TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH RALPH CHESSE, 54 MINT STREET
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
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MM Mary Fuller McChesney, interviewer
RC Ralph Chesse
RM Robert McChesney, also present

MM Let me ask you first Ralph, where were you born?

RC I was born in New Orleans in 1900.

MM Where did you receive your art training?

RC Through my own experimentation mostly. I did all sorts of things. I started in as a painter when I was about sixteen. Then I switched to theater and I combined those things; I especially combined painting with puppetry and became a puppeteer, but I always painted during my puppeting activities and exhibited. My first exhibition I had in San Francisco in 1928 with the Art Association. I won a prize with Mathew Barnes at that time.

MM Did you begin doing puppetry while you were still in New Orleans?

RC No, I began puppetry up here in San Francisco with Blanding Sloan in 1925, I think it was. I was first introduced to it then, and then I went to New York in 1926 and came back in 1927, and 1928 I started doing experiments with puppetry on my own in a theatre Blanding Sloan had started on Montgomery Street.

MM How did you first have any relationship with the Government sponsored art project?

RC The first contact I had with them, was when I found out that they were going to do murals in the Coit Tower and I think that was 1937 or 1938.

MM No, it was earlier - - it was '33 or '34.

RC Oh, '33. I submitted drawings for one of the panels. I was allowed a space in the building and I submitted a drawing which was accepted

by the board. I did a mural on children and playgrounds at the top of the stairs.

MM Who were the people on the Board when you submitted your designs?

RC Ralph Stackpole was one, and the Director of the DeYoung Museum, Walter Heil, was a member on that Board, too, and all the drawings were submitted to the DeYoung Museum and were passed on by this Board and they made selections as to what the subjects would be. They wanted a related style all through this building.

MM Were you invited to submit designs?

RC No. I had to really go after it, because everyone was clamoring to get into the building. There were probably more artists than there were spaces and they had to really go through everything that was submitted to them and make selections. I had to go after it; it wasn't just handed to me.

MM How did you happen to hear about it - - that the building was going to be available for murals?

RC This was one of the first projects that the artists became involved in and of course, being a member of the Art Association and working with artists around town, I got wind of what they were going to do. I knew Ralph Stackpole and I contacted him immediately and asked to be included in those who submitted. I knew Lucien LaBaudt, who was also one of the painters. He did the stairway going up on each side. Then I knew Ben Cunningham very well. I knew a lot of the artists who were involved in doing murals for the building, and at that time everyone was Diego Rivera conscious. Most of them had studied fresco with Rivera, some of those people who worked on this particular building, so it was kind of a Rivera spirit, I think, throughout the project. I think many of the painters had never done actual

wet fresco before. They were oil painters mostly and this was a new field.

MM Had you done any fresco painting yourself before?

RC No, this was the first one.

MM Did you ever hear of a man named Howard Mack in connection with the Coit Tower project?

RC Yes. He, I think, was on the Board and I think he was connected with Walter Heil and Stackpole. He had something to do with this project. I think he was probably one of the Board members.

MM Of the museum? Or of the Coit Tower Project?

RC Of this particular Federal project. I don't know how he fitted into the picture, but I remember the name very well.

MM We were just talking about Howard Mack. How were you acquainted with him?

RC I didn't knowhhim intimately, but I knew he was associated with the art colony and I think he was one of the Board members who made the selections of the designs that went into the Coit Tower. He was an influential person and he may have been responsible for some of the Government to put up money for this project.

MM When your designs were once accepted by the committee, what was the next step that you went through in the process of making the fresco for Coit Tower?

RC I submitted several things and they asked for some changes, some alterations, and the final sketch that they accepted was done, I think, an inch to the foot. (It was a small drawing. It was not a full-sized drawing). When that was finally accepted, then we had to make a full-sized drawing for the space. We did cartoons, an outline drawing to scale from the original sketch and then when they were ready to go ahead with the frescos, the artists went into the Coit Tower and there was a plasterer who plastered up the section. You went along each day; you put in a section of your design and painted it, and then the next

day you would come in and do some more. The plasterer did the whole building. He was the key man, actually, because they depended a lot on his knowledge of surfaces to get a good fresco job.

MM Several coats of plaster had to be put on the wall, didn't they?

