TEMPE HISTORICAL MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #: OH-279

NARRATOR: James Yeater

INTERVIEWER: Aaron Monson

DATE: July 1, 2008

JY = James Yeater
INT = Interviewer
_____ = Unintelligible
(Italics) = Transcriber's notes

Side A

INT: Today is July 1, 2008. This is the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with James Yeater, former Theater department head at Arizona State University. Let's begin.

Can you tell me please when you first came to ASU, and what made you choose ASU as an employer?

JY: I came in 1958. At that time, I had two choices, I guess. One with a college in northern Michigan, almost to Canada, and the other one was Arizona State College. No particular choice too much, but it seemed like climate-wise, this would be a little better choice.

It also seemed . . . . In those days, we did not have interviews. You didn't go to the campus to be interviewed. You were lucky to get a phone call and learn a little bit about it. And the Theater program here seemed rather similar to one I had had as an undergraduate; that is, with about four or five courses, and it was still called Drama then rather than Theater, and with doing plays with the student body as a whole rather than a part of any professionally-developed system. I was familiar with that, so it seemed like a good choice.

But I guess, basically, it was sort of an opportunity.

INT: Can you tell me just a little bit about what brought you into the drama and theater career path? What initially sparked your interest in it?

JY: Actually, I think I started out in other things, but began to—I'm sure this is the common pattern of many—began to work, to be in plays and dramatic presentations and debate and so forth. I think I was an English major as an undergraduate, but did a great deal of drama, and radio drama was still rather a big thing back in the '40s. And at that point,

when I got out of the Army and out of Korea, I just decided to change directions, and moved into a professional theater preparation program at the University of Washington, and then later a doctoral program at the University of Illinois.

INT: What are some of the changes that you've seen happen at ASU since you arrived here?

JY: These have been enormous. Let me tell you a little bit about the situation as we encountered it. On campus, as Arizona State College then, there was tremendous pressure, as a result of the G.I. Bill and then that whole influx of students coming in to the state at Arizona State College, to expand. There was nothing in the Valley in higher education, and the pressure was just enormous, and it was going up by sharp percentages, the enrollment, each year. So space was at a tremendous premium in that age.

The older college did have an auditorium. It is where the Language and Literature building is now, just kind of right there by Old Main. And it had a pretty good-sized stage, and it wasn't badly equipped, and it was, of course, used for all those events on campus, from baccalaureate and faculty assemblies to concerts and plays. There were spaces under it, it had rather spacious basement space there, that was used in dance. You said you had talked to Bob Ellis; he will remember that era very well, since that's where the radio station that he worked with was developed, there in those facilities underneath the old auditorium.

And the program itself was a one-person program. At the time I came, that person was Frank Byers. Again, Bob Ellis would remember that name, because Bob was in several shows and a very good friend of Frank's. And Frank taught a course in Radio Drama, which was other than the Acting and Introduction to Drama and Play Production—that was it as far as curricular work goes. And, of course, Frank directed the plays. This was a year or so before I came, so I was actually the second Drama person, and Frank took advantage of that to finally get a sabbatical leave, so I was, for that first year, on my own. But then he returned, so we were a two-person operation.

In the summer, a year or so before we came, the plaster started falling off the balcony, from underneath the balcony onto the seats below. And, obviously, it was not a safe place, and they immediately condemned it and immediately ordered it to be destroyed, to knock the building down. And there was no space to put anything. So not only did the performance phase disappear, but virtually all of the costumes and the lighting and curtains and tools and everything else.

So that first year that the auditorium had ceased to exist, there was no other space, but there was another building called the Payne building, not at all related, though I think there's a relation in the name of the building. It was an Education building, just opposite Matthews Hall, and it was kind of an E-shaped building.

So they had to raze parts of it, but there's one little section of it that was kind of a common room that they had used with the elementary kids, and they rather grandly called it an auditorium, Payne Auditorium. So they were able to save that little wing, with a

little brick extension. It was really a very nice little place, it had hardwood floors and a lovely beamed ceiling over that, and it did have a little stage at one end. With some folding metal surplus chairs from the Navy, you could set up for about forty people. So that's what they did, and the first show I directed here that fall, we were in that little Payne training school *(Payne Training Lab School)*.

