

**SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA COLLECTION
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
MSS.**

Interviewees: Marcus Overton

Place of interview: Gaillard Auditorium, Charleston, South Carolina

Date of interview: June 5, 2009

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Transcriber: Jessica Farrell

Date of Transcription: July 20, 2009

Editor: Jessica Farrell

Date of Editing: August 18, 2009

Proofreader: Jessica Farrell

Date of Proofing: August 18, 2009

JL: We should be going. All right—

MO: Sometime in the late summer or early autumn of 1991, I received a letter from an old college friend of mine that said, “Would you be interested in going to work at the Spoleto Festival? Their general manager has left, and the fellow who is heading up a kind of informal search committee has talked to me.” My friend was currently working for the Martha Graham Dance Company. And at that point, I had followed only in the most general outline the enormous blowup, the huge explosion, a nuclear incident that had taken place in the Spoleto Festival the preceding Spring when, because of a site-specific art exhibition called “Places with a Past,” an enormous rupture had developed between Gian Carlo Menotti, the founder of this festival, and his then-general manager, Nigel Redden. I didn’t pay very much attention to it except insofar as it appeared in the pages of the New York Times, I was running the performing arts program at the Smithsonian Institution. I had my hands full with daily work. I said of course I would be interested. Gian Carlo Menotti was a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, a figure that even a little country boy from Myrtle, Georgia, like me, had heard about him, and then visitors on TV in the ‘50s, and I knew *The Consul* and other things. I didn’t particularly think that I was going to profit by other people’s misfortune, because by that time, Nigel had been fired, and the board had exploded. Some of the most long-time Spoleto supporters had left, and the festival in effect lay in some shattered pieces and no one really was quite sure what the future was going to bring. But nonetheless, sometime in November, after some backing and forthing in letters with Ted Stern, who was then the interim chairman, since

part of the whole blowup of the board had been the departure of the president and the chair, who had been very close to Nigel. I went to New York. In fact, it was very near Thanksgiving, somewhere in there. And I went to the Carlisle Hotel, to which I had never been before. And I went up and rang a doorbell, and the door opened, and there was Francis Menotti, Maestro Menotti's adopted son, and behind him in the room Gian Carlo Menotti. We spent about three hours together, is my guess. And we talked about various philosophies of management; we talked about the situation. I had tried to do some research in between so that I could sort of try to understand in some objective way. I didn't know the people involved. I had known who Nigel was when he was at the National Endowment for the Arts, which I was also associated as an advisor, one of the advisory councils, for a time. And when the conversation was over and Gian Carlo had said, "Well, you know, here's what I think," and I'd said, "Here's what I think," and whatever, I left. And a short time later, I was offered the job by Ted Stern, the then-chairman. Wonderful man. And we had some backing and forthing, and I will have to say that at first I turned it down. It seemed to me at first that the situation was quite simply so complex, so freighted, with bad feelings that had been left in its way, that I certainly wasn't sure that I might be the person who could solve all these fragments of problems that were lying around. But Dr. Stern and I spoke after my initial hesitancy and eventually I changed my mind and said, "Yes. Yes, I'll come to Charleston." It was arranged that I would come here on February 1st, 1992, which I did. And I moved here. As I look back now on that, I see that that was a mistake because if you are going to be effective as the overall general manager of this festival, there is one burden that you need not to have, and that is to live in the community in which you are working. It gives you enough of arms-length distance to see the politics of the community a little clearer, and Nigel has always, very wisely, not lived in Charleston. Part of that is because he holds down two full-time jobs, which is quite extraordinary. He runs the Lincoln Center Festival and he runs this festival. I'm not sure he could do both if he were living here. He can do both with a great staff here in Charleston, living in New York. In any case, in the beginning all things went beautifully. And I should say here that Maestro Menotti and I never exchanged a crossword in the two years that I worked closely with him. He was a wonderful, I might almost say, mentor, to me in a way. I had never worked with anybody before who had been famous for as long a time as he was, and watching him gave me many, many lessons, in "Aha, so that's how you cope with that particular burden of fame," and whatever. Nor did any crosswords take place between me and his stepson, his adopted son, Chip Menotti. I had a very good working relationship with Chip. He needed to be treated in a certain way. I think every human being in the world probably has certain ways in which he or she likes to be treated. He wanted to be acknowledged and addressed as an individual in his own right, not just his father's son, and I treated him as that individual, and I think that he recognized that. We had a very—it was certainly business-like, I don't mean by that that we were big buddies, it was a very business-like relationship. And Chip, he had some skills. Many people think that Chip can't do anything, but that's not true. Chip was profoundly dyslexic and he managed to handle all their business affairs by memorizing plane schedules, itineraries, enormous amounts of material, and that takes a lot of skill and not any inconsiderable degree of intelligence. So the big problem now was how to keep a festival alive from which most of its major supporters had fled. And these supporters were people who, by virtue of influence they could wield, both among their social set and among people with whom they were financially connected, they could keep other people from renewing their financial support of the festival or from giving to it for the first time. And believe me, we were always suspended above a pit. Non-profit arts organizations like this one do not fail

because they are not loved and/or supported, they fail nine times out of ten because of cashflow problems. It's not that you can't somehow lay your hands on money every now and again, but laying your hands on it at the right time so you can meet a payroll, keep the people you need there in the office day by day, acquire the materials that you need, have access to the resources you need, without that, you close your doors. If you don't have enough money to meet the payroll every week, you start losing your best people and you can't do your work.