RC There was a scratch coat first, which is a rough coat, and it is the base for the final coat of marble dust and lime. You put your cartoon on the scratch coat first and then you paint it in with very large heavy outlines so that you can always see that drawing on the fresco as you go along. Then when you plaster the section that you are going to paint that day, you put up your cartoon and you pass through a perforated pattern the outline of that part of the design. Then you use colors that have been ground. They had a color man there who did nothing but grind colors through the whole project. You would go down and get your pick of colors - - it was just a water color process - - and the water dissolved the paint and was absorbed in the plaster as you went along. It is a little different from water colors, as it took a little while for it to soak up and you had to sometimes go over it with several washes before you got the depth of color that you wanted. You couldn't pile it all on at one time, as you do a water color drawing.

MM How large a section would you do in a day's work?

RC Oh, it depended upon the amount of detail involved. If there wasn't too much detail, you could do maybe a three-foot square section.

MM What was the size of the panel that you did?

RC I don't remember off hand. I would roughly say it was about four feet. It was a curved surface. It was across the stairs. It was about four or five feet wide and then it was the whole length of the building from the floor to the ceiling, which must have been possibly ten or twelve feet.

MM You said the subject that you finally decided upon was children?

RC It was children in a playground. There was a flag, as I remember, and children playing with a nurse. There were some children playing ball. It was a long narrow panel which was a little difficult to fit in with this particular type of subject, because instead of doing it wide, you had to do it from the top to the bottom. I used a central apparatus as the motive from which I could work in the other figures, because of the type of space that it was.

MM Did you begin painting from the top?

RC Yes.

MM You worked down?

RC Yes, I worked down.

MM The plasterer must have been pretty busy running around. There were about thirty artists working there at that time, weren't there?

RC That's right. The plasterer was a very busy man and a very skilled man. In fact, it was Matt Barnes, who was also a painter, who did the plastering. He was a skilled plasterer and that was his trade. He painted also, but he was a plasterer by trade and a very fine plasterer. That was his contribution to the project.

MM Do you know very much about Matt Barnes?

RC Not too much. I knew him personally. I used to meet him at Art Association meetings and art gatherings. I went to exhibitions and parties with him. I knew him that way. I didn't know him too personally. He had a studio on Montgomery Street at one time where I had a studio, too, so he used to run in and see me sometimes. That was during the twenties and thirties.

MM He became quite well known a little bit later for his very romantic paintings.

RC He had a particular style of painting. I don't know of anyone who has painted just the way he did. It was a very individual style and the surface was very highly glazed and usually he did moonlight subjects - - maybe a house or a foggy moon coming through a very deep, blue-purple sky on the top of the hill, or something. It was a very individual style. I don't think he was successful outside of San Francisco. He did have an exhibition in New York at one time, which was not successful, but that is true of many artists who never make the scene in New York, but they do have exhibitions, which is not always a reflection on their work. It depends a lot on the market and what dealers are selling at the time. It is true today, as well as then.

MM Did you have any assistants working with you on your fresco?

RC Not on my panel. I worked alone because it was one of the smaller spaces. I was able to do it alone. Some of the jobs took several months to complete. I think I took about five or six weeks on the one that I had.

MM You mentioned Ralph Stackpole, was he working on a fresco at Coit Tower when you were there too?

RC Yes. He had a very large space there downstairs. I just don't remember what the subject was, but he was one of the painters on the project.

MM Lucien LaBaudt did one?

RC Lucien LaBaudt had a space up the stairs on either side. Because it was going up the stairs, he used the idea of a hill and a cable car and the buildings going up the stairs. It was a very clever idea, I thought.

MM I interviewed Marcelle (LaBaudt's wife) and she said that he had put several people who had worked on the project, into his fresco?

W Were you in it?

RC I don't remember whether he put me into it or not. I knowthat he did that in some of the other projects that he did; the one he did up at the beach. There were many people there who were in that mural.

MM You were upstairs though?

RC Yes, this was right at the top of the stairs.

MM Who were the people working next to you?

RC Across from me were Ben Cunningham and Edith Hamlin. They both had spaces there. I don't remember the names of the other people who were there. There were other spaces across from me and along side of Ben Cunningham but I just don't remember now who they were.

