columbia, it's not because Columbia set an influence. I think it's because they realized they have to. You know, more colleges are drawing on working professionals because they don't want to have to give tenure out to all these professional teachers. Meanwhile, Columbia has instituted tenure, or five-year as we call it. I don't know if it's been influential in that sense. Society's changing, you know. It becomes harder and harder to pay for everything. And, you know, colleges and higher education is becoming more expensive and they're scared of it becoming prohibitively expensive. You know, that's one of the things that we're worried about in the unionization of part-time teachers, for example; I don't know if that's true. But certainly, that's the thing that everybody in academic life is scared of: Is it becoming too expensive to do, to make available? And so then a college like Columbia finds itself, perhaps, in a position of an independent bookstore faced with competition with Borders. You know, can you do what we do without having to become more like Borders? Do I have to invest in computers?



**In your department there's not much computerization, I would guess.**

Well, we have to have computers for registration but that's it right now, and for e-mail. But that is a big change and it took a lot of us a lot of time to learn how to work the machines. But I thought about, you know, a bookstore that I shop at—they don't have a computer for their inventory. You know, if I don't find it, they take out a little carton and write down the name of the book to reorder it. There's something incredibly ineffective about that, but, of course, there's also something very human about it and I value it. That's why I shop there. But, you know, it's a changing world. I mean, the pressures are so [great], the big budgets are, you know, so big. The big operations that succeed are operating on such a vast scale financially and they're keyed into such a broad spectrum of people that, can a school like Columbia—which has historically targeted itself to a more offbeat clientele—can it survive? I think the answer is: Yes it can, but it's going to have to make a lot of changes and they're making these changes. And, you know, it's not the same school that I went to...

**Do you think...**

..when I went to Columbia College, you know, we would not have been sitting in a conference room, we would have done it at Ed's, yeah, or Ann Sather's, you know, or in the hallway.

**You're making me hungry, Ann Sather's... Do you see any kind of impact on teaching of music and theater?**

Well, in Chicago there is, because all of the teachers at the Theater and Music Department are all

working professionals. I mean, that's still true. The Theater Department, for example, all of the teachers are actors or directors or designers. They work, you know, you see their names all the time. And, of course, so they have an influence, their taste, their style is influential on what they teach their students. And the Chicago style, I mean, that's a whole other interview, but in a nutshell it's about ensemble; it's not about stars. And it's about honest communication on stage as opposed to presenting the imitator. I mean, that's the Chicago style of theater as opposed to the Broadway style. And so, they're teaching their students that, but of course, a lot of students come having growing up watching television. And that's more true now than it was even when I went to school. Every generation has been more TV trained, every successive generation. So they come thinking that they're gonna be on Leno next week and that's what they're here for, to become stars. I mean, the whole culture's like that, you know? I want to go to bed with the President so I can go on 60 Minutes, or not go to bed with the President—whatever it is. I want to, you know, become an actress so I can be on The Tonight Show. And that certainly is not what we're about as professionals, Chicago theater professionals. So we spend a lot of our time just trying to get the kids real. But I think that the ones who will go on take that with them. And so I do think a lot of Theater students at Columbia College do go out and start their own theater companies; maybe they don't last very long but they form their company, which is a stepping stone for them to either continue as a company or to join other companies or to just work as journeymen actors around the city. But, you

know, they're oriented towards ensemble, towards honest work as opposed to performing out. But some want to do that too; go to LA, so we have that side of it too. And in the Music department, of course, Bill Russo has gone back to his jazz, which was his first love and his background and so the Music Department... its profile has become more of a jazz profile, and that may be one reason he decided not to do Joan of Arc. He was gonna do the Bible as a rock opera, but he just decided instead to do a jazz concert because I think the kinds of students he's getting are no longer the kinds of students who would be interested in playing in a show like Joan of Arc. They want to play jazz things, they're more sophisticated, whatever, so.

**That's interesting. Based on your experience here as both student and teacher, how has your personal vision of education changed? Or, has it?**

The biggest problem I face with students—in my field—is recalcitrance. Because, for one thing, I teach singing for students who are scared of singing, being scared to sing, and so they hold back a lot. And sometimes it's through sheer terror, sometimes it's through nerves, sometimes it's through apathy, sometimes it's through laziness. I think, you know, because some of it, I just said that TV, you know, everybody's more successfully trained by television, it's bred a much more passive kind of student. Or, it's through hostility. I've become much less interested in coaxing them through it and affirming them than pushing their butts through the work. I was just thinking about this, I didn't realize that until this interview: In the Free Theater days, back in the '70s,



it was very much about experimenting and finding and exploring and affirming. And, you know, some of it was a little flaky. But increasingly, what I've run across from my students is inability to work: lack of adrenaline, lack of energy, some of it is purely physical—the whole couch potato thing, I don't know...

**Working full-time? I'm always struck by how many students work full-time and then come to class.**

Well, then, I suppose there's that too. You know, they're burned out, I suppose that that is true. But...

**But it's a problem?**

...but it's a problem.

**Yeah. Does that have to do with a different student body, do you think?**

Oh, I think it's culture, I don't think it's just Columbia. But are you asking me a...

**Yeah, I'm just wondering if the difference between your experience and the experience we've all had here, is it because some of the students have less...**

Yes, definitely, but it's a different culture. You know, I think people are less intellectually curious, they're inundated...