JL: So how did you—well let me first say, for the record, before this interview goes too much further along, that this is Jessica Lancia. I am interviewing Marcus Overton for Spoleto Festival U.S.A. It is June 2nd, 2009, and we are in the Gaillard Auditorium in Charleston, South Carolina. Now, that being said, how did you then manage to bring Spoleto out of the red, or continuing its existence?

MO: [laughs] We didn't manage to bring Spoleto out of the red. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure sometimes that I can answer that question because every day was a battle. I had a person on the staff who was in charge of development. She was someone who had been part of the old regime, and it was clear that we were going to have to look for revenue in places we had not looked for it before, and more importantly, from my point of view—I have always been in management, concerned with both sides of the equation. It's not just developing new sources of revenue, it is monitoring your expenses and running the leanest, tightest, most efficient organization that you can. And I can assure you there has never been a more dedicated, sacrificing, self-sacrificing bunch of people than those wonderful staff members who stuck on when they could have said, "You know what, this place has blown up, and I'm going to go someplace else and find a job." But they didn't. Many of them stuck by, they kept working. We pared the expenses of our operation down to the very minimum. That's the first thing that you do, is make sure you're not spending a nickel that you don't have to spend, and you start looking for new sources of revenue. I also started looking for a new development director. It had been easier in the past, and the person who was still occupying the position of development coordinator really wasn't accustomed to going out and beating the bushes for money, and finding new sources of revenue, and developing new grant applications. And remember that at this time in the arts in America, the National Endowment for the Arts had played a very significant role in this festival's support. I don't know whether in your research if you've come across the fact that this festival exists in large part because of the National Endowment for the Arts' decision to found a festival in the southeast. That's how Gian Carlo came here, that's how the place got selected, and they had always made large contributions. But in the early '90s, we had just passed through the whole period of the Mapplethorpe incident at the NEA, and I had lived in Washington for 12 years watching the endowment, being very close to it. It was clear to me, at least, that we needed to develop alternative sources of funding because the days of large endowment funding might very well be over. If indeed Congress managed to abolish the endowment that would truly be the end of it. In any case, the endowment's budget had gone much lower. I tried to convince some members of the board of this, and to explain to them that we needed to be casting our net, rather a field, but I was not successful. This was heresy. They looked at me as though I had just lopped my head off and presented it to them. "How could you say that? We will always get a big grant from the National Endowment for the Arts." And I said, "I don't think that that is true. I do not think that we will always get a big grant, and we must start to develop other sources of revenue."

JL: Was Homer Burrous the chairman of the board?

MO: We'll get there.

JL: Okay.

MO: And by this time, Dr. Stern had—since he had only agreed to be the interim chairman in the wake of the terrible breakup, he had been looking around for another chairman, and he had indeed met Mr. Burrous. Long before that, I think, he and his wife had moved to Washington when he retired from the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta. And I certainly have no wish ever to impugn Homer's motives for becoming chairman or whatever, but I certainly can say that his qualifications, coming as he did strictly from the corporate world, were a little—they didn't include any real knowledge about arts production, and particularly about how to deal with artists. I think sometimes that the saddest thing about that whole period was that I couldn't quite persuade Homer to understand that there were certain ways to treat Gian Carlo that would have been very productive. And I'm not talking about manipulation, I'm talking about diplomacy, I'm talking about acknowledging someone's stature in the world of the arts. Gian Carlo was still not happy. When he came back to Charleston for the festival of 1992, he was still very angry at certain people who had said quite unpleasant things to him. Certain people here in Charleston were extremely angry with him still, and especially with Chip Menotti because of things Chip had said to them, and believe me, they were vile things. Many of them were most unpleasant. And my job was always, as I saw it, just to keep trying to get everybody together. You cannot change the past, but you can control what is happening right here at this moment, and I just tried always to keep things moving forward, staying a little bit away from the past. So when Chip wanted to dwell on what Mrs. So-and-so had said to him and what he'd said to her, I would say, "Well, she's not with us anymore, and we've got these other new people on the board. How should we go to meet them and build up our relationships with them?" And Homer had never been the chairman of an arts organization like Spoleto, and he needed a good deal of guidance. It was difficult because, after all, Gian Carlo and Homer needed to interact very closely together. In any case, the long and the short of it is, that as the '92 season festival progressed and fell into place, we had some wonderful things in it. It was clear that there were still some very old wounds that somehow some folks—not excluding Gian Carlo and Chip, but also some people who were still on the board—people seemed just determined to keep some old wounds alive. In fact, one board member said to me, "Oh well, we may have lost the battle, but we'll win the war," which was a code word for "We'll get rid of Gian Carlo," because that was really what was in the minds of a certain group of people. They wanted him out, and it became increasingly clear to me. To tell you the honest truth, one night in the dead of night I looked at the clock at 3:00 in the morning as I was thinking about how I was going to face certain problems tomorrow, and I thought, there's no way out of it, eventually he will leave. He will go, because there's a certain degree of deep, profound hurt here on both sides that simply will not be healed. So I thought to myself, if that's the case, if this is what's going to happen, Mark, my first duty above all other things was to move away from even the specific people involved and ask myself, "Is this festival something worthy, something of an ideal in the Platonic sense of that word, something that should be kept alive at all costs, no matter if the founder may come and go, no matter what may happen, is the idea of this thing something really wonderful and valuable?" And I said, "Yes, it