MM What was Cunningham's mural?

RC I don't remember now just what the subject was. They were all figure subjects. All the subjects on the walls were supposed to represent California activities generally - - some of the industrial subjects like farming and wine and then there were city activities and industrial activities - - all the various subjects which represented California were included in these murals.

MM You mentioned the influence of Diego Rivera on the murals which were done at Coit Tower. Did you know him personally when he was here in San Francisco?

RC I met him on several occasions. I met him once at the Perry Dilley Studio at a puppet show, strangely enough. Dilley was a puppeteer on Montgomery Street at the time that I had my theater. He had an upstairs studio and he gave hand puppet shows to schools, and he had a little theater in his studio. He invited people occasionally to special performances. Rivera was invited the night that I went to see it. Then I met him again during the Golden Gate Exposition when

he was doing this great big mural. He had a great influence on all the painters at that time. He was considered very controversial in his subject matter. He got away from the modern movements of the Paris schools - - the abstract painters - - and he went back into his own native folklore for his material, and combined a very sophisticated political approach in an illustrative way and his forms reflected the peasantry of Mexico - - the primitive type of work that the peasants did. All these things were combined and it came out in a style which was very much his own. I don't think he was as successful when he attempted to do the same thing with American subject matter, when he went into machinery and the industrial thing. He got off the track. I think his best things were the things that he did in Mexico - - his Mexican subjects.

MM Had you seen any of his work before you did the fresco at Coit Tower?

RC I have never been to Mexico, so I have never seen his Mexican fresco, only in reproduction. The one that he did at the stock exchange I had seen and the one that he did at the art School I had seen.

MM That was the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco?

RC Yes.

MM Do you think his influence on the Coit panels came merely from the frescos that he did here or did it come from people who had gone to Mexico and seen his work there?

RC It got its popularity from work that was done in Mexico, and many of the painters went down there and worked with him on his Mexican projects, and it was considered quite the thing to do, to go to Mexico and work with Diego Rivera. There was a very definite trend to do frescos up here at that time. Everybody was dabbling in plaster and plaster panels

and doing wet fresco like Diego Rivera. It was a very appropriate thing, I think, for the Coit Tower to use this media at this particular time, because I think it best reflected a very definite art period - - the whole WPA art project is a period in American art that I think will stand as an example of coordinated effort among artists and with a great deal of collaboration and coordination in selecting materials and styles of painting. Each one had a little bit different style, but there was a coordination in all the subjects which were done in all the art projects - - many post offices, many public buildings, schools benefited from the subsidy and the artists did too, because they had work which they didn't have before. All of the art projects - - the theater project - - were a very important contribution. I came into the theater project after having done this Coit Tower mural. I was appointed state director for puppetry for the Federal Theater when the WPA finally came into its full program. I remained with that through the Golden Gate Exposition. I had several groups of people putting on shows that I had designed and directed, both in San Francisco and in Los Angeles. Then when the Federal Theater was disbanded; it was in July, 1939, I went into the art project in San Francisco.

MM Before we get on to this Theater Project and Art Project (I would like to talk with you chronologically.) and I did have a few more questions about Coit Tower. I was curious to know if during the time you worked there, there were many discussions going on between the different artists who were doing frescos? The reason I ask that, when you look at the Coit Tower frescos, you have an impression of many people working very much in the same direction. I was wondering

if you met together or if you talked a lot about what you were doing with painters there, or was this just something that was sort of spontaneous?

RC I don't remember that kind of an association. Artists generally are pretty individualistic. While they may agree or disagree about certain movements in painting, basically they try to remain themselves and try to develop something within themselves which will be recognized as their own contribution. Influences have a tendency to destroy that, and even though, we'll say, an influence like Diego Rivera at that time is very evident in everything that was done in this program, so each artist tried to contribute something of himself to it, so that there are variations. The general thing was that Rivera approached the mural as a very political idea and some of this got into the Coit Tower, too. Also he reflected the times, the people around him - - the peasantry, the political things which happened to the people. There wasn't so much of that that could be used as an American scene, but they went into the industrial side of the American scene, such as dairy farming and coal mining or gold mining, ranching - - California ranching - - some of them showed the fruit orchards. All of these things came into the California scene. This is the kind of influence that I think Rivera had on the subject matter. The style of painting itself was pretty much controlled by a medium which is a very flat type medium. You work an outline and you color and build up your form from a flat two-dimensional drawing. You don't paint a fresco the way you paint an oil painting where you start with a blob of color and develop it and add and subtract and build forms and textures - - create these things in variations of textures. A fresco is flat. It is two-dimensional pretty much, and even though you may give them some modeling

– you work within an outline. You do a pattern in two dimensions. You work out your color scheme and it is merely a matter of enlarging that and getting it on the wall. There is no spontaneity to fresco as I can see it, it is pretty well cut and dried design which is well organized.