I remember my office space—there were no offices, it was really tough—and my first office was in a little four-plex where the University Foundation building is now. That, of course, was a little commercial area there; Pete's Drugstore was there on the corner, and some areas behind it was kind a part of the old barrio of Tempe. So Speech and Drama, there were about seven or eight in the department, became quartered in that. I remember at first coming in, I had a kitchen sink and I had a bathtub, but I didn't have a desk, and my desk was one of those little ironing boards that fold down out of the side of the wall. But we eventually, rather quickly, got a desk and a file cabinet.

But in those early years, you never knew exactly where you were going to be in the next year, as they hurriedly kept adapting spaces and moving people around, desperately trying to meet that situation, because the number of courses and the faculty and the need for classrooms were expanding, and there was not always the money there—I guess it always comes down to money eventually—to expand those spaces.

At any rate, our operation was in the little Payne Auditorium. And after about a year there, another crisis quickly developed in that they finally got the money to go ahead with what is the Social Science building now, which is right where the little Payne Auditorium is. So they jacked that sucker up on airplane tires and rolled it across the campus and put it behind what was called Cosner *(sp?)*, which was, again, part of the elementary school system. And we were just in a little gravel clearing there by the side of Cosner. And we would be there for about three years, I think, at least.

I remember we were there when President *(Homer)* Durham first came. And Durham was one of our early presidents who really took an interest in the arts and did come to the plays, and as we later moved on into Gammage, was an important part of that.

So those early years were a matter of, as I said, it often does come down to funding, and in those days, there literally was no funding through the department. We were funded as an activity, and even in those days, you had to pay your student activity fee, and that got you into the football games and basketball games and the school plays. So we had to go to the school committee each semester to get a budget, which was about $600 or $700 a year. So putting things on in those kind of conditions, of course, it was always a challenging kind of thing.

So our early goals then, of course, were finding space, adapting to that, finding ways to do the really good plays that we wanted, within very limited facilities and very limited financial resources for production costs.

A few years after I came, Frank Byers did retire, and then his place was taken by a chap named Don Doyle. He and I then became a two-man department, and it was that way until after Gammage Auditorium was built. I think that first year that Gammage was built, we finally got some actual new lines in the technical areas of the theater. But prior to that time, all the courses, all the direction, all the production were the two of us.

So we kind of—I don't want to sound that old, like when your grandfather said, "I had to go to school and walk ten miles and it was uphill both ways," that kind of thing—but it really is kind of starting from a fairly low point, as you have ambitions to create other programs. And it's more a matter of kind of steady progress rather than, I think, any great leaps ahead. so that one by one, each year, we were able to add a course or two. When we started a course, you could get a minor by combining it with courses in Speech and Drama. We finally got it where you could minor just in Drama, and then finally a major in Drama, and eventually into the graduate area. We were able to staff the first Masters program, and then additional undergraduate majors, then moving on into more specialized graduate areas with MFA programs, and then finally with the doctoral program, which was at least in place before I retired.

So I don't claim any special credit for any of those, because we gradually accumulated a very gifted and talented faculty, but I was there, at least, through all that. I don't think we even really had such a title as Director of Theater. You just had one person, and that was it.

Eventually, that thing which started out as Speech, Drama, and the Speech Sciences, which was a total of either six or seven actual faculty, eventually split into separate departments, and then actually into two separate colleges, so that Speech Communication, in that normal sense, became a part of a new college, and we became part of a new college when the College of Fine Arts was established. Then the Speech Sciences, I think, went back into the College of Liberal Arts, I believe that's where they are today.

INT: How would you describe the effects of growth at ASU, coming up even 'til today?

JY: It is, I suppose, that constant battle of playing catch-up. Obviously, the resources and facilities and size and budgets of things that are available today are just astronomically higher and greater than they were when I started. But I think even today, in relation to peer universities, they're struggling to reach those same heights, 'cause you're constantly playing at the system of catch-up.

I've always kind of regretted that—I can see historically how it happened—but I've always had some regrets that the system where we had just three universities and then the community colleges, without that inter-layer of four-year schools and V.A. schools that is so widely available in the East and Midwest and even in California and up the coast. So it does make it a little harder to develop that general humanitarian approach to undergraduate education when you're within a system that probably places a little greater

value on the research aspects of it, because of the striving logically to be a first-rate research university as well. So I'm sure, in the far future, it will always be a struggle.

And that financial system, of course, has changed so greatly. When we came, most of the university's activities were indeed funded by the legislature, who were not known for their generosity, as legislatures rarely are. But that, over the years, percentage-wise, has declined steadily, and so the university has to constantly be finding other resources of income.