is.” I’ve been working festivals all my life. I was the assistant manager to Jimmy Levine and Ed Gordon at the Ravinia Festival. I worked at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. I worked with some of the greatest movers and shakers in the arts, people whose devotion to their company was far larger than themselves. The Lyric Opera of Chicago is one of the four or five greatest opera companies in the world, but Carol Fox, its founder, was eventually fired.

JL: So why was Spoleto worth it to you, why did you decide?

MO: Why was it worth it? Well, first of all I’m a southerner, and I know what it is to grow up in a community where finding the arts, trying to be nourished by the arts, is difficult to do. I grew up in a little farming town in rural northwest Georgia, and believe me, I was ostracized and shamed and very much an outcast during all my years of grammar school and high school because I wanted to be an actor, and you don’t want to be an actor in that kind of anti-intellectual, anti-artistic environment without people thinking that you are some kind of freak. And I believed that the arts are the only thing that redeem us, and if that sounds like a spiritual statement, it is. I am not a conventionally religious man, but the arts are the only way we learn what it means to be a human being.

JL: And so Spoleto, compared with other festivals...

MO: And so Spoleto, in this part of the world, where there was no, until this festival came into being, there was no big arts activity that was like a magnet, that drew people to it to investigate these questions, to ask questions about what it means to be a human being, to investigate the past. And here we have a place that carries so heavy a burden of the past, even today as we sit here and speak. And in my opinion, it is only art in the end that can help you make sense of a past that may have in it a horrible thing or two. And we live with these horrible things yet to this day. Every day, they are on the pages of the newspaper, and Nigel blew them up with that art exhibition in 1991, and the pieces are still falling down from that. People still talk about it. So when great minds like Menotti’s and Carol Fox and Edward Gordon and Jimmy Levine, when they say, “This is a place where we can gather all of these resources together and people will be different when they come here and experience what we have,” I think that’s valuable. So from that night at 3:00 in the morning, my aim was, no matter what happens, the criteria for my decision-making will be, what is best for the festival? If it means I am out of the picture tomorrow, if it means somebody else comes into the picture, fine; what is best to keep Spoleto alive? And there was a second, a corollary to this. I knew then, that night, with a stroke, I don’t know where it came from, out of the blue. I thought the way to do that is to make sure that eventually Nigel Redden will return, because Nigel had formed a unique bond. Many arts administrators, many arts managers do. They find a place where suddenly all the skills that they happen to uniquely and individually possess happen to just fit into all the little grooves like the teeth of a broken comb. Everything sort of fits together, and they’re the right match for that place. It’s like marriage. We go through the world and someday we stumble across the person with whom our edges are going to match up. And Nigel was the person. He had proved in the earlier years here, that he had—and I looked at what he was doing after he had left Spoleto, and they were basically placeholder jobs. Because it is my hunch—I can’t prove this, Nigel’s far too cagey ever to have admitted this to me—I think Nigel knew that the day would come also when he would come back. And we needed him, because here it is not the board. For this festival, it is