MM Did you find it difficult to work in frescos since you had never done it before?

RC The medium itself was a little strange - - working on a hard wall and finding that the paint didn't react the same way to the surface as an oil painting would. You don't have the flow and plasticity in fresco that you have in oil painting. You can use a knife in oil painting, you can use a brush and you can vary your techniques, but with a fresco you can't. You have to keep it pretty flat and usually you work up these surfaces with very small brushes. You don't use large brushes for great big areas. You have to cross patch to get your tone, because the color doesn't stick. You have to go over it and over it in order to get the depth of color. You can't put it on in one operation.

MM Were you at the Coit Tower during the time of the demonstrations?

RC Which demonstrations?

MM As I understand it, there were two. There was one demonstration in support of Diego Rivera's mural which was destroyed at Rockefeller Center in New York. I saw a photograph of that one, and the artists went outside and demonstrated.

RC Oh, yes, I remember that.

MM You were there then?

RC I was there then.

MM Then there was the second difficulty I heard about when a man named Clifford Wight had painted a hammer and sicle on the beams of the roof

or something.

RC Yes, I think he was one of Diego's pupils. He was one of those who had been to Mexico and worked with Rivera.

MM Did you know him?

RC Only by seeing him going in and out of the building and meeting as I did many of the artists who were painting there. I didn't know him too well.

MM He was the one who did those very tall panels....

RC He and there was another local painter who had done a similar one which was rather a companion piece to it. He used to live across the bay. I am trying to think of his name.

MM Mallette Dean?

RC Yes.

MM After the Coit Tower project, did you go ahead and do any further fresco work?

RC No, because in order to do a fresco, you had to have a wall, and as my activities at the WPA came into the picture, I switched to theater. I didn't pursue the mural phase of painting as many of the others did, because there were mural projects that developed along with the WPA art project later on. There were many fresco projects - - there were post offices that had spaces that the painters designed for. Then there were some of the murals that were done on canvas and then stretched and applied to the wall surface later - - glued on.

MM The Coit Tower project was finished in 1934, as I understand it, and then you went on to the theater project. Was there any loss of time there? Did you go directly from the Coit Tower to the theater project?

RC As a matter of fact, the WPA Project which I became associated with, started in 1936 and I was with the San Francisco unit during 1936 and I organized a company here and we did "Crock of Gold" which was the first production that we did on Bush Street.

MM Was this puppetry or theater?

RC This was a marionette project and these were marionettes - - a marionette unit which was part of the Federal Theater unit. They had a different unit for everything. They had vaudeville, bands, music units, and they had serious drama and opera. They covered all the different activities.

MM Who were some of the other people who worked on this "Crock of Gold", your first production during that period?

RC Charles Bratt was one of the very active ones. I don't remember the names of many of the people who acted as puppeteers. Crawford Perks was one who had worked with me in my own little theater before.

MM How many people did you have with you?

RC Oh, we started out locally with about fifteen or twenty people but the quotas changed from year to year and there was always a season to cut back. They would lower the quotas and they would insist on people who were on relief. So many of the good people who qualified did not have relief status, so they were considered non -relief people. They tried to balance them out, but as time went on, they insisted on having more of the relief people and the non-relief people were let out, even among the supervisors. Most of the supervisors were non-relief people because they were key people who had to be brought in to get things organized.

MM You were non-relief?