INT: Working in the Theater department, in the Drama department, were you ever personally involved in lobbying the legislature for more money for the university, specifically allocated to Fine Arts?

JY: No. That was a great weakness of mine. I really should be at different places, going out trying to help raise money, but I'm very poor at that, so I rarely did anything along that line.

INT: What would you say was the biggest challenge that you faced as an influential person in the Theater and Drama department at ASU?

JY: I think the things that I have mentioned, because it was more of an incremental thing of each year pushing to add faculty, to include courses, to expand the program, to improve the production value of that.

Sometimes—and I'm sure this is true in any profession any person is in—you get a little discouraged and think you're not accomplishing anything, until you sit down and say, "Well, look, five years ago we didn't have this and this and this, and we actually have improved our situation greatly." And I think it's those kinds of satisfactions that do come, and gradually those things do happen.

An important part of that was the development of Gammage Auditorium, which came along in the '60s. It was kind of one of the last big projects of Dr. *(Grady)* Gammage, after whom the facility is named, that he was able to talk Frank Lloyd Wright into making a commitment. And what they came up was just wonderful: the auditorium, of course, which exists today. but this was planned as a whole arts complex; in other words, these other buildings that would be built around the auditorium. So that on one side, there was a Music building, with all the classrooms, practice rooms, recital hall and smaller recital halls. And then slightly on the other side, the Art building, with the studios and labs and classrooms and an art gallery. And then there was the smaller theatre. Gammage, of course, is just enormous, and is not practical for not only amateur actors or school-age actors, but simply for the best kind of facility for drama in general. For certain types of plays and things, and certainly for musicals and operas, it works very well, but ongoing, it is a massive facility for training young people. But this was to go with the smaller theatre, that would be just behind where Gammage is now. So you would have those three other facilities, and architecturally they were all matched with the traditional circles and curves of the Wright architectural approach. But none of that ever

got funded. Gradually, those other things developed, but as independent projects not related to that central idea.

But Gammage did provide a performance outlet. There was opportunity then, for quite a number of years, we would do three productions in Gammage—a straight play, an opera, and a musical theater presentation. And they were joint, the two musical works, were joint productions with the department of Music and the department of Dance, so there was a wonderful kind of cooperation there, and a lot of people got some very fine experiences in working with that.

But a smaller theatre is always the preferred. So ultimately other construction plans doomed little Payne Auditorium as well.

But actually just before we got into Gammage, they finally decided to re-convert the Lyceum building back into a theatre space. That's kind of an interesting building, too. It was built by the WPA back in the'30s. It was initially the boiler plant for the university, and when they made a much larger physical plant/boiler facility, I think where it is now, when they moved the boilers out, they had a big space, with very solid walls. I think this was in the late '30s, they reconstructed it as what they termed a lyceum, using the old Greek concept of philosophy and the arts. Then they built a little extension that would be like a lobby, it was a wonderful space, with lovely hardwood floors and a great big wood-burning fireplace. And then a little ballroom, that came off of that, and then they built a little stage at the end of that. And back in those heady days, there was no Student Union at that time, so when you had school dances and faculty suppers and receptions for dignitaries, you used this lovely little Lyceum.

Then when the crunch came, with the end of the war and the G.I. Bill, that building got taken over, and it just became a warren of little partitions and spaces—most of Psychology, a lot of Sociology, were in that building. You would not know that it had ever been an open performing space, because it was all divided into little cubbyholes and offices and little seminar rooms. Where that little stage was was the Psychology rat department, where they did experiments with the rats. We always thought that was probably ironically an apt a use of that space as we had made as well.

But finally, they got the Social Sciences building built, and they moved Psychology and Sociology into those buildings. So we got, I remember the figure, just about $30,000, and most of that was spent in getting rid of all the old partitions and things. But we re-converted it into a theatre. Cartmel *(sp?)*, a very fine architect, who later did a lot of really splendid stuff in the Valley, I'm sure he made no money on our little conversion, but he converted it back to a theatre that seated maybe 140. It was a little cramped, because there was no overhead space at all, it was just the top of the building. But it had a nice lobby then and a good space, and it became primarily the home where most of our productions would be, while we assumed that almost every year or so, our new playhouse will be built.

But we always followed that plan with the Regents, I don't know if they called it levels or not, but you had certain projects that were inching up, waiting for approval, and they were always prioritized, so that things could go up but then they could fall down. It seemed like oh, you almost got up there, but they had just enough to do the first three projects, and it didn't happen until just the year that I retired, when it finally all came together. And my colleagues gave me the privilege of directing the first show in the new complex.

INT: Which show was that, out of curiousity?

JY: It was "Of Mice and Men." I've virtually never directed the same play twice, but that was one that I had directed very early when we got back into the Lyceum, and it had such a strong cast, and I always remembered that with such affection. So that was the show that we did again as that first play there.

But with that addition of what's called the Galvin Playhouse in that complex of the Fine Arts there, Dance and sections of Music and sections of the ASU Museum are now all there.

INT: You've mentioned quite a bit about the pride you take in the steady growth of the Theater and the Drama programs during your tenure. But aside from that, is there one accomplishment from your time at ASU that you're most proud of?

JY: No. Again, I tend to think of it more in a collective way. There weren't big victories, there were a lot of little advances.

Incidentally, as this related to the relation of ASU to Tempe, I remember with so much affection when probably it was a little closer in a lot of ways, because not only was ASU much smaller, but Tempe was much smaller. And obviously we would go down frequently to Mill Avenue, and if you're building sets, you have to go to Tempe Hardware and those lovely two old gentlemen—I'm sorry their names escape me right now—they were twins who were part of the Tempe Hardware store who always knew everything and how to get it. And O'Malley's Lumber, which was right there where they're putting up a new high-rise now, you would constantly be going there for paint and lumber. And Tempe Sales, which I think still exists, it's not in downtown Tempe now, but they had great stocks of unusual fabric and things, which were ideal. So there is kind of more of a relationship to the town.

And when we came, also, people tend to forget . . . . You are living here now in almost like theater heaven, there are about 75 groups within the county, within your availability here, of theater companies. And anything that is touring at all will find its way into our community, perhaps at Gammage. And such great facilities all around, in Scottsdale and Mesa and the Herberger in downtown Phoenix. And those just simply didn't exist. And not only for training people in the theater, but we felt very strongly that our mission was to provide good theater for the community, because there weren't many alternatives. There was Phoenix Little Theater, there was Phoenix College, and there was ASU, and

that basically was it. It was a time in the national history of the theater when the road had evaporated, there were more railroads to run that system, television and the movies were so dominant in that given area. So we served, we felt, a very direct function, and wanted to be that, providing the best theater that we could for this community.

INT: What would you say was the biggest innovation that came out of your time at ASU?

JY: I don't know. I don't know how you would prioritize something like that. I'd have to go back to my more gradual change; that is, slowly of course, everything grew—the buildings were there, the facilities were there, the new programs became established.

INT: So just generally speaking, the growth of the program itself you see as an innovation?

JY: Yes, I suppose that is. It would be hard to find, I think, another university that went so far so fast. And there are, of course, penalties that come with that; one of them, I think, being that you establish programs and ideas that you don't really have the full funding or base for. That you improvise, that you put things together—well, we'll use a course out of this department that already exists and one out of this one that already exists, and we'll make kind of a new program.

I think the one thing, perhaps a question that you would ask, if there were things that didn't come together that you would like to have seen, it would have been something like the Film program. Initially, and I suppose the first couple of decades here, we didn't think too much about this. We were so concerned with developing live theater performances and the personnel and technicians and so forth for that. But, obviously, in a practical kind of way, there are probably as many, indeed if not substantially more, positions for actors and producers and designers and lighting technicians and so forth in the area of film and television than there are in live theater, though both of these areas have grown substantially. But it's very difficult, and it takes a lot of money, to really develop that kind of thing from scratch. And so you sense its importance, you sense people here who want to direct films, to learn how they're produced, to learn the technology of cameras and lighting for film, and those kinds of things. So over many, many years, there were programs developed which kind of put together, and you can get some work in this, though it is so hard to establish that as an ongoing thing.

But you find yourself being proud of the people that you've produced, and you look around, and one of the highlights of Phoenix theater is Phoenix Theatre, and Michael Barnard, who is the artistic director there, came through our program and worked in some of those difficult situations. We're very proud of people like the Childsplay group. David Saar was one of our fairly early graduate students, as Don Doyle brought in a great emphasis and background in theater for children, which has been developed by Don and later assisted by Lynn Wright and others, to be of major importance. Then David came away with some of these ideas and established Childsplay, which is one of the best children's professional theater companies in the world, I would say. And the City of Tempe has now provided them a magnificent space. That Performing Arts Center in

Tempe is just a jewel, and we're very proud that Childsplay is one of their resident companies.

INT: I will ask you one more question, and we have just a couple minutes before I need to change the tape, so I'll just give you a hand signal so that I don't interrupt you too suddenly. Can you tell me about one thing that you wish you could have accomplished during your tenure at ASU that you couldn't, for whatever reason?

JY: I think that ideal of Film would be one of those that I don't know how many times and in different ways, combining sources from Audio Visual education and from the English department to kind of put together something, or to try to. We actually did a production or so within the studios at KAET, but we could never really quite develop something, actually having dramatic works going out through Channel 8, there were just so many blocks there. And I think that, as we know, that theater, the film aspects of it and the television aspects of it, are an important part of contemporary theater. And I think that since my retirement that they have made some substantial requirements, though I think they're probably still struggling with getting it to that point to where they have the financial backing to get the actual equipment and instruments and to be able to hire the kind of personnel who have that direct knowledge and experience in the hands-on work of film. So I think they're getting well-established in perhaps writing for film and certainly in the study of film in the past. And I would predict that perhaps that will be an area of growth in the future.

INT: Okay. I'd like to take this opportunity to flip the tape. This will conclude Side A of the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with James Yeater.

(end of recording)

Side B

INT: The Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with James Yeater, this is Side B, and today's date is July 1, 2008.

Can you tell me please, looking at the university as a whole, what you think ASU excels at the most today?

JY: Well, obviously, they are very much open to change and to the incorporation of technology into what they're doing. Sometimes, I think, a lot of these things are a matter of developing new terminology for things that have always existed, but they certainly are at the forefront in trying to mold the university with the way the country, with the way the world, is going, and I have great admiration for that.

You can't have it all—you can't be both big, and you lose the advantages of being smaller. You're sometimes asked, "How big do you think this will be?" and my hope would always be, "I hope it doesn't get bigger; I hope it gets smaller and more selective." It often just seems to me the sheer amount of what they're doing, the increase in the

complexity of things continually, is going to pull resources from that educational interaction between teachers and students, which always seemed to me to be the essence of the university situation.

But you can't go home again; the world changes and moves on. And I think at one time I said in this interview that I thought it was unfortunate that Arizona had not developed that intermediate plane of higher education, that you have to jump from the community college to a doctoral research program or a _____ university, with not that in-between. Then it occurred to me that, in a way, there is an in-between, with things like the University of Phoenix, which I don't know why I don't even think of it in ways of being a college, and yet obviously it is—not only a college, but a very big college, probably with almost as much enrollment as ASU, if not more.

And so, a great deal of higher education will have to adapt to that kind of technology of internet learning processes, which I assume will get more and more refined as time goes along, and education will have to adapt to that, the same way it did when we were inundated by students after World War II. And such good things came out of that, so you are always optimistic that, down the line, all of this will come to some fruition. So it's easy to see that a lot of that personal touch that was so important, I think, to older teachers will be lost in this increasingly mass-connected kind of a teaching situation.

INT: Very similarly to what you just said, mentioning the good and the bad of the size and the technology and the personal touch being lost, would you equate that to one of ASU's major weaknesses today?

JY: In a lot of ways, I suppose I would.

Some things that they have developed, like the Honors College, it seems to me that this is a superb movement within the university, and you kind of wish every student could be in the Honors College. And so there is that attempt to maintain that really personal relationship between teachers, and to really deal with students who intensely want to learn and to relate and find values in their lives, rather than prepare for a career.

INT: Keeping the idea of the university as a whole, how did ASU change as an organization during your tenure?

JY: When I came, of course, it was still a College. The first semester I was here was the big election. The higher levels of government—I don't know whether it was the Regents or the legislature—wouldn't let Arizona State be called Arizona State University. The pressure from the University of Arizona was quite intense, so it became a ballot issue. And the people associated, all our alumni and faculty wives and so forth, worked hard, getting petitions and getting out the vote. So that November the first year that we were there, we became a university, but there were four colleges: Education, Engineering, Business, and Liberal Arts, everything else. And then the graduate college itself is a college, though it doesn't have instruction exactly.

So we were initially in Liberal Arts, that is, Drama was. But it was divided into divisions. I always remember a wonderful English professor who was head of our—I think they called the division Language and Letters or something like that—and it included English, Foreign Language, Journalism, and Speech and Drama. And then there was another division . . . . You're a History major, aren't you? I think there was all the Social Sciences, so there was a division of History and Political Science and Economics and so on and so forth. Then gradually, of course, that began to change.

The big change came actually in the same year, in the early '60s, when Gammage Auditorium got built, and at that same time, they established the first college of Fine Arts. And all of Music and Art and Speech and Drama moved out of Liberal Arts into that college of Fine Arts. This would be the early '60s or so.

Then, of course, later on, other changes occurred. The Speech, that is the Communications part of it, eventually moved into that new Public Programs. It's quite different there. I think much of that is moving to the downtown *(Phoenix)* campus now. And in the Speech Sciences, as they developed, they had really quite separate interests. I think they're back in Liberal Arts, among the Audiology and Speech Correction, as they got bigger and moved into things.

But almost to the time, I think, that I retired, the university was still that sort of standard kind of organization, where you had departments within colleges responsible to a vice president. In more recent years . . . . I don't know, maybe the colleges eventually will disappear, as things become more interlocked across traditional lines of departments and colleges. There are so many institutes and things. There's been a very great emphasis on relationships between often what you think of as being pretty separate kinds of disciplines in their pure form, to make new approaches to knowledge. So as you look down through the phone book or something and note the way things are organized into centers and institutes and interdisciplinary kinds of functions, those things have just multiplied. I expect particularly under *(President Michael)* Crow, that kind of thing is finding new ways or is rapidly changing the terminology on that.

There is a risk in that in some ways. As you develop these interlocking things, you have to develop a bureaucracy that's going to integrate it and dole out the money. So, it seems to me very substantial increases in resources going into administration, as opposed to the direct professor/student contact.

INT: Looking ahead, a little over sixty years, to Tempe's Bicentennial, 2071 would be the year, where do you see Arizona State University at that time? Give us your best guess.

JY: I would tend to predict that it will be all over the area. Obviously, it cannot physically expand in central Tempe. And the branches at Williams Field and in downtown Phoenix and on the west side, I predict that that will continue. Just as a lot of people think that Phoenix and Tucson will gradually grow together to be one urban complex and the universities practically mesh in that way.

INT: Let me ask you the same question about the Fine Arts program at Arizona State University. Where do you see that aspect of the university in 2071?

JY: I've kind of thought about this particularly. I don't know, in a way, that as you train musicians, as you train a pianist or a soprano, that you do that in an awfully different way than you did in the 18th century or earlier. When you begin to deal with the arts, it is such an individual kind of thing. No matter the structure around which you finally finance the whole thing and put it together, the basic aspect of the teacher and the student remains a very constant kind of thing, as it has always been. An actor or a singer or a painter has to learn those skills and learn the art part of it—the injection of the feeling and emotions into the techniques that they need—are pretty unchanging over the centuries. The way in which they're set up to meet with their students, I suppose, will have changed, in different kinds of ways. And maybe some aspects, like music theory or theater history, something like that, might continue to find resources on the internet and reach other people in unconventional kinds of ways. But when it comes down to training the artists, it's still gotta be a very, very close human kind of contact.

INT: Can you relate a funny or an interesting story from your time at ASU, any sort of anecdote that particularly sticks with you?

JY: Oh, yeah. When you're working in theater, things happen a great deal.

INT: Bloopers, I imagine.

JY: Bloopers, yes, and missed lines, and not getting quite the right word out, and that sort of thing. They kind of blend in together.

But I had looked at this little note on the outline that you sent me, and thinking back, and thinking, "Is there kind of one little image like that?" And as you kind of gather, the thrust of my remarks has been triumphing over adversaries and complications and gradually really building quite a good program, I think. But I was kind of thinking about this, and then I got to thinking, "Was there kind of one thing that would encapsulate the difficulties that we faced in those years, with facilities and with money and everything else?"

And I happened to think, just after we had moved the little Payne Auditorium out of its location into its new site, we finally got a lighting board, and old Luxitrol *(sp?)* six-dimmer thing, so we suddenly had something we could work with a little more. But we were still in the Payne Auditorium, which if you open it up enough to really get the performance space that you needed, there was literally no off-stage space. And a play that we elected was "Antigone," the Greek drama, in a modern French version. But we really wanted to kind of show off a little and take full advantage of using carefully-controlled lighting effects so that we could follow the action on stage and kind of mold things and give them a little more of a professional kind of feeling. We really had a wonderful cast in the key roles for that. But to do that, you really had to have someone who could see the stage and call the cues, and there was no place to put that person. I

couldn't really put him in the audience, 'cause you would hear the person. There was no place overhead, and if you were backstage, you couldn't see. So the only way . . . . We'd been fortunate, we outfitted ourselves a lot with what was called government surplus at that time. You go over there, you find wonderful things. We got lights and trunks and all kinds of things, and we got a little batch of walkie-talkies, Army surplus walkie-talkies. So we had our stage manager . . . . There were windows, of course, on this little building, all the way around. We had shades that we'd pull down so that could get it black in the auditorium. So we left the shade up on the window at the back of the auditorium, and our stage manager would peer in and see, and then he had his walkie-talkie that would go to the walkie-talkie that the person on the light board had, which was back by the toilet.

Incidentally, the one toilet in the building was centered right backstage, so it was awkward, 'cause we really couldn't flush the toilet during a performance, as that would be a very unaesthetic sound. You wouldn't want, right in the middle of "Antigone," to have the toilet flush. But that's beside the point.

The person on our Luxitrol backstage could execute these intricate light cues at the direction of the stage manager, who was peering through the window from the back of the house. And that worked, and we got through the first two performances very nicely. And then, about the third performance of the first week, it rained, and it just poured rain. So I still have that little vision of—the chap's name was Jim Seaman, who later had a pretty good career in theater—Jim was at the back, with an umbrella and in a raincoat, and he was just shivering, but holding his walkie-talkie and peering through a slot in the window, calling in the sound cues and the light cues for this great drama that was unfolding onstage.

So that's a capsule, if you can see what it was. Go over to the Galvin theatre now, and you can see that we've really come a long way.

INT: Right. Just one of the quirks of working with limited facilities at the time.

JY: Right. I think so, because that production, I remember with such vision, it was good work, with a good cast and good material to work with, and the audiences responded. And, again, in those days, we had good audiences, and ran things for seven or eight performances, over two weeks, so you got a little of the feeling of an actual run. And I think people found that theatrical stimulation, even in our little Payne Auditorium.

And others were going on in about the same deal. We had not really, for instance, had much opera prior to . . . . There had been a little bit. Dave S_____, of Music—who became the first manager of Gammage Auditorium, he had managed a kind of Lyceum and concert series before the big auditorium was built—had done some. But when Ken Sipe came into the Music department and was most interested in opera and musical theater as well, we worked together on a great many productions, but then, of course, we were also doing our own productions mainly in the Lyceum.

And there was an old dining hall that was left over, again, from the training school that was actually kind of where the arts complex is today, it was called Cosner, and was used by the kids in the training school. That was a little complex where Tempe Center is now; of course, it was the original Tempe High School before they built the one out there so they tied in together. And they faced kind of the same thing, they were doing things in an old cafeteria from the elementary school. We had our little restroom, so they let us use their restrooms, since we had nothing but that one toilet backstage in the little Payne Auditorium—it was always called an auditorium, though we seated about 40 max. Some patrons would be a little put off, because this, of course, was an elementary school. So all of the sinks and the urinals, the toilets, were child-size, so you had to bend over to wash your hands or to do other things. But any port in a storm. (laughter)

INT: What kind of cultural impact did ASU have on the city of Tempe, before and after your tenure?

JY: Again, as I say, we really felt a responsibility in those early years—I know the first year I came, so that Frank had already been working on this before I came—to establish a Shakespeare Festival. And there was a philanthropist in Phoenix named Alfred Knight who had an interest in Shakespeare, and he had accumulated a marvelous library of Elizabethan documents. And he was interested in Shakespeare, and he put up the money. So for about three years, I think, we had a festival that combined Arizona State and Phoenix College and the Phoenix Little Theatre. And, basically, again, these three groups, that was it, just about, in the Valley. So if you wanted to attend the theater very much, you kind of went to productions of one of these three groups. So we combined. I remember the Shakespeare Festival, it actually was a little festival. Each one of those groups did a different play, of course, and we did them in succession in kind of one event. It really played quite well to audiences.

So as I say, theater was, in the broader sense, was at a premium at that particular time, in the late ‘50s and ‘60s. As the road had dried up, and even the movies were feeling the brunt of television and were in decline. All those great houses. I missed the Paramount Theater in downtown Phoenix; it was gone the year before we came. The Orpheum, by that time, was doing three Spanish B pictures a year. There was no place to put any road show or any touring attraction in the Valley.

There was a wonderful lady, I’m trying to think of her name, who did promote several—Mrs. Lindy was her name—and the best place in the Valley, or practically the only place, was the auditorium at Phoenix Union High School, which I think still exists. I’m not sure what form it is, but the building is still there. It was a pretty good stage, and I remember seeing things Mrs. Lindy brought in, two or three things a year. I remember seeing John Gielgud in “The Seven Ages of Man” there, and MacLiesh’s “J.B.” and some musicals and other things.

But by and large, there was just an absolute dearth, because there was no facility to handle anything like that, until finally when Gammage Auditorium came along, and suddenly you had a venue that could handle the roadshows. And so Gammage, and the

events that we staged in Gammage, supplemented the community theater in Phoenix, the Phoenix Theatre, and Phoenix College. If you wanted to see live theater, those were basically your options. Now there was a winter repertoire theater, called the Sombrero Theater, that operated in the tourist season, January through about April.

So we always felt that we were not just the school, we were part of the cultural scene of the Valley. That's probably less of a function now of the theater on campus, since there is a great other theater scene, with professional productions all over the Valley now. But I think we filled a very important need, as did the other aspects of the art, with Dance and certainly with Music as well.

INT: One more question, just to wrap up the interview, a very broad question. How did Arizona State University help define the city of Tempe?

JY: I suppose, even in its earliest time, it's almost the biggest employer, in some ways. And then again, the downtown area, along Mill Avenue there, and the campus are just integrated physically or geographically into one unit. We've got to live together.

I remember when I first came, the campus, of course, did not have those malls or things like that. Those were all streets, connecting streets. As you came to class, you could park, there was on-street parking. You could park right in front of East Hall or . . . . Probably not, it was always taken, but theoretically you could. So at each of the block areas, you could drive right through, one way or another.

And it was amazing, so much of my memory . . . . I mentioned where our first office was, we weren't there very long, but throughout that early period, I remember all of that row of houses behind what would be Tempe Center. Of course, all of those, and one block further east, were all homes. And as the university gradually took them over, then they couldn't afford to build anything yet, but they had the property, so I think particularly so much of Music was part of that. I remember the Lyric Opera, who we co-produced with on the musicals and operas, were in those series of houses. And again, the same way, the bathtubs were piled high with music scores, and they used what had once been somebody's living room and dining room for rehearsal spaces for operas and so forth, right in what were people's homes.

Incidentally, Tempe was going through the same thing when we first came. We've always loved the library. The Tempe Library is a great, great asset to this community. When we came—it would be about where the present-day City Hall is—but it was in what had been somebody's home once. You came up on the porch, and you realized …. I remember the 792 collections were kind of in what would have been the master bedroom. And then the next step, I think the library moved into a series of buildings in the shopping center along Southern and Mill, I think, somewhere along in there, where Walt's TV is now, that was our magnificent library. But the people were so good, and they blended right in with that, probably because it was obviously a much smaller kind of base to start with.

And there were so many really affordable restaurants along Mill as you went down there—a wonderful bakery and things like that—that kept bringing people working on campus and the students, of course, into very, very close contact. And I think that is obviously there, as buildings spring up right along Mill Avenue that are classrooms, and a part of it.

Tempe, I think, has been so incredibly wise in developing their transportation system. It is just remarkable, and it all kind of terminates there, in close proximity to where the campus is and where the center of the town is. It is just amazing that you can get almost . . . I mean, now, it's free. So many of those little neighborhood buses, that Orbit system, is just extraordinary, and just bound to create a strong community, because you can get around within the community.

INT: Okay. I don't have any further questions for you for this interview, but if there's anything else that you would like to add while we're on the record, any final remarks or closing remarks?

JY: No. It's been fun, thinking back over some of those years and the changes we've seen, and I'm sure it will continue to move in ways we can't really conceive right now. I don't know whether I would have thought about things like the internet and so forth in those early years.

INT: In that case, we'll go ahead and conclude the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with James Yeater on July 1, 2008.

JY: Okey-dok.

(end of recording)

Transcribed by Susan Jensen
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