not the board. At least it was not then. It's very different now; these years that Nigel has had the chance to shape this board, to rid it of a lot of deadwood, and some of that deadwood was from the community who wanted to be on the board because it was the prestigious thing to do, but they couldn't go out and bring in the bacon, so to speak. But it has always been Nigel's charisma—that's an overused word—but Nigel's particular skills and knowledge and unerring diplomacy that made it work. It's not been the board chairman. There are some arts organizations in which the board plays a much, much bigger role than the executive. And as I said before, with all due respect to his good intentions, Mr. Burrous just didn't know. I begged him at one point, I said, "Please, go to Scotland. Go talk to Gian Carlo on his own territory. He's not happy. He still doesn't feel that he's wanted here. And just doing it by telephone or e-mail doesn't work. He needs you to be there." And he wouldn't go. And also I had hired a development director by this time; from Texas she came, lovely lady. But also it was difficult to get a team going here. Mr. Burrous, he was reluctant to do cold calls, and sometimes, you know, if you think that somebody's got a big gift out there, and they just need the right person to talk to them, sometimes you just have to pick up the telephone and say, "How do you do? I'm so-and-so, I'm the chairman of so-and-so. I'd like to talk to you about the role you could play in helping Spoleto move to another level." But you have to do it peer-to-peer. Someone who's not a multimillionaire cannot make that call because the other person says, "Well, who are you? You're not a peer of mine." And so when you are raising money, to a great degree, it needs to be peer-to-peer. At least that's the way it works in this community. In any case, we got through the first festival, and it was good. We had a lot of good things in that festival, and we had plans for some more coming up. And by this time Gian Carlo and I had been working together for awhile, and so we started sort of understanding how each other thought, and he said, "Well, have you seen some things that you'd like to bring?" And I had. The George Coates Performance Works from San Francisco, wonderful avant-garde multimedia theatre performance troupe. And Martha Graham at that point had appeared at the festival some years before that to great acclaim. And I thought, well, Martha was old and ill, and she and Gian Carlo had been friends decades, and we need to bring that company back for one last big festival appearance. In those days, companies didn't make repeated appearances here, so bringing a company back was unusual. And I said to him, "I think you should bring Martha back, and give her one last chance to revive something." And she did. So we had some good stuff, some wonderful theatre. But after the '92 festival, the friction was still there in certain areas and we were not raising money to the degree that we needed to. Now, I had managed to bring the '92 festival in well over \$100,000 under budget. I'm very proud of that, because that's what monitoring expenses very carefully contributes. That was \$100,000 we didn't have to raise that year in unearned income. But the tradition had been in years past that no one monitored the technical expenses very closely. This festival is very lucky. It ends in the first of June, but the fiscal year doesn't end until the 30th of August, so if you've gone over your budget by the end of June, you've still got two months to raise whatever that shortfall was. And believe me, not many organizations have that luxury, so that you can spend a little extra money during the festival because you've got a cushion on the end to raise it. But we came out of the '92 festival with a deficit—that's a long time ago—my memory seems to think something in the neighborhood of \$90,000, but I'm not sure. Which is not bad for a festival with about 120 events in a year right after the board has been exploded sky-high and in a community that was not certain, well, should I give them any money, are they going to last, what are we going to do?

JL: How much money did you raise? How much money did it take to—

MO: I have to tell you, I do not remember, you'd have to go look at the budgets for those years. I've got all this stuff in great big trunks somewhere in California, but I don't remember the exact figures. I was too busy, frankly, holding things together and keeping staff members. Because nobody was getting any raises, everybody was having to work extra hours, and I was under siege from Chip Menotti to fire one of the staff members who had been there the longest and occupied a very important position. And she and Mr. Menotti and Chip had had a terrible set-to during the incident in 1991, and I must have received, I cannot tell you how many phone calls in the dead of night from Europe saying, "Are you going to fire her today?" And that's not the way I work. I told Gian Carlo when I first interviewed with him that I would take his feelings about personnel under advisement, and that I understood that there were certain people that perhaps needed to be replaced because they no longer had the confidence of the artistic director, but that their replacement schedule had to be on my terms and it had to happen when I thought it did the least damage to the festival. And I did not choose to terminate this person without making sure that the festival was protected. We got along just fine. At the end of that first season, I asked this particular staff member, I said, "You know, what happened between you and Mr. Menotti can only be solved between you and Mr. Menotti. I can't fix it. You must go to see him." And she agreed to do so, which I thought was a gesture of great goodwill on her part. But when the meeting was over, I'm afraid they had not moved in any positive direction. And eventually I said to Homer Burrous, "The time is going to come when she has to go. He cannot stand that she's still here." And that was a great—unfortunately the occasion I think of a break between Homer and myself, because he didn't care what Gian Carlo thought. If she'd been here a long time, and she'd bought a house, she was ensconced, and I said, "Well that may be, but Gian Carlo..." Anyway, but that also put a little wedge between me and Gian Carlo. He didn't understand why I didn't follow through with what he wanted. But as I said, it had to be on my terms, when I thought it was best for the festival that we make this change. And when you've had someone on the staff for as long as this person had been on the staff, they are a very important part of your operation, and you can't just rip them out of the fabric of that. Anyway, there's '92. In the '93 season we did a lot of wonderful—the repertory—well, we ran into financial problems, and I was trying to keep Gian Carlo's vision on track. His vision for the opera productions was at first very large, so it took me awhile, and extremely difficult negotiations, to say, "Well, you know, Maestro, here's the budget. I'm not sure we're going to be able to do all of this. Maybe we should just do one or two of these three long, one-act operas that you want." Because they all would have to have had new productions, new scenery, new costumes. So we ended up doing Alexander Zemlinsky's wonderful one-act opera *The Dwarf*, and it was the first time it had been seen in the United States in a long time, and it introduced Mary Dunleavy and Robert Brubaker sang the dwarf. [Editor's note: According to the Spoleto Compendium, it was Zemlinsky's *The Birthday of the Infanta*, and it was an American premiere.] A lot of singers have gone on to some good things. And I think that was the year we did *Viaggio a Reims* of Rossini [Editor's note: According to the Spoleto Compendium, it was Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*.] and we had a wonderful dance company, the Compagnie Philippe Saire from Switzerland, really interesting. [Editor's note: This Company performed in 1994, not 1993.] And John Kennedy was doing his *20th Century Perspectives* concerts in those days, and it was a good festival. We sold tickets well. I think people began to see that we weren't gonna die, we weren't gonna go away. And the new development director had developed some