RC I was non-relief, because I had a job at the time that I went into this. I was doing some work at the City of Paris (a department store)

at the time - - some window shows. This was something that they had to do hurriedly. They got the people to get the thing started. It had to be started right away and they got the key people to start the project, and then from that time on, there were many, many changes that happened. Good people were lifted to heights of supervisory capacity and were taken out of smaller projects, which meant that you had to try and find replacements, which wasn't always easy. The change was quite regular. You didn't hang on to one group of people for too long at a time, unless they were on relief. There were many problems in the theater because everything had to be passed on by Washington. A supervisor, while he had complete authority over his group, if he was going to produce a show, he had to have the approval of Washington before they would permit him to do it. Very often the things that were submitted were lost in the shuffle. By the time they got back, they either were rejected or something else had taken their place. Sometimes you went ahead and did a show and then you found out after it was done, that you didn't have the rights and Washington would call you off. This happened with "Crock of Gold". This was the first project we did. We developed a script from one that had been previously written. We produced it in San Francisco and it was very successful. We had a long run. When I was made supervisor for the state, I took the show to Los Angeles and I took the marionettes that I used here, but the crew was different. They had a much larger marionette unit in Los Angeles because the population was greater. By the time we got "Crock of Gold" rehearsed and ready to go on, a wire came from Washington to say that we hadn't the rights to do the show, but we had already produced it in San Francisco. These things happened all the time. It was very frustrating to direct this, because there were so many people who had jurisdiction over the units - -

everything had to be passed by Washington. There was a lot of red tape involved which interfered with the freedom. It was a wonderful start for the Federal subsidized theater and everyone had hopes that it would be a permanent thing, because there was still a great need for this sort of thing in this country. When the theater became more articulate, when they began doing things like "living newspaper" which was rather political, the Congressmen began to get a little frightened and thought that the artists were too articulate and the writers were using it as a spring board for their own propaganda, so they stopped it.

MM Did your work with writers? You were talking about getting a script like the "Crock of Gold" and working from a script that Mayer Levine had done. Then would you have writers that worked with you?

RC We had writers on the project and they didn't always produce things that we could use, but we had them. Very often I made my own adaptations. I tried to have full control of whatever I was producing and if I couldn't find somet ing which I could have rights to, I would write my own. Even those things were not always accepted. I was very anxious to do a Rourke Bradford story at the time and I had written to Rourke Bradford and had permission to make an adaptation of a short story he had written which was called The Child of God. It was a fantasy, but it had some Negro folklore in it and also brought out the problem of the Negro in the south - - the lynching and the unfair trial of a Negro; unfair accusations in the Southerner's attitude towards the Negro. I was very anxious to do this show, but it never got off the ground. It was lost in the red tape in Washington. They never seemed to clear it for some reason or other. I wrote the script, but it was never produced.

MM What was his name - - Rourke Bradford?

RC Rourke Bradford. He was the one who wrote the original stories for Green Pastures. He wrote of the Negro in relation to Bible stories; the characters in Bible roles were Negroes - - God was a Negro and the Angles, and all the important biblical characters were all Negroes. This is how Green Pastures came about.

MM I remember seeing that movie a long time ago. Was he a Negro himself?

RC No.

MM Where was he from - - California?

RC No, he was from the South.

MM When you first began the marionette unit, did you start the whole project yourself? Did you establish headquarters and hire assistants? I was just curious as to how you did this?

RC Well, you organized your own unit.

MM Nothing had been in existence, though, when you took over, had there?

RC No. There was a local director appointed and it was her job to get people organized to do this theater project.

MM This would be a local director of the theater project?

RC No, she was not local. Her name was Elizabeth Ellson. She had a very fine theater background. I think she was from Vassar. She was appointed by Hally Flanagan to direct the San Francisco unit. Hally Flanagan was head of the theater unit for the WPA.

MM Then Miss Ellson was the one who contacted you?

RC Yes. I had had several marionette theaters in San Francisco, so my reputation in the puppet theater was known pretty well locally. I was the first one that they approached on this. They organized one in Los Angeles, which had a much larger group of people. There were about fifty people at the time. Blanding Sloan, who initiated

me to puppetry much earlier in my career, had headed that unit. Then he moved on to something else and another puppeteer took over the directorship of the WPA marionette unit - - Rovert Bromley. We were so successful up here with the shows that we did - - we got very fine reviews. I organized it almost from many people who had no previous marionette experience at all. Most of them got their training right on the project. We had a shop and we built things. I made designs and taught them how to make the marionettes. Then we had, of course, the advantage of people with theater background - - actors - - sometimes we used actors' voices and used puppeteers to manipulate the show. In the Southern branch of the WPA they had more people, but they didn't seem to hit it off too well. They weren't doing anything very imaginative, as I remember. The people working on the project didn't seem to take advantage of what the WPA theater was offering them. I mean experimentation in a new form of puppetry, a new idea. These are the things which should be developed under this kind of sponsorship. They were doing the old stuff - - the old fairy tales and the old song and dance routines and the popular type of vaudeville show with puppets. I was asked to go down there and take charge of both units; the San Francisco unit and the Los Angeles unit. I used to travel back and forth. They didn't like it too well, because I was considered an intruder. I had quite a bit of trouble at first, because they felt that I should have stayed up here. Sometimes the performance would get into a hassle. I would suddenly get a wire that I should go back to Los Angeles because the unit was in a mess. I would have to go down there and get the whole company in the theater and give them a pep talk and re-rehearse the show and get them started again, because they didn't like the material. They didn't like the

sort of things that we did up here. I refused to do things which were just run-of-the-mill type of puppetry. I thought this was a chance. We had so many different types of talent to use, that they should be used to better advantage than just doing stuff to keep people in jobs. We had very good craftsmen in that unit - - women who could build very intricate types of animals and jointed types of marionettes that did special things They were more interested in the tricky phase of puppetry and I was more interested in the dramatic phase of puppetry. I looked upon this as a theater and not as a trick, which was where I think we disagreed. Finally I was moved to Los Angeles. I lived in Los Angeles. I lived in Los Angeles from 1937 until 1940 and then I came back to San Francisco at the closing of the project. We did one last show in the second year of the Golden Gate Exposition under the Recreation Department which did performances of "Pinnochio" for the summer. It was after that that I joined the art unit.

MM What were some of the other shows that you did? You mentioned "Crock of Gold" and "Pinnochio".

RC We did "Crock of Gold". I did a production of "Alice in Wonderland" and I did "Mikado." I did a topical review type thing which was not the usual song and dance type of review that marionettes go in for. We did little things which were satires on prison systems. I had George Bernard Shaw as a master of ceremonies who damned everything. Instead of saying how wonderful the program was going to be, he would knock it down before each act would go on.

MM Did you write this one yourself - - the review?

RC Yes, I selected the material. There were some sketches and things that were available. If they were good, I would use something that was available, but mostly I developed the idea myself. We used recordings for background music. One of the things we did was a reading

- - a dramatization of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," which was done as a dramatic reading to musical background and then it was animated with a character in the setting of a library with the raven coming in and perching on the bust of Pallas. It was very exciting and interesting and something that puppeteers wouldn't ordinarily think of doing. In fact, the Los Angeles people, when I took it down there, didn't like it. They thought it had no place in a variety show at all. Another thing that I did, which I produced on my own before I went to the Federal Theater, was the performance of "Emperor Jones." We built a production of "Emperor Jones" on the project and I played the part of the emperor which I had done previously. One of the things that we wanted to do - - I had done it - - was the prologue of Vachel Linsay's "Congo" which all worked in beautifully with "Emperor Jones," a short play. It was a very fast moving play. The first act ran almost a half hour and there were several scenes that followed which were very fast moving as he goes into the woods to be beat of the tom-tom and the climax was a gunshot going off. To give it the right mood, I had Vachel Linsay's "Congo" with a voodo figure in a jungle setting with brillant lighting and a tom-tom rythmn. I recited Vachel Linsay's "Congo" as a prologue. We had to clear this through Washington and again we were on the stage opening night with all the people rehearsed (we did it then as a choral thing) to do the prologue. The curtain was ready to go up on the show and the telegram came in saying that we didn't have the right to do the play.

MM So you never actually performed that?

RC No, not the "Congo". We had to eliminate the "Congo". We rehearsed it and it was already, but they wouldn't let us do it.

MM But you went ahead with "Emperor Jones"?

RC Yes. Well, the "Emperor Jones" had permission from O'Neil to do it. He was living out here at the time. This is how it was possible for us to do it. He gave us clearance on it. Ordinarily it would have been impossible to do "Emperor Jones" because it was royaltable for one thing, and the Government tried to stay clear of royaltable plays as much as possible. They did royaltable plays, but they wanted to cut expenses as much as possible. We found in Los Angeles, even with all the conflict, that the marionette group took in more money at less Government expense than some of the other large theatrical productions that were done. But all the money went into a kitty. We didn't get the benefit of the extra cash to do better productions and it was soaked up by this private theater unit.

MM What did you charge for a performance?

RC I think it was fifty cents to a dollar. That was the range of price for the shows.

MM Where did you perform them? Did you have a theater here in San Francisco?

RC The first theater we had in San Francisco was the "Little Bush Street Theater." I think there is a recording studio there now. Then they had the Alcazar and they had the Old Columbia first which was later knocked down. We played "Emperor Jones" in the Alcazar.

MM How often would you give a performance?

RC Well, there were a lot of things going on. The marionette was merely one of the theatrical units and they scheduled - - because they only had this one theater at the time, they would schedule the marionette performances to fit into their regular schedule of plays. In Los Angeles it was a little different, they had quite a number of theaters. They had them all over Los Angeles. There was one little theater where we played "Emperor Jones" and I have forgotten the name of it

now, and there was another one on Hollywood Boulevard where we played. We did "Rip Van Winkle" in that theater at that time. Then for the Fair we did a musical production of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." This was one of the compromises that we had to make because this was the sort of thing that the Los Angeles group of people loved to do. They had musicians and singers and every kind of talent imaginable that had to be put to work, and so this was one way of mking use of this talent. They gave a very good production of "Snow White." The San Francisco unit then did the "Rip Van Winkle," which had been built in Los Angeles and it was shifted up here. There was always a rivalry between the two groups. When I was sent to Los Angeles, well, then the rivalry between San Francisco and Los Angeles was quite strong. There was always something going on and I wasn't able to travel - - they didn't permit me to travel as much after the first year as I did the first year when I was getting things organized. So it sort of got out of hand when I wasn't around to keep them straightened out.

MM Where did you give your performances at the Treasure Island Theater?

RC There was a Federal theater - - a very complete Federal theater - - in the Federal building. It had revolving stages and it had the most modern switchboard. They had a little marionette theater on the side and I designed the stage and laid out the whole theater for our performances. We had a revolving stage and we had an upper balcony for a marionette bridge which was used as a bridge and as a storage space as well. It was a very comfortable theater - - the seats and everything were very comfortable. We played five or six performances every day.

MM Every day? Five or six?

RC Yes.

MM That was a pretty heavy schedule.

RC It was. We would alternate. One week the San Francisco unit would play and the other week the other unit would play. We had to balance them up. It was closed off that summer. Instead of letting the season run through, Congress shut off the Federal theater in the middle of Summer - - July it was. This was when they had scheduled quite a number of the "living newspaper" performances.

MM Here at the Fair?

RC At the Fair.

MM Then the theater there was no longer used?

RC- I don't know what has happened to it since. After the Federal theater broke up, I don't think there was any live theater going on in that building. The second year, the recreation took over the marionette unit so that there was still marionette demonstrations in the Federal building under the Recreational Department. We produced the show "Pinnochio" in the marionette theater that summer.

MM So your marionette unit didn't close down, you just transferred from the theater project to the Recreation Department.

RC No, this was closed down. This was not Federal theater at all. This was Recreation Department. I had to organize another crew of people. The people that we had originally for the other performances had all dissolved. They had gone back to Los Angeles. The people in San Francisco had been taken off the project. There were just one or two that we were able to get hold of. It was an entirely different setup. It was not like Federal theater at all. We built this one production for the Fair.

MM The Recreation Department that you worked for wasn't under WPA then?

RC It was, yes, it was still WPA, but it was not Federal theater. There were some playgrounds and they taught crafts and all that sort of thing.

It was not theater actually. The puppetry happened to be one of the crafts which was included in this, and since the theater was available we were asked to do a marionette show for the Fair.

MM Where were your headquarters here in San Francisco where you actually made the marionettes?

RC At Bush Street. We had a shop upstairs and even after the theaters were rented - - the larger theaters were used - - the headquarters was still at Bush Street - - the executive offices and the shop for the marionettes.

MM How are the