KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH HARRISON O. LONG

CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Tuesday, 14 October 2013
Location: Dean's Conference Room, College of the Arts, KSU

TS: The interview today is with Harrison Long who is the 2014 recipient of the Distinguished Professor Award and is an associate professor of Theatre & Performance Studies and interim associate dean of the College of the Arts. Harrison why don't we begin by talking about your background? You were just telling me a minute ago that you grew up in Cobb County, so why don't you talk about that?

HL: Tom, when I was born my father was pastor of the McEachern First United Methodist Church out in West Cobb. We lived there until I was three years old. Then my father moved to Acworth First United Methodist Church where we lived until I was almost nine years old. Then we moved out of Cobb County to Conyers. Methodist ministers move around a lot. I never dreamed I would move back to the Atlanta area, let alone Cobb County, but here I am raising my own family. There's a special joy and a special meaning that comes with being a part of the community I was connected to early in my life.

TS: I guess so. What was your father's name, by the way?

HL: Nathaniel Harrison Long, but he went by "Nat."

TS: Okay. So you ended up with his middle name.

HL: I did. It's a Southern tradition for names to move from the last name to the middle name to the first name as it moves through the generations. Harrison was *his* mother's maiden name. They were from Jackson County, Georgia. Then Harrison became his middle name and finally my first name. The same pattern is true with my son, Oliver, my oldest son.

TS: Oh that's your middle name, isn't it?

HL: That's right. And Oliver was my mother's maiden name. In fact, you remind me a little bit, Tom, of her brother, Hoyt Oliver who is a professor emeritus at Emory at Oxford.

TS: What's your mother's name?

HL: Linda Lee Oliver Long.

TS: So you grew up a preacher's son.

HL: I did. My father, both of my grandfathers, three uncles, and one aunt were all ordained Methodist ministers.

TS: You didn't have a chance, did you?

HL: Well, there are a lot of similarities in what they do and what I do.

TS: Oh, really?

HL: Sure. As a kid, I went to church, three times a week: Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. Church is the place where I learned how storytelling can change people for the better. When someone tells a meaningful story, a transformation occurs. I suspect you can relate to that as well.

TS: Absolutely.

HL: So I was connected to the theatre through that. A lot of ministers' kids have chosen a life in the theatre—Laurence Olivier, for example.

TS: Wow, I didn't know that. But it makes sense because it's really a performance when you get up and preach a sermon, I think.

HL: Good preaching *is* a performance. Good preachers and good actors have a lot in common. Sometimes when I explain that, people assume I'm saying that preachers are disingenuous. That's not what I'm saying. They think good acting means convincing your audience of a lie. Sometimes when people find out that I'm an actor, they say: "Well, I'll watch out for you. You must be a good liar." Then I tell people that actors and liars are opposites.

TS: Well, you're telling a truth through your performance.

HL: That's exactly right. A liar tells a falsehood under real circumstances. But an actor tells the *truth* under imaginary circumstances. Good actors and good artists are like good preachers. They *have* to tell the truth. That's why good preachers and good artists make a lot of people uncomfortable.

TS: That's good! Okay, so you bounced around from place to place growing up, but good Cobb County roots. You were saying earlier your great-grandmother lived here too?

HL: That's right.

TS: Went back to at least Reconstruction?

HL: Yes. Her name was Mamie Langley Oliver. She was born in 1888 around the Loganville area. But by the time I was born she lived just off Marietta Square.

TS: Which way off of the Square?

HL: Just past Roy Barnes' law office.

TS: Okay, going out Atlanta Street.

HL: Out Atlanta Street there's an old apartment building.

TS: Yes, I know exactly where it is.

HL: That's where she lived.

TS: There were a lot of schoolteachers who lived in that apartment building.

HL: She *was* a schoolteacher.

TS: Waterman Street School wasn't far away.

HL: Yes, that’s it! She taught first grade at the Waterman Street School.

TS: I live not too far away from there, just south of South Marietta Parkway.

HL: I love that area.

TS: I've got the view of the Confederate cemetery right out the front door.

HL: Whenever I’m over that way, it takes me back to my childhood. We always passed through there on the way to visit “Big Mama.” That’s what we called my great-grandmother. I always think of her when I pass the Confederate cemetery.

TS: Great. Where did you go to school?

HL: I went to Acworth Elementary through the third grade, and then we moved to Conyers.

TS: I ought to ask you, what year were you born?

HL: In 1966.

TS: Okay, so you go to Acworth Elementary and then move to Conyers.

HL: I moved to Conyers when my dad was appointed pastor of the Conyers First United Methodist church. We lived there until I was in tenth grade, and then we moved over by Chastain Park in Atlanta.

TS: He had a pastorate over there?

HL: He was the pastor at St. James United Methodist Church. Interestingly, my dad’s father, Nat G. Long, helped start that church. We moved to Atlanta a little over a year after my mother died.

TS: While you were in Conyers?

HL: While I was in Conyers, when I was fourteen years old. She was schizophrenic. She ran away when they were taking her back to the state mental institution. Mama had several visits to Milledgeville, and that was a very difficult thing for all of us. My father was a very determined, brilliant person, but had a mild case of CP. He was very determined and ambitious.

TS: CP is . . .?

HL: Cerebral Palsy. A mild case, but even so it took a lot of effort to keep his hands steady and enunciate his words. When I was a kid, he worked a lot of twelve and fourteen hour days. When he was tired, he might slur his speech or stumble a little. Some people who didn’t know him misinterpreted his condition. They thought he might have taken a drink or two. But in reality, my father never touched a sip of alcohol— Well I *used* to be able to say “never in his life,” but on rare occasions, after he retired from the ministry, my dad got a little wild and would order a strawberry daiquiri. Only one.

TS: For medicinal purposes?

HL: Strictly for medicinal purposes. Honestly, I think it appealed to his latent rebellious tendencies more than anything else…that and his love of sweets. But despite CP, my dad accomplished a lot. He was a great man, a *complicated* man. As an undergraduate at Emory University, he was twice elected president of the student senate, which was really something for somebody who had a mild case of CP, particularly in the late 1950s, early 1960s.

TS: Wow. Well, a preacher's wife is always in the public spotlight. It had to be difficult on her.

HL: That's exactly right. It is a high profile position to be the wife of a small town minister, particularly in those days. There was a lot of pressure. People held the minister's family to a higher standard. Which is not to say that we lived up to it in every way. Being a minister's wife was a demanding job in its own right—and an underappreciated job. Yes, my mother's illness was difficult for him—for all of us. But the people of the church also gave our family a great deal of loving support.

TS: Absolutely. It had to be when you were fourteen years old and younger.

HL: My mother's illness and death was *the* formative experience of my life, very painful, and it will continue to be for as long as I live. On the other hand, having that experience early in life helped me in some ways. Sometimes people who experience tragedy early on develop empathy or sensitivity or a dash of wisdom here and there. Despite the pain of all of that, I think it taught me a lot.