new leads, one of them being the Lyndhurst Foundation in Chattanooga. Now, it had been unusual in years past for local foundations, I mean in the southeast, to support Spoleto because so much of the support in the years of Gian Carlo had come from the east, from New York, from the National Endowment for the Arts, from the South Carolina Arts Commission, even from the South Carolina State Legislature in those happy days before budget cuts, and a great deal from European sources because of the connection between FDDM, Festival dei Due Mondi, and us. And here was the big problem: At that particular time about 10% of the unearned income for the festival came from Charleston. Well this is sort of strange, because if your festival is ever going to claim that it's laid real roots in your community and that it's not just this kind of travelling show that drops down out of the sky each year so that it can be scented with magnolia and jasmine—if you're going to have an artistic endeavor like this it has to sooner or later not only entertain the community it's in, but change it, send roots down in it. I'm sure you understand the whole Avery Research Center celebrates those rooted community organizations. So I flew to Chattanooga one morning with my development director, Lee Breeden, to make our final presentation, because this was going to be a relatively large grant. I think it was \$250,000, which is a lot of money. And we sat down with the man who was in charge of the foundation, and the first question out of his mouth was, "Now tell me about your community support."

JL: Ouch.

MO: And I told him the truth. He said, "Why should I give you any money? Your own community doesn't support you." I said, "Not yet, but we're working on that, and we're not going to solve that problem overnight, nor are we going to solve it in one season. We may not solve it in two or three," but I said, "We are determined that we are going to send down more roots. I want to start an education program at Spoleto," which I did. The Education Spoleto program doesn't have much prominence this year, but Education Spoleto was my baby, I began that program. I started the "Conversations With" series, as a matter of fact. We had a cabaret series in those days too, which was quite popular. And we got the money, but he put a string on it that was hard. We had to raise \$2.00 for every one dollar of the Lyndhurst Foundation money. It didn't have to be new money, thank God. Somebody could expand an already-existing contribution, for example. It could be a new contribution. So I never will forget, I was in the office one night until 2:30, 3:00 in the morning. I wrote a letter, an individual letter, my letter, a tailored, personalized letter, to every contributor. Every corporate contributor, every individual contributor, and we matched the Lyndhurst grant before we began the festival that year. I was very proud of that.

JL: That's fantastic. So—

MO: I faced the same question elsewhere in New York. I went to the Harkness Foundation, and he said, "But nobody in your own community supports you, I've looked at your thing," and I say, "But we're getting there, we're going to the place that you want us to go to, but we can't get there without some help." I don't think we did get that one, as a matter of fact. In any case, by the time we got to the end of the '93 season, the deficit was approaching \$300,000. Now in these days of million-dollar deficits, that didn't look like, frankly, a lot. I wasn't happy about it, and the community was all up in arms, "Spoleto's never had a deficit before," which was not true. It had had a deficit at the end of the festival but somehow or other it had managed to be filled by

the time it got to the end of the fiscal year. But in any case, I thought well, if it's only \$300,000, it could have been a lot worse. It could have been a lot worse, and indeed, in the first year of the next general manager, Milton Rhodes, that \$300,000 grew to \$1,000,000 in one season.

JL: That's what I wanted to talk about a little bit, was about the end of your relationship and what happened with Milton Rhodes and the split with Menotti and just how it came to pass.

MO: Well, I am not going to tell you the turning moment of Menotti's decision, because that is for my book, because I alone know the reason, the moment, where Gian Carlo made that decision to leave the festival. It did not have to be. And I don't want to sound like I'm the great know-it-all and see-it-all, but had Homer made some efforts toward Gian Carlo that I suggested to him, I don't think Gian Carlo would have left, but he felt in the end that Homer and the board simply didn't care whether he stayed or not. Or worse yet, I think he felt that they took him for granted. "Oh," Homer said to me once, "Gian Carlo will never leave. We pay him too much money, he will never leave." Well it was true that Gian Carlo always lived beyond his means. There's no question about that. But I don't think Gian Carlo would have left if he had felt that he was being valued as an artist, or that he was not sort of, "He'll always be around." As we planned the '94 festival and I was still attempting to be very careful about monitoring expenses, and we did not have an ally in Gian Carlo's old and long association with a man named Tom Kerrigan, who was the New York press agent for the Spoleto Festival, a man who publicized all those festivals and never set foot in Charleston. He never came here. But he was a brilliant press agent, but he did it the old-fashioned way. I'll give you one example of where the whole thing began. Tom wanted to send out 6,000 press releases in October of 1992, and I said to him, "No. We're not sending out 6,000 press releases," 6,000 times 32 cents, however much it was. No, it wasn't a great deal of money, but several thousand dollars in wasted postage so these press releases could be tossed into trash cans. It was just too early for travel writers, for a whole bunch of people. And I had been trying to reach Gian Carlo all week without success in Scotland on the telephone. It was odd. I didn't know where he was. I couldn't find him, but it turned out that Tom knew he was in Monte Carlo. And so when I refused Tom this press release, he called Gian Carlo. Gian Carlo instantly—it must have been the middle of the night—called me. "Ah, well," he said [with accent], "If we cannot afford the press release then perhaps we cannot afford the festival." I said, "No, Maestro, but every nickel counts, and right now I don't have \$6,000 to throw away on sending out a thick press release. We just don't have it. I have other, more important things that it needs to be used for." That was the beginning of a big snowball, and over the course of the next two days, that snowball got bigger and bigger and bigger until Tom Kerrigan, this New York press agent, demanded that I be fired, because I was standing in his way. And Gian Carlo was a man of loyalty. Above all other things, he was a loyal man. And there was one other straw, and suddenly in the middle of the night, he calls the AP reporter that was his friend in New York and says, "I'm leaving. I'm withdrawing. I am taking my festival," which, of course, he could not do. He did not own the trademark. He did not own the name here. But there's a certain turning point in there that—one of these days I'll write my own little story about it. Well.

JL: So he was loyal to—

MO: The mayor was on my side. When Tom Kerrigan faced the mayor with the ultimatum that I had to be fired because I wasn't playing along, I wasn't agreeing—and it was mainly because I wasn't agreeing with Tom. Gian Carlo and I had this on the phone, and I said, “Maestro, we've got to save the money. We've got expenses coming.” But it was Tom who said, “Overton's got to go,” just because I had “turned on top.” And the mayor stood behind me and said, “No, no. Mark is doing a fine job, and he's not going to go.” And so then he went. Well, by this time, I will have to say—and I'm perfectly willing to admit my culpability or shortcoming in all of this—I certainly by this time was not getting along very well with Mr. Burrous. I didn't understand why he seemed so determined to retain the employee that, for Gian Carlo, was a thorn in his side, that he did not want, this woman who had been very crucial in the operations. And I didn't understand why Homer was so solicitous of her feelings and so unsolicitous of Gian Carlo's. And I didn't understand why Homer would not pick up the telephone and call a big honcho at Southern Bell who had \$60,000 that he wanted to give us, but he needed to be asked by the right person. And we made a phone appointment for Homer, to call the man on his boat one Sunday afternoon. He didn't call him; we lost the 60,000 bucks. And by this time it was difficult for me to understand what's going on here, who's side are you on, we gotta keep this place alive, and if that means we need to stroke Gian Carlo in certain ways, then everybody has to pull in this effort. We can't let egos get in the way. I say that, of course, we all have egos, everybody has healthy egos. So off Gian Carlo went, and the months after that were really difficult. I was the first to say—my ego was not involved in trying to hang on to anything. If it seemed, when looking at the situation as a whole, that somebody else needed to come in and have this title of executive director or whatever it was, fine. As I told you before, at 3:00 in the morning many months before I had made my decision: This festival's got to stay alive, and it's got to stay alive long enough for Nigel Redden to return. That's what was important. I didn't know when the pieces of that puzzle would fall into place, but I thought to myself, if this is one of the pieces—because I'll tell you this, this is a very unique festival in a unique place. We talked about the place. Charleston is not like any other community. It's the other side of the moon. People think differently here. They think about the arts differently here. The intellectual life of Charleston is sort of divorced from the arts. It's unlike any other place I've ever been. There's a whole intellectual life over there in that college, but most of those people, they don't have anything to do with Spoleto. They don't see a world, a life, an intellectual life taking place in the festival, so they're just sort of separate. In California, our audiences are full of professors from UCSD and SDSU and the ideas that great musicians have to bring are debated among everyone and thought about. But that's not the way it works here. I'm not saying that it's a bad place, it just has evolved in its own way. And so the fact of the matter was that Homer wanted someone who spoke a corporate language, and I'm not a corporate language speaker. I don't believe that arts is like making cars. I don't want my arts events to be like cereal boxes coming off the line. I don't like corporate jargon. I find it meaningless. I don't like for the bottom line to be the single sole determinant of everything that happens in your operation, and so that I fought. And I thought, I'm not the one. I should move out of here and move over and be a production person because that's what I do best. I'll pull all this stuff together, make sure the artists are happy, make sure that the art is cradled in someone's hand and is the focus of their attention, not the so-called bottom line. And at first, several candidates came. And in fact, one of the most hurtful things, to tell you the honest truth, was that several candidates were brought in to be interviewed while I was still executive director and without my knowledge. And that hurt me, that hurt.

JL: For the position of executive director?