TS: I'm sure. So you go to Woodward Academy?

HL: My father got remarried about a year after my mother died. We moved to Atlanta. My older brother went to college, and my grandmother, who had been living with us, moved out. My head was spinning. I was sort of a temperamental kid to begin with. So the decision was made . . .

TS: You had been through a lot.

HL: I had. The decision was made to send me to Woodward Academy, which in those days retained a little bit of military discipline. Woodward was originally Georgia Military Academy.

TS: I was surprised they didn't send you to a military school.

HL: Well, this was very kin to that. Some of the old military faculty were still around when I was there. Major This and Colonel That. It was a growth experience for me. Of course, even a successful minister doesn't make the kind of money it takes to send a kid to boarding school. But a woman in our church named Blanche Hagan sensed that our family was going through a lot of pain. She paid for me to attend. Blanche really took us under her wing. In some ways, her generosity saved my life.

TS: So you boarded at Woodward?

HL: I boarded at Woodward because she paid for it. I'll always be deeply indebted to her for that. She was sort of an adopted grandmother.

TS: So you spent two years at Woodward?

HL: Then I went to Florida State University.

TS: Let me do my math. This would be like 1984 that you . . . .?

HL: That's right. I graduated from high school in '84.

TS: I guess the question all minister's kids get asked is why theatre and not the ministry?

HL: Well, a couple of responses. One time somebody asked me what it was like to be a minister's kid, and I said it's like being backstage at a magic show because you know all the tricks. Preachers are human too, but they're not allowed to *seem* like they're human in public. To paraphrase Shakespeare: "Shut the doors upon a [person's feelings], and it will out at the casement. Shut that, and 'twill out at the keyhole." Sometimes all those feelings we're not allowed to show in public come out in the home.

TS: You can't be perfect all the time.

HL: That's right. My father was a great man, but he was a very passionate man, and there was an intensity there.

TS: And you didn't want to go through that yourself?

HL: No, I didn't. I tell people that I didn't go into the ministry because ministers can't tell people "go to hell." But I don't really mean that. I respect the ministry. Some aspects of the ministry are very appealing to me. If I had unlimited time and money, I'd love to enroll at Candler School of Theology because I love to discuss theology. I'm still an active member of the United Methodist Church, but I'm not cut out for ordination. But, the truth is I don't see my career path as a big departure from my father's or my grandfathers', both of whom were ministers. As a young man, I thought it was I was choosing a much different path, but now I believe my career is more of an extension of what they did. It feels like I'm carrying on a tradition. There are a lot of preacher's kids in the theatre because the theatre is a kind of church too. As a child I would go to church three times a week, Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. I saw people's lives transformed through the art of storytelling, through *authentic* storytelling. My dad was very good at that.

TS: So you're getting to what should have been the question I asked, which is why theatre?

HL: Well, because I do the same thing that my dad did. It's a ritual. Part of the reason my dad was a great preacher—and he was a *great* preacher—was he brought his whole *self* into the preaching. There wasn't anything artificial about it. He was a smart guy; he'd gone to Emory; he'd gone to Drew University in New Jersey; he went to Yale Divinity School. He has two master's degrees, one from Yale Divinity, and one from Drew. Then he came back later in life—younger than I am now—and got a doctorate in homiletics from Candler School of Theology at Emory again. Smart guy, but there was nothing overly heady about him; he was very accessible. For me, the theatre was something that was my own. I needed something that was mine. My mother was ill, and because she was ill, I needed something that belonged to me that didn't involve someone looking over

my shoulder. It was a way of working through my own stuff like my father did through his preaching.

TS: Were you acting in school plays before you ever went to college?

HL: I did. I had done a few church plays, but I decided to be an actor when I was in eighth grade. At that time that my mother's illness was in full force and I needed something to help me escape. I was cast as the understudy in the middle school play. I showed up for rehearsal everyday to help the other students learn their lines. Then, the boy who was cast in the leading role dropped out because his father thought rehearsals were taking too much time away from baseball practice. So I got the role by default and decided that acting is what I wanted to do. It's an enormous blessing to know what you want to do.

TS: Oh, yes, and at a young age too. It's remarkable that you would know by junior high school what you wanted to do.

HL: It's not easy to be an actor. But I don't regret it for a moment. The rest of my family are mostly teachers, so I come by the academic side pretty honest, despite the fact that I wasn't a great student until my final year of graduate school.

TS: I find that hard to believe.

HL: I got better and better. I'm a pretty good student *now*. That's one of the best reasons to become a teacher; you continue to learn.

TS: That's good. So why Florida State?

HL: At the time I didn't really know which theatre programs were the best ones, but I had heard some pretty good things about FSU. Every summer they used to produce three or four musicals on Jekyll Island. About the time that we started looking at colleges, my dad took the family on vacation down there, and we saw a couple of shows. That's how I became interested in Florida State. I suppose I got lucky. FSU taught me a lot about my craft and a lot about life.

TS: So you go through Florida State and then you go straight to SMU [Southern Methodist University] from there?

HL: I did. SMU in Dallas, Texas, and that was another good experience, very different from my undergraduate experience.

TS: Oh, really? How was it different?

HL: The Meadows School of the Arts is a conservatory, rather than an academic program. I didn't have to write one formal paper in graduate school. Can you believe that? It was primarily practical experience rather than scholarship, but it was extremely challenging in a different way. I fell in love with Shakespeare at SMU. I had started to enjoy Shakespeare as an undergraduate, but SMU was where that love took hold because the program emphasizes classical training. The years I spent working primarily in the theatre, more than half of what I did was Shakespeare. That was a great experience too. Shakespeare is a wonderful acting teacher.

TS: So let's see, 1988 you got your bachelor's, and in '91 you got your MFA. Somewhere, I can't find the date, but I think you were already doing professional acting by that time?

HL: How did you find out this information?

TS: Well, I just read it on your website. It said 1986 your professional acting career began, so that was halfway through your undergraduate degree.

HL: By that time FSU's summer program at Jekyll Island had moved to Panama City Beach. My first professional acting gig was performing musical theatre on the "Redneck Rivera," as we called it.

TS: Yes. There's a book [Harvey H.] Hardy Jackson [III] wrote that just came out on the Redneck Riviera and the history of it [*The Rise and Decline of the Redneck Riviera: An Insider's History of the Florida-Alabama Coast* (University of Georgia Press, 2013)].

HL: Is that right? It was a good summer. They paid us a minuscule amount of money, but it was fun. They put us up in a hotel right on the beach. Once the shows were open, we had our days free. We performed at night, and would go to the Lands End Oyster Bar for a pitcher of beer and cheap oysters on the half-shell. Thankfully, I was so burdened with insecurity in those years that I managed to stay out of a lot of trouble.

TS: I was thinking, that's pretty rebellious drinking that beer every night.

HL: Well, not *every* night. I couldn't afford that. My behavior was pretty tame in comparison to some of my theatrical colleagues. But for my family, yes, that was quite rebellious.

TS; Okay, by the time you get through your masters, what are you thinking about for a career that you want to make your living by? Acting, or making your living by teaching or a little bit of both or where are you at that point?

HL: No it was all about being a professional actor. Although I was savvy enough to realize that an MFA would allow me to teach college if I ever wanted to. The MFA is a terminal degree in my field. And I know that it's a *terminal* degree because it nearly killed me! Of course, early career, actors, even with terminal degrees, often get spear-carrier roles and are required to move scenery during transitions. We used to say that MFA stands for "Moving Furniture Around." I worked with the Texas Shakespeare Festival a couple of summers and then . . .

TS: While you were in school?

HL: While I was in school. Then I worked at the Utah Shakespearean Festival, which has become one of the more prestigious Shakespeare Festivals in the country. They've won the Tony Award now [in May 2000] for [America's Outstanding] Regional Theatre. That was my first job out of acting school. My next job, other than a brief stint as a failed waiter, was working for the worst television show of all time called *Dangerous Curves*.

TS: I saw that you did that, and I don't know that I ever saw an episode of *Dangerous Curves*.

HL: Count yourself lucky. It was about lady private detectives who wore thigh holsters. It was a series of shows that came out on CBS that they called *Crime Time after Prime Time*.

TS: So it sounds pretty sexist.

HL: It was that and more. I acted on the show just a little. On one episode I played Phil the forensics expert. But mostly I served as the dialogue coach.

TS: Were you teaching them how to speak southern dialect or what are you doing?

HL: Well, it was a joint venture between CBS in the United States and ABC International. Part of what I was doing was just helping the actors learn their lines, which were difficult to learn because they were very, very poorly written scripts. It's hard to remember lines that are poorly written.

TS: I hadn't thought about that, but I can believe that.

HL: Absolutely. Because the show was international, we had a lot of European actors. If someone is not a native speaker, even if they speak English fluently, they might get the emphasis all wrong, such that the meaning of the line gets confused. They may know the language, but they might not have mastered what we call the "melody of meaning." Some of the European actors would know how to emphasize the words in conversation, but when they spoke memorized lines, it might be more difficult. So, for instance, I worked with a French actress who had the line, "What is that in the road ahead?" But the way she emphasized the line it sounded like "What is that in the road? A *head*?" Which means something altogether different. My job was a little bit of acting coaching, a little bit of line coaching, and a little bit of negotiating between the actors and the producers. The two producers were Leonard Katzman and David Paulson. They had produced shows like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *Knots Landing*, those kinds of shows. I was the liaison between those guys and the actors sometimes. Not an easy job.

But even on a bad television show, like *Dangerous Curves*, there can be some incredibly skilled and talented people. A lot of the crew guys were outstanding at what they did. Some of the actors from New York and even some of the local actors were extraordinarily talented. They would do this television gig, and it would support their theatre habit for another six months, so that they could pay the rent. One of the producers said to me with a straight face, "You'll never go broke underestimating the public." That's when I decided for sure that television was not really my line. I was on track to be a television director if I had continued on that path.

TS: But you didn't want to direct bad shows?

HL: Well, I didn't want to direct bad shows, but it just wasn't my medium. I think television has generally gotten better since then. There's still a lot of bad TV out there, but there's some television out there that's pretty good. Even still that's not my world. I've never regretted that decision.

TS: I watched one of my favorites last night, *Foyle's War*.

HL: I want to see that.

TS: Yes, I love it.

HL: I've heard it's very good. Okay, I'm going to watch it now because you're the third person who has told me that. My wife and I don't watch much TV, so when we do, it has to be good. *Foyle's War*, okay.

TS: Michael Kitchen, I believe, is the actor who plays Foyle. He's fabulous, I think.

HL: I'll watch that. Because otherwise we're just twiddling our thumbs waiting for the next *Downton Abbey* to come on.

TS: Right. That and *Father Brown* are my favorites. Father Brown solves murders, but he's more interested in saving the souls of the murderers than he is in bringing them to justice.

HL: There's conflict for you (laughs).

TS: So, TV is not what you wanted to do; you wanted to do live theatre, I guess.

HL: And it goes back to what that original impulse was for me. I was watching my dad in the pulpit and that live performance, the interplay between the performer and the audience.

TS: I guess it's obvious why you'd be interested in Shakespeare, the best playwright of all time.

HL: Yes. It's a great privilege to work on that stuff. It's teaches you a lot about life, and it teaches you how to be a good actor too.

TS; If you can remember Elizabethan English, I guess you can remember anything.

HL: Much easier to remember Shakespearean verse for several reasons. Even the prose is easier to memorize than a lot of poorly written contemporary material—much easier to memorize than *Dangerous Curves*. There's a thread, a through line of thought, particularly with the verse, because the language has rhythm, and it's musical. It's the same thing I experienced as a kid trying to learn a long list of information for a biology exam. I would make up a song that included all the material I needed to learn, and it would help me remember.

TS; My problem with Shakespeare has always been that they'll say something in Elizabethan English, and it's really, really deep, and while I'm thinking about it, I've missed what happens next.

HL: That's true. Yes. But Shakespeare anticipated that. He'll tell you the same thing three different ways just in case you were thinking deeply the first two times.

TS: So there's hope for any of us, I guess.

HL: Right.

TS: I know you've got some New York credits. So do you head out for New York somewhere along the road?

HL: I was based in Dallas working on the television series. About the time that I had the conversation with the producer, I felt like I had to get back into theatre. I was offered a job at a theatre in Michigan, which meant that I had to be released from my contract two weeks early. I trained someone else to take my place, but I planned to come back the

following fall for the next season. On my way back to Dallas, I stopped off in Atlanta, and I thought, “My heart isn’t really in this.” I called up the producer, who said, “We need you.” Then I said, "I'd like to come back, but I want you to pay me twice as much money." He said, "We don’t need you that badly." So I was in limbo here in Atlanta and called up a guy named [Robert J.] Bob Farley who had been artistic director of the Alliance Theatre. An actor friend in New York told me Bob was starting up a new company called the Georgia Ensemble Theatre [GET]. When I got back to Atlanta I called him up, and I auditioned for him. Long story short, I was invited to be a founding company member. GET still exists today. Bob and Anita, his wife, who's the managing director, are still very good friends, and I'm thankful for that. I’m also thankful because they’ve hired a lot of our KSU theatre students through the years.

TS: Okay, so you travelled with them?

HL: Well, they're based in Roswell. During those years I was a freelance actor, so I would work with them and a lot of other local theatres. Even though I was based out of Atlanta, I worked in regional theatres across the country a good bit too. I would occasionally teach. My first college teaching jobs were at Clayton State and at Georgia State around that time. Sometimes I was just a few hours ahead of my students that first time out. During my first college teaching gig I was performing eight shows a week at the Alliance Theatre. I’d get home about 11:30 at night then prepare my Theatre History lecture for the following day until about 2:00 in the morning. It was exhausting, actually, although now that I have kids, I think that was a piece of cake. But [I was] teaching at Georgia State and at Clayton State and working in the theatre, and then occasionally working around the country. Then Melanie and I were married in 1998. We moved over twenty times during the first two years of our marriage going from job to job.

TS: And it survived anyway.

HL: Well, we had survived a four-year courtship that was mostly long distance, which prepared us for that. At least we were together. We went to Bali, Indonesia to study.

TS: I saw that! I wanted to ask you about that.

HL: We went to Bali to study Balinese theatre, yoga and mask carving. From there my wife was asked to assistant direct a couple of pieces at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. So we travelled from Bali, which is close to the equator, to Minneapolis in February. It was quite a shock.

TS: That was a big change. I saw shadow puppetry also in Bali.

HL: That's right. Well, we didn't create shadow puppets, but we saw a lot of shadow puppetry. Every night we would see various forms of Balinese theatre.

TS: Did you have some kind of grant to go over there?

HL: My wife, Melanie, has gotten several grants but not for that trip. We saved our pennies for that one. My wife is a brilliant person. She's been awarded three Lotta [M.] Crabtree Research Grants [for Women in Theater]. She was also given a Dunn Peace Scholarship, which funded a trip to South Africa not long after apartheid. In South Africa she interviewed some people with the Market Theatre and the Cape Town Theatre Festival.

Sadly, I didn’t get to join her on that trip. I was performing Tennessee Williams in Michigan at the time. So we moved around a lot, came back, and then finally landed in New York City for about six years.

TS: So after that, so that would be like 2000?

HL: In 1999, I believe.

TS: So almost as soon as you got back?

HL: That's right.

TS: Okay, so you did some Shakespeare up there and had a role in *Henry V*, I saw.

HL: Well, this is an interesting story. The first time I played Henry V was at the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival. We began rehearsals in the summer of 2011. For those who aren’t familiar with the play, *Henry V* is about an English King going to war against France. It was a wonderful production. Lou Rackoff, the director, conceived the play as an allegory, an illustration of what it takes to be a great leader. But halfway through the run of the show 9/11 happened. Melanie and I had just purchased our first home, an apartment in Manhattan, only one month before. That was scary. Then, on 9/13 I walked back into the theatre to play this king going to war. It is astonishing how the social context *outside* the production changed the meaning of the play for our audiences. We didn’t change any of the lines, or the costumes or the staging, but the resonance of the production was entirely different after the attacks. People cried in places where we hadn't elicited any response before. But they also laughed. Certain jokes made sense, and the people who came to see us perform *needed* that release.

One year later I was offered the role again, this time at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival in New York. I didn't change much about my interpretation of the role. But once again the context was different, and that changed a lot about the way people understood my performance. By that point, the American people, even the moderate Republicans of upstate New York, were embittered by American foreign policy. It changed the way they felt about Henry, going to war. People saw me as a sort of proxy for George W. Bush. They didn’t like me very much.

There was another interesting contextual element. We performed the play outside, on the banks of the Hudson River. The final image revealed me as Henry dancing with the French princess. While we danced, 25 or 30 soldiers hobbled off the battlefield behind us, some on crutches, some on stretchers as if they were injured or even dead. The most chilling part was the backdrop. Behind the injured soldiers was the gorgeous Hudson River. Directly across the river, on the opposite bank stood West Point, the United States Military Academy. I mean the *real* one. That was the backdrop for the whole production. That experience taught me how context is everything. The time and place of a performance has a huge impact on how it is received. If you take the same material, but put it in a different context, people will often respond in an equally resonant, but very different way. Shakespeare’s work has survived for over four hundred years because it remains relevant in many contexts.

TS: Yes. Okay, you do that for a while, and then that must lead right up to coming to Kennesaw State, doesn't it?

HL: Almost. That was 2002. I was based out of New York for a while. My wife became pregnant. I started teaching so that I wouldn't have to leave my family. I taught in all five boroughs of New York City. Then I got an opportunity to go to the University of Tennessee for a year as a member of the Clarence Brown Theatre Company. While we were there, I was applying for jobs around the country, one of which was Kennesaw State. It was an opportunity to come back, to be close to my father, who was still alive at that time. So we sold our place in New York, and arrived at KSU in the summer of 2005.

TS: Wow, how about that. Tell me about that one year at the University of Tennessee and the Clarence Brown Theatre. You're teaching there; did you direct or act or do anything?

HL: I taught, and I acted. Actually, I had done one play at the Clarence Brown before we moved down there—what we call a "job in" from New York City. While my wife was pregnant, I was in this play based on the novel *Midwives* about a birthing that goes horribly wrong. Melanie was about seven months pregnant at the time, and I had to sit there and watch this pregnancy go wrong, *every night* on the stage. In retrospect it was probably good training for the delivery room. Of course, the horrors of *Midwives* didn't dissuade us from coming back when they offered us a full year. We did a production of the *Odd Couple*, which was fun. My favorite project there, however, was a Pulitzer Prize winning play called *All the Way Home*. The play is based on James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, which also won the Pulitzer Prize [posthumously in 1958]. That project was special because it was the 100-year anniversary of James Agee's birth [born in Knoxville in 1909]. It was a rare experience because the play, which is somewhat autobiographical, takes place in a neighborhood right by the university. In fact, the house we set on stage was only about three blocks from where we were living at the time. It's a great play, and we put together a magnificent production. Moving. [Editor's note: The novel *Death in the Family* and play *All the Way Home* are based on the death of Agee's father in an automobile accident in 1915 when James was six years old]. [It was] some of the best work I have ever done as an actor. It was incredible to be immersed in Agee's material right there in Knoxville where it all happened.

TS: Absolutely. I think there was a controversy about it a few years ago, wasn't it? Somebody published a different manuscript or different ending or something [Michael A. Lofaro, *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author's Text* (University of Tennessee Press, 2007)].

HL: I wasn't aware of that.

TS: Maybe I have my facts mixed up. I think there was some kind of controversy [growing out of the fact that Agee died before the book was completed, and David McDowell, his literary executor, had to make sense of sometimes garbled notes in preparing the work for publication].

HL: I'm sure if you had asked me about this ten years ago it might ring a bell.

TS: Agee also did *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [1941] about sharecroppers in Alabama during the Great Depression.

HL: Great southern writer.

TS: Yes, absolutely. It's been forty years since I've read *Death in the Family*. Wasn't it set about 1915?

HL: Yes, around that time. It's based on circumstances surrounding the death of Agee's father.

TS: Okay, so you're at the University of Tennessee on a full time, temporary contract.

HL: A lecturer position, and I had been encouraged to return the next year, but something just felt right about coming to Kennesaw. In fact, I was scheduled to be a finalist at three other universities after they offered me the job here. I had to cancel those plane tickets. I lost at least one friend that way, sadly, but I had a hunch that it was the right choice to make, and indeed it was for many, many reasons.

TS: Coming home?

HL: It was coming home. My father died nine months after I returned. I wouldn't trade the time I had with him for the world. I live about fifteen minutes from my brother, Nat, which is great. And Cobb County is a terrific place to raise children. I have two little boys, Oliver and Nathaniel.

TS: Can't get away from those family names.

HL: That's right.

TS: Okay, that's 2005. You come to Kennesaw as assistant professor of theatre in a tenure track position, and you can't sneeze about a tenure track position, I guess, when they become available.

HL: Absolutely. It was a great opportunity to build an acting program. Plus I was drawn to the unique character of the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies. They were doing something different here than I had seen at any other university.

TS: Really? What was different about the program here?

HL: Performance Studies is a relatively new field in contrast with traditional theatre, which has been around time out of mind. The field views performance from an almost anthropological perspective. There are a few performance studies programs in the country, and many theatre programs in the country, but ours combines the two. There really aren't many of those. I was brought here to build an acting program, which I did. The way we teach acting is informed by performance studies. For that reason we've earned a reputation in the field for training intelligent actors, musical theatre performers, designers, technicians, and directors.

We train theatre artists who are able to analyze text and understand the social implications of what they're doing, and who are truly collaborative. Our students are known for bringing a sense of purpose and meaning to their work. This depth is important because we are doing more than training theatre artists; we are cultivating responsible citizens. A comparatively small percentage of theatre graduates, even Julliard graduates will earn their living as theatre professionals ten years after they

graduate. That's true across the field, even for the most successful programs in the country. So it's important that our students get something more than the nuts and bolts of theatrical craft. We've got to provide them with skill sets that contribute to their development as human beings and as citizens. That is something that the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies does extraordinarily well. Our graduates are teachers and lawyers and police officers and arts administrators. Of course, a good many of our alums have successful careers as professional theatre artists. One of our students was one of only two actors in America honored at the Kennedy Center for his outstanding performance in *Splittin' the Raft*.

TS: Who was that?

HL: John Stewart. That's an interesting story. We received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to tour a production to seven North Georgia communities. The play, which I directed, is titled *Splittin' the Raft*. It's an adaptation of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as told by Frederick Douglass. John Stewart played both Frederick Douglass and the escaped slave, Jim. The production was a big success. We were invited to perform as one of only five or six schools in our nine-state region at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, regional festival. Then, John was one of only two young men in North America honored for his performance at the Kennedy Center national event. That production is only one example of the kind of thoughtful work generated by the Department of Theatre & Performance Studies. The production created healing conversations in all the communities we visited. I'm in the process of publishing two papers about this. One of them is called, "We're Not Ready for Huck Finn," because we experienced a lot of fear. Quite a few of our partners backed out because they were afraid of Mark Twain.

TS: Afraid of Mark Twain?

HL: Well, *Huckleberry Finn* is a controversial novel for many reasons. The book uses the "N" word over 200 times. That's an ugly word, and it shouldn't be taken lightly. But the novel is intended to represent the truth: the good, the bad and the ugly. Not long before we performed the play, New South Publishing, in Montgomery, put out a new version of the novel, replacing the "N" word with the word "slave." I believe the novel shouldn't be censored even though the word is offensive. Removing that word sugarcoats reality. It takes the sting out of it. Sugarcoating means we don't have to take responsibility for our past. That tour showed me how we're still dealing with the atrocities of the past. Of course, I knew that before to some degree, but now I *really* know it. One of the papers I've written compares two Georgia communities who have renovated slave cabins. One is in Oxford, Georgia, where the original campus of Emory University is. There was a bishop there in the Methodist Church. The Methodist Episcopal Church split . . .

TS: Right—Methodist Episcopal Church South [1844-1939].

HL: Right. A former professor wrote a book, debunking the relationship between a Methodist bishop, Bishop [James Osgood] Andrew, and Miss Kitty, whose real name was Catherine Boyd. [Mark Auslander, *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (University of Georgia Press, 2011)]. In 1841, Catherine Boyd, was offered her freedom or the option to remain Andrew's slave. When Kitty

chose to remain, Bishop Andrew built a small house for her where she lived in comparative freedom. Three years later, Bishop Andrew's ownership of slaves caused a split between Northern and Southern factions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which lasted until 1939. In the 1930s, Miss Kitty's Cottage was moved from the original site on the Emory campus at Oxford College to Salem Campground, a few miles away. It remained there until 1994, when the cottage was moved back to Oxford. Now, as a Methodist minister's kid, I grew up every summer going to Salem Camp Meeting, which is the oldest camp meetings in America. You know what a camp meeting is?

TS: Oh absolutely. Out of Marietta, the Marietta Methodist campground [Roswell Road in East Cobb County].

HL: That's right. I live close to there. As a boy I heard my dad preach there several times. But Salem Camp Meeting is out in Newton County. I grew up going to Salem every year, sleeping in a "tent" less than fifty yards from Miss Kitty's cottage. Auslander uncovered the history that suggests a sort of Sally Hemings type relationship.

TS: With Andrew?

HL: That's right. So for the black members of that community, that slave cabin is a symbol of violation.

TS: That puts Andrew in a different light.

HL: But as the son and double grandson of Methodist ministers, and as someone close to the cottage, I was steeped in the myth of Bishop Andrew, the quote "benevolent slave owner."

TS: Well, at least benevolent, I don't know . . . but he's the one who led to the split in the Methodist church North and South.

HL: That's right.

TS: Before the Civil War [1844].

HL: That's right. So this book really stirred up Newton County. I think it was published only ten days or so before we arrived. The night of the performance, during our post-show discussion, I saw people I had known for more than 30 years—friends, family members, members of the church my father had pastored a few miles away. Also present were two of my uncles, both stalwart members of the Newton County community. One of my uncles is a former mayor of Covington. The other one is a retired Oxford city councilman. It was interesting to hear them argue contrasting points on the controversial issue. *Splittin' the Raft* gave that community a public forum for discussing some important issues, and it led to a broader discussion about tolerance. It's interesting to contrast the Newton County experience with our final tour stop in Sautee Nacoochee, up close to Helen.

TS: Right. Ninety-six percent white, I guess, up there.

HL: Well, it's in White County, which they say lives up to its name. A lot of the land around Sautee Nacoochee is still owned by the descendants of E. P. Williams, a local slave owner. About three miles down the road is an African-American community called Bean

Creek. Many of the Bean Creek residents are descendants of Williams' slaves. There is a fascinating history between those two communities. There have been some hard times, but some good ones too. With the help of Andy Allen, a Bean Creek resident, Caroline Crittenden worked to restore the only remaining slave cabin in Northeast Georgia. Coincidentally, our proposed tour dates corresponded with their grand opening. So they invited us to perform as part of the celebration.

It was an intense experience, but we had another healing conversation. I went back six months later, and we had a community discussion right there in the slave cabin, which included members of the Bean Creek and the Sautee communities, White and Black. It was one of the most exhilarating, meaningful experiences of my life. That conversation highlighted how far we've come and how far we have yet to go. Shockingly, only ten days after our conversation in the slave cabin, the Ku Klux Klan made national news by applying to adopt a highway in neighboring Union County.

These are two of many examples of how, wherever we went, we uncovered the existing legacy of slavery today. Another one is in Douglas County. I didn't know this, but apparently the county had originally been named for Frederick Douglass with two "s's" [by the Reconstruction era Georgia legislature when the county was formed in 1870], but during the Jim Crow era they spitefully dropped the second "s" and named it after Stephen Douglas who had debated Lincoln against emancipation. We performed in Grant Park at Maynard Jackson High School not long after the execution of Troy Davis [on September 21, 2011], if you remember that. The student body there is about 96 percent African American, and the execution really hit them pretty hard. We had a very interesting discussion there. So this is the kind of work we do in theatre and performance studies. We're creating work, and we're creating work with a high artistic standard, but we're doing it with a greater purpose. I suppose it's come full circle back to what my father did as a preacher and that original impulse. I know that the work we're doing is creating productive discussions and in some cases, I think, genuine healing.

TS: So do you typically put on a play and then instead of having a curtain call and disappearing you come out and have a discussion with the audience before people leave? Is that the way it typically works?

HL: Well, after the curtain call. With that production we always did it because we *needed* to do it. That was a large part of what we did because that was how the program was designed. But we often do that. We usually have at least one talkback for every production we do here on campus. We don't have a talkback after every performance unless the production deals with issues that demand that kind of discussion. Sometimes they do.

TS: Yes, that's great. Wow. It sounds very intellectual as well as being community engagement. The intellectual part, I can see how articles will come out of this, but the audience discussions sound fascinating to me.

HL: Well, I guess it's accidentally intellectual. I consider it a very practical approach. But as I mentioned to you before, I never had to write one formal paper in graduate school. KSU has made me more intellectual, more of a scholar. That's another unique characteristic of our department. We develop the scholar artist. That's what we call

ourselves in Theatre and Performance Studies. That's not a typical thing in theatre programs, the scholar artist. We have Dr. John Gentile, our former chair, to thank for that. The Department of Theatre and Performance Studies has been a place where I have grown a lot, where I've developed in the area of traditional scholarship, which has made me a better artist. I have lots and lots of professional theatre credits, but writing articles for scholarly journals is a new thing for me, and it's fun, and I'm learning a lot from that.

TS: I guess that's not really part of the job description in theatre so much as doing performances as your creative activity or writing plays or what-have-you.

HL: That's right, but in that department we are expected to do both!

TS: Well, the Distinguished Professor Award, one part of it is that you have a regional and national reputation. Of course, you've performed in plays and have credits all over the country. But the other part that I really like about the award is that it's for people who integrate teaching, scholarship, and service together. I think you've been talking about it already, but could you elaborate on how you integrate those three basic areas of our academic performance together?

HL: Well, I think it happens naturally, if you're doing meaningful work. At least that's been my experience. I was attracted to *Splittin' the Raft* because I felt like there was a message there, that it offered us a bridge into the community. Because we had this experience of taking our work into the community, the students learned a great deal, and I learned a heck of a lot about the application of my work. I guess the most meaningful projects are the ones that connect all three performance areas. They just tend to flow naturally. I don't necessarily set out and say, "I'm going to do something as a teacher that's going to affect my scholarly record or my service record." It's just that the projects that apply are the ones that are the most interesting. I will say this though; Karen Robinson, another Distinguished Professor who is the interim chair of our department and also one of my primary mentors, gave me some great advice once. She said, "Make it count more than once." We're all so, so, busy here that we have to be strategic about what we do in order to make the greatest impact.

TS: Sure. I've always thought that if you do what the job description calls for, it's very difficult to be strong in all areas and still live a normal life.

HL: Is someone living a normal life around here?

TS: Well, I mean, you've got your kids; you're proud of your kids; your family and all those kinds of things.

HL: I have a great life, and I love my job. I get to be creative and work with some really smart folks. It's a gift to be surrounded by people who encourage me and stimulate me. I have some outstanding students too. I learn at least as much from them as they learn from me. It is a joy and a privilege to know that I'm helping people in small ways every day. Most of all I am blessed to have two amazing sons and to be married to a brilliant, wonderful woman. So I guess this really isn't a "normal" life. It's an *extraordinary* life. I feel very blessed.

TS: I also saw that in 2010 you performed in a play at Horizon Theater that Karen Robinson directed, and I did an interview just one week ago with Margaret Baldwin.

HL: Oh, you did, great!

TS: Who actually wrote it, *Night Blooms*.

HL: Yes.

TS: Why don't you talk about that a little bit?

HL: That was a highlight of my career. The older I get, the more demands are placed on my time. I've had to become more selective about the creative projects I choose. When I was a young actor I would just do anything, but now something has to be really special. Margaret's piece really was that. She had been working on *Night Blooms* as part of Horizon Theatre's summer play development program for a couple of years before I became a part of it. Then she and Karen invited me to start hanging out in the rehearsal room. That was before Clayton, my character, had a single line. Clayton was just a very general idea at that point. I would sit in the room listening to the scenes Margaret had written, and I would just start behaving like I *was* this guy. I started interacting with the other characters, improvising and talking with them like I was as much a part of the play as all the others. Then Margaret started taking notes, and before long I had lines of my own. It's rare for an actor to contribute to a writer's process in that way. Especially when it's an amazing writer like Margaret. I really enjoyed playing that character. Clayton is a Unitarian preacher who comes back to Selma, Alabama, his hometown, to help support the civil rights protestors. In some ways the play mirrors my own experience coming back to Georgia after having been in the North. Playing a preacher helped me connect with my dad and my grandfathers because that's the road not taken— I consider Clayton a kind of tribute to them. Most of all, it was an incredible pleasure to do that kind of meaningful, powerful, thought-provoking, work and to do it with two colleagues that I admire so very much, Karen and Margaret.

TS: I gather that the play had a lot of similarities maybe with what you were doing with John Stewart in terms of race relations and how things are perceived differently on different sides of the divide.

HL: Absolutely. *Night Blooms* generated some important discussions. Margaret has written a really powerful play—and one that provides an opportunity for healing. Of course, the impetus for the play was loosely based on Margaret's family in Selma, Alabama. During the run, we even got to meet some of the people that inspired the characters. Matilda [Martin], who had been the family maid, had this almost God-like stature. She was a powerful person. I thought there's no way this woman could live up to what Margaret talked about, but, when we finally got to meet Matilda, I could see that there is truly something special about her. I felt fortunate to meet her. Matilda has since passed away. Once again, plays can be a great way to deal with social issues. Any of us who were born in the South need rituals for sorting through all that, I think. We're not just healing other people. We do this work because we have to exorcize the demons inside *ourselves*.

TS: This Unitarian minister Clayton that you play—is he totally fictitious or was there really somebody like this?

HL: He is an amalgam of several people. There was a Unitarian minister who had come back and was connected to a friend of Margaret's family, but it's a family member in the play. So part of that came from Margaret's background. Maybe a little bit of it came from my memories of what my father and my grandfather encountered going to Yale Divinity School. Around that time my father would have been about that character's age and would have gone to Divinity School around that time. The character we decided had gone to the Presbyterian Divinity School at Princeton, and my father had gone to the Divinity School at Yale, so there were connections there. And there was also a book that we all read that was by a Unitarian minister who had gone back. Clayton was a combination of all those things.

TS: Okay. So you think the Unitarian ministry probably was pro-civil rights in '65?

HL: Very much. There was a tradition of Unitarian ministers who were with the Freedom Riders and came back and were actively involved in the protests.

TS: Okay, great. I also saw where you did a Theatre in the Square performance of another clergyman who was kind of a bad guy, I guess, Cromwell, in *A Man for All Seasons*. [Editor's note: Thomas Cromwell was actually an attorney, not a clergyman]

HL: That's right. Yes, he was a bad guy. That was a lot of fun. It's fun to be the bad guy sometimes. That's a wonderful play.

TS: It's one of my favorites.

HL: It's a really *really*, wonderful play. We had a great group of actors, sort of an all star Atlanta cast, and I was glad to be a part of that. Theatre in the Square has since died, and that's a huge loss. We're reeling from that and the loss of Georgia Shakespeare.

TS: Yes, that was a shocker last week or whenever the news came out.

HL: Yes. It's almost as if someone in the family has died. It's not just that another theatre company is gone, which is bad enough, but that a theatre company which has consistently produced some of the best work in the southeastern United States, is gone. Georgia Shakespeare supported some of the most skilled theatre artists in our region. I had a lot of friends there. I've even worked there as an actor myself. My wife, Melanie wrote an adaptation of *The Frog Prince*, which was part of their last season. The loss of that company is a tragedy. I felt the same way about Theatre in the Square. I don't know what that means for the future of our community.

TS: I guess they are both casualties of the recession of 2008 in their way—hard to raise money, to pay the bills?

HL: Yes. They are. I don't even know what to tell you about it. I don't know what to say other than it is a sad, sad thing. I'm sad for myself, I'm sad for the theatre community, but I'm mostly sad for Atlanta.

TS: Absolutely. We've got some of the papers from Theatre in the Square in our [KSU] Archives here now, but no substitute for having the theatre itself.

HL: That's right.

TS: Well, somehow along the line you got interested in administration, I guess, since you're interim associate dean now. How did that come about?

HL: Well, when I came to KSU in 2005, I was charged with building the acting program. In 2007 I applied to the National Association of Schools of Theatre for accreditation for a new acting concentration within the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies. About a year and a half ago, not quite, I was asked to serve as interim director of the School of Art and Design, which was an enormous shock.

TS: That you were asked?

HL: To me and everyone else because visual arts is not my discipline. It was a big surprise, but I will say this: we had a really terrific year together. We got a lot done. I'm thrilled that Geo Sipp is now SOAAD's permanent director. He's already doing some fantastic things over there. It was an honor and a privilege to serve that school while they searched for a permanent leader. I learned a lot. So as my interim year was drawing to a close, the opportunity to apply for the interim associate dean position came open. I applied, and I am deeply grateful that the college faculty council and Dean [Patricia S. (Patty)] Poulter have given me this opportunity. It's another great learning experience and another great opportunity to serve. The turn toward administration has happened quickly, and so unexpectedly, but I like it. It's very fulfilling work.

TS: Is there a national search going on now for a permanent associate dean?

HL: There will be a search next year. I accepted the interim position for a two-year term. If folks still like me next year, I'll probably apply.

TS: I can't imagine that they wouldn't like you enough to apply.

HL: Thank you. So far, so good. I'm really enjoying working with Dean Poulter and all the chairs, and it's a chance to get to know people better across the college.

TS: What are your responsibilities primarily?

HL: Well, I do a lot of things, but some key areas include assessment, facilities expansion, curriculum development, new programs, and that kind of thing.

TS: Are we going to expand our facilities any time soon?

HL: We are trying!

TS: Does that involve any fund-raising on your part?

HL: Thankfully, the dynamic Dean Poulter handles the heavy lifting in that area. I support in small ways, but Allison Fichter, our extraordinary development officer for the College of the Arts, and Dean Poulter are really, really good at that. I'm happy to let them be the primary pilots in that area, and serve in a supportive role. I learn a lot from the two of them. They are real pros.

TS: One of the many hats that ministers have to wear is to do a stewardship campaign every year, I guess. They've learned how to, without embarrassment, go out and ask for money.

HL: This is true.

TS: [Former dean Joseph D.] Joe Meeks did a fabulous job of fundraising, I think, over here in this college.

HL: He was extraordinary in that way. He did a great job with that. Joe is the consummate Southern gentleman, polite and charming and strong, and he knows how to get people excited about the work we do.

TS: Well, I would think you would be a good fundraiser too.

HL: Well, I am learning more every day!

TS: I guess you've been at Kennesaw nine years now. Maybe in the community for, I'm going to have to check my math, you're getting almost up to fifty years old, I guess.

HL: I'm forty-eight. I just turned forty-eight a few weeks ago.

TS: One of the questions I always ask in these interviews is what keeps you at Kennesaw?

HL: So many things. We're a progressive university. We're a forward-thinking university. We aren't isolated in an ivory tower. KSU is connected to the communities beyond our campus boarders. Our faculty, staff, and administration are constantly looking for ways to support the region we serve. For that reason, our success is overwhelming—our growth and the innovative nature of our programs demonstrate our institution's vitality. So that's one thing. Secondly, the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies has a distinctive character within the field. That's a big part of it too. Also, I'm privileged to work with many outstanding colleagues across the College of the Arts—colleagues who teach me; colleagues who affirm me; colleagues who challenge me. Most of all, I genuinely believe the students are different here. I'm not entirely sure why. I've taught at seven or eight universities through the years, and I can tell you there is something special about KSU students. Part of it, I think, is we have a lot of nontraditional students. A good number of our students are the first in their families to attend college. A lot of our students are already in the workforce, and that brings a strong work ethic and a kind of maturity. Our students are inspiring.

TS: Do you have enough scholarship money to recruit students for theatre? Or are they just whoever shows up at the door?

HL: The College of the Arts is fortunate to have some very generous friends who make it possible for topnotch students to attend our programs. But, of course, we can always use *more* scholarships. We've got to do everything we can to attract the students who are most likely to succeed, most likely to benefit from our programs, and most likely to use what they learn for the betterment of their communities. Top arts programs like ours have to make scholarships a priority if we want to remain competitive. Dean Poulter, the department chairs, and Allison Fichter recognize that need and are taking concrete and creative steps to address the issue. Last year, for example, Dean Poulter provided additional scholarship funds to attract top students. She's also created a marvelous new program each semester called "Savor the Arts" where community friends join us for lunch, meet our students and see some outstanding student work. We've already developed some new scholarships that way. Also, we're building new advisory and fundraising boards for the college and each of our academic units. It's thrilling to see the

impact of our work in the community and to witness the enthusiasm of local leaders and leaders in the arts and business. Once people know what we're up to, they become excited about supporting us. One more point: the Governor's Complete College Georgia initiative is a good program. It represents a real shift in the way we evaluate ourselves and the way we make the case for funding. I like it because it rewards us for the success of our students and the success of our programs. Recruitment is a big part of that. You get one top-notch student, and that person rubs off on their peers in a positive way. Success begets success. It's like throwing a pebble into the pond—you see the ripples. So your point is well taken. Scholarships are essential to our success.

TS: Okay. Well, I'm just about out of questions, I guess. Anything you'd like to add to the interview that we didn't talk about today?

HL: Well, no. I just want to thank you. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. I've known who you were for a long time, and I've seen you walk across campus. I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to meet you in person. I'm honored that you thought me worthy of listening to my blabber for a while. I'm very thankful to be a part of the KSU community. KSU has been very, very good to me. It's a joy to support what's going on here at KSU because KSU has supported me in so many ways.

TS: Great. Well, that's a good way to end the interview. Thank you very much.

HL: Thank you, Tom.

INDEX

Acworth (Georgia) Elementary School, 3
Acworth (Georgia) United Methodist Church, 1
Agee, James, *A Death in the Family*, 12-13
Allen, Andy, 16
Alliance Theatre, Atlanta, 10
Andrew, Bishop James Osgood, 14-15
Auslander, Mark, *The Accidental Slaveowner*, 14-15

Baldwin, Margaret P., 18
    Night Blooms play, 18-19
Bali, Indonesia, 10
Bean Creek community, White County, Georgia, 15-16
Boyd, Catherine (Miss Kitty), 14-15

Complete College Georgia, 22
Conyers (Georgia) First United Methodist Church, 3
Crittenden, Caroline, 16

Davis, Troy Anthony, 16
Douglas County, Georgia, 16
Dunn Peace Scholarship, 10

Emory University
    Candler School of Theology, 5
    Oxford College of Emory University, 15

Farley, Anita, 10
Farley, Robert J. 10
Fichter, Allison, 20-21
Florida State University, 5-6

Gentile, John S., 17
Georgia Ensemble Theatre, 10
Georgia Shakespeare, 19
Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, 10

Hagan, Blanche, 4
Horizon Theatre Company, Atlanta, 18
Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, 10

Katzman, Leonard, 8
Kennedy Center, American College Theatre Festival, 16

Kennesaw State University
    Department of Theatre & Performance Studies, 13-14, 16-17, 20-21
    Students, 14, 21-22
    School of Art and Design, 20
    College of the Arts, 20-21
    Fundraising, 20-22

Long, Harrison O.
    Background, 1-4
    Similarities between preachers and actors, 1-2, 5
    College, 5-7
    Reasons for choosing a career in theatre, 5-6
    Graduate school, 6-7
    Professional acting career, 7-13, 18-19
    Dialogue coach for *Dangerous Curves*, 7-8
    Preference for live theatre, 9
    Work with the Georgia Ensemble Theatre, 10
    First college teaching, 10
    Marriage and family, 10-12, 13, 17, 19
    Study in Bali, 10
    Six years of acting in New York, 11
    Playing King Henry in *Henry V*, 11
    Teaching in New York and Tennessee, 12-13
    Decision to join the KSU faculty, 12-13
    Director of *Splittin' the Raft*, 14-17
        Community discussions of the play, 14-17
        Scholarly papers on healing conversations, 14
    Newton County uncles, 15
    Role as scholar artist, 16-17
    Recipient of KSU Foundation Distinguished Professor Award, 17
    Thoughts on the loss of Theatre in the Square and Georgia Shakespeare, 19
    Interim director, School of Art and Design, 20
    Interim dean, College of the Arts, 20
    Reasons for staying at KSU, 21-22
Long, Linda Lee Oliver (mother), 1, 3, 5-6
Long, Melanie (wife), 10-12, 17, 19
Long, Nat (brother), 13
Long, Nat G. (grandfather), 3, 19
Long, Nathaniel Harrison (father), 1, 3-6, 9, 12-13, 15, 19
Long, Oliver and Nathaniel (sons), 13
Lotta M. Crabtree Research Grants for Women in Theater, 10

Marietta (Georgia) Methodist Campground, 15
Martin, Matilda, 18
Maynard Jackson High School, Atlanta, 16
McEachern First United Methodist Church, Cobb County, Georgia, 1

Meeks, Joseph D., 21
Methodist Episcopal Church, 14-15

National Association of Schools of Theatre, 20
New South Publishing, Montgomery, 14
Newton County, Georgia, 15
North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, 11

Oliver, Hoyt (uncle), 1
Oliver, Mamie Langley (great-grandmother), 2
Olivier, Laurence, 2

Panama City Beach, Florida, 7
Paulson, David, 8
Poulter, Patricia S., 20-21

Rackoff, Lou, 11
Robinson, Karen, 17-18

Saint James United Methodist Church, Atlanta, 3
Salem Camp Meeting, Newton County, Georgia, 15
Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia, 15-16
Selma, Alabama, 18
Sipp, Geo, 20
Southern Methodist University, Meadows School of the Arts, 6
Stewart, John, 14, 18

Texas Shakespeare Festival, 7
Theatre in the Square, Marietta, 19

Unitarian ministers and civil rights, 19
University of Tennessee, Clarence Brown Theatre Company, 12-13
Utah Shakespeare Festival, 7

Waterman Street School, Marietta, Georgia, 3
Williams, Edwin P. (E.P.), 15-16
Woodward Academy, Atlanta, 4