MO: Because the people who brought them in were people to whom I had done nothing harmful, and people whom I had trusted. And you know what, I was a big boy. Why didn't someone just have the guts to haul me in their office and say, "You know what, this is not working out. We need to find another way." They would have been surprised to find out that I would have said to them, "Let's work together and find whatever way is best to keep the festival alive and healthy," but they didn't trust me far enough to do that, and that hurt. And it also made me angry, because it meant that no one had taken the trouble in this most genteel, and most human—why, oh, we're in Charleston, we know all about humaneness and manners in this most humane of cities. No one had thought about being humane to me, and that hurt and made me angry. But you gotta swallow your anger, because the only person whose judgment I could trust at that moment was my own, the only one. So I thought, I gotta do what I think is right for the festival. That's all that matters. So you shut your mouth, you swallow your anger. And I found out about the two candidates that had been brought in already, and a man named David Rawle played a big hand in that, who is now on the board. And that was fine. You know what, I would have helped them if they had come to me and treated me like a human being. I would have helped them find the right person, and it wouldn't have been Milton Rhodes, because Milton Rhodes, nice as he was, affable fellow, good boy, and head of the American Arts Alliance, didn't have the faintest clue about running a festival. Running a service organization like the American Arts Alliance and running a producing organization with a multimillion-dollar budget presenting every kind of different art there is, totally different kettle of fish. And Milton actually told me once that he thought that people would give money to the Spoleto Festival because he talked like they did. Now I've never heard that as a reason for people writing out their checkbook, and I was criticized because I didn't talk like the southerners anymore, and that's why they won't give money to you. Well, we have entered here the realm of the kindergartener when that kind of stuff is brought up. So, I'm sorry. Milton, I'm sure he's a perfectly lovely man at whatever he's doing now, but he and David Phillips, who was brought in as his lieutenant, did not have a clue as to how to run a functioning, very big arts organization.

JL: So just let me get this straight. So they hired Milton Rhodes, the board hired and you became—

MO: They hired Milton Rhodes to become executive director and I was happy to become producing director, so that I could focus. By this time, the staff member that I had spoken to you about before did indeed been allowed to resign. She had moved back to New York, where she does live now, and works at Lincoln Center. And somebody needed to fill in that gap, and of course it was logical that I do so since I had done her job and many others like it for many years before I came here.

JL: So what was your job as producing director?

MO: My job was what Nunally Kersh does now, to make sure that the festival happened, because neither Milton nor David Phillips as lieutenant had any idea of the logistics of actually making a festival.

JL: So booking the acts, renting the spaces...

MO: Well, visas for the orchestra to go to Italy, visas for foreign performers, making sure travel arrangements are made. That's where the deficit went berserk, because when the Hungarian Ballet that year arrived in New York, it turned out they didn't have a ticket to get from New York to Charleston. So what did they do? Milton and David put it on the American Express card for the festival, because they didn't know what else to do. All those airfares, and the deficit just went [makes exploding sound], like that. And they didn't know how to monitor expenses. Neither Milton nor David knew how to look at opera rehearsal schedules and see how money could be saved by shifting this act around to here and not having the stagehands have to do the change over there, but over here—all those little things that you learn over years of production, complicated production. And remember, this is what I'd done at the Ravinia Festival, which is much larger than this place.

JL: And so why did you then decide to leave ultimately after Milton Rhodes became executive director, after your year as production director?

MO: Well, that is a complicated question, because in a way I didn't decide to leave. In a way, it was made very clear that I was to get out.

JL: By whom?

MO: By Milton. You know, it's interesting how little things do this. I remember one day when Milton said, "Oh, let's go out to lunch together. Let's go have lunch together." And I said, "Gee, I'm sorry, I can't today Milton, because we have this crisis here with a visa problem, and I need to stick to this desk because I'm expecting some calls from Europe, and I gotta talk to them." He never again asked me to share even a snack with him. He never again treated me in any way. And I thought, just because I didn't go to lunch with you that day. It's just insane. That's what I mean. To him, it was just a business. You don't have to stay at your desk, you're an executive. No, that's not the way it works in production. You gotta be there when the problem's there. And there were problems in the office. The women did not like working with Milton. There was problems of verbal sexual harassment and other things that were unpleasant. I'm a gay man, and Milton and David Phillips made it very clear that they held me in great contempt, if not disgust. They said things to the staff and in public that were disgusting, not only about me, but about board members and others. Shall we say, lack of discretion; a lack of good manners, we'd call it in the South. And I thought, you know what, it's time to move on. Sometimes in life it's time to move on. But I loved this festival. I loved it very much. I love the idea of a festival. I've spent my whole life in presenting festivals and opera companies, and I loved it. And we reached an agreement. Not a very generous one; I was hauled into Milton's office and forced to sign a severance agreement that abrogated certain parts of my contract, put me in a very bad financial position. For a year, I struggled very badly, because they took away from me what I had counted on, what was written into my contract. He said in John Warren's

office, “If you don’t sign this, I’ll make sure you get nothing, not a penny.” So I signed it, because you know what? Sometimes you just have to realize, as I did that night at 3:00 in the morning, it’s time to move on and realize your objective some other way in some other set of opportunities. I reanimated my career as an actor, which is how I started in this business. I made some movies; a lot of movies were filmed here then. And I persuaded the local radio station to let me start an interview show. And she took a chance on me, Marcia Warnock, because I didn’t have a track record to speak of. I had done some radio, but not a lot. And she said, “Sure, do it.” My show became very successful.

JL: Spoleto Today?

MO: No, that was called “Who Do You Know?” And then during the festival of 1995, the ETV radio people said, “Would you be willing to let us call you every morning of the festival and say, ‘What’s interesting today? What’s going on today?’” I said, “Sure.” So in my kitchen, out on little Oak Island, I’d pick up the telephone, and for about ten minutes, “Well, what’s good today?” And I’d say, “Well, I’m looking at the schedule here. Oh, God, you mustn’t miss this, and the organ series has a great somebody at 10:00 this morning,” and we just did this little rundown of the day, and the next year it grew to about 20 minutes, and then we got a studio, and that was the beginning of “Spoleto Today.” This is its fifteenth year. And Nigel has been always one of our greatest supporters. He once said to me, “I don’t know how you do it. You know more about this festival than I do.” I thought that was a great compliment, because I’ve always admired Nigel, and Nigel believed me. He has never said this to me, but I know in my heart, and I believe in my heart, that Nigel saw in the papers that existed the injustice that had been done to me, and he was determined that in whatever ways he could, that however much I was willing to be a part and a participant in the festival, that that would happen. And I’ve always been grateful to him, and I thank him for that. And “Spoleto Today” became a big success. People listened to it, and to my great surprise, if I said, “Go see something,” they would go see it. So I felt that I had helped sell some tickets for the festival, too, and guided people to some things that they might not otherwise get to see. And more importantly, for people who just felt overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff that there was—and Piccolo Spoleto was just growing by leaps and bounds—I could say to them, “Ah, maybe you missed this, but at 10:00 on Wednesday night there’s a Cathedral Music by Candlelight and it’s going to be the Maurice Duruflé *Requiem* and you mustn’t miss this performance.” “Oh, I wouldn’t even have known about it,” a lady said to me, “if you hadn’t said something.” And that always gave me a great deal of pleasure. One man—I gotta tell you this story because I take great pride in it—he was on his way back to Savannah. He was more than halfway there. He had the radio on and he was listening to one of my little announcements that ran during the day in which I talked about the Verdi *Requiem*. And he said, “I listened to your announcement. I pulled the car off, I turned around, and I drove back to Charleston because I felt I had to hear the Verdi *Requiem*,” and he said, “I’m really glad I did.” And the lady who said, “I went to *Voetsek* [Editor’s note: Unable to verify this word/piece.] because you told me to, I didn’t want to go because I didn’t think I’d like it,” she said, “Oh, it was wonderful.” Well now, that’s worth a lot of trouble, worth a lot of stuff, to be able to think that you helped guide someone to something that they’ll never forget, that maybe made them think about a whole lot of other things differently. So I’m very proud that I have been able to realize that determination of mine, that long ago at 3:00 in the morning, whatever happened, keeping the welfare of the festival was the most important thing, was the

thing that interested me. Now, not all of it was pleasant, not all of it was happy, and it broke my heart to see what happened in those two seasons afterward when the team of Milton and David Phillips very nearly destroyed the place. I mean, we got that close to closing the doors. A \$1,000,000-plus deficit, which for this place was really big. But by then Gian Carlo had been gone two years, and by then Nigel was at a place where he could accept an invitation that was offered to him. And when he came back, I thought, okay, it's going to work now. We'll bit by bit put these problems behind us and Nigel will make it right. And he has done so.

JL: Well we're almost out. I did want to ask you about—I can stay longer if you can.

MO: I have an interview at 12:30 with Louis Otey that I've got to record. I've got to go. If you want to talk again sometime, call me. I've said some things here that are a little—I'm trusting—I don't know what you're going to do with this. If you're going to write a hagiographic account of the Spoleto Festival, then you'll have to take all my stuff out, because I'm not party of the hagiography. I think you need to look at everything. If this is a feel-good book, then maybe just ignore those years. But you know what, I presented—well, we haven't even talked about, really, the artistic content of '92, '93, and '94, and I chose most of what was in 1994. Even though I was then the producing director, we did some artistically very exciting things that year, and the one thing that Nigel and I crossed swords about at one point was when I said to him, "You act as though there was no festival in the years when you weren't here sometimes." In the forward-planning document, it was as though I had never existed. And that hurt because, my dear, I shed a lot of blood in those three years, and my staff shed a lot of blood, and did without raises, and worked very hard, self-sacrificing. A lot of people invested a lot of themselves in keeping this place alive, come hell or high water. And I don't want everybody to say, "Weren't they wonderful, oh God," but just to acknowledge that there were people here who kept this place going in hard times, that's all I wanted. And artistically, there was nothing to be ashamed of in any one of those three years.

JL: Well, let me stop the recording, and I thank you very much for taking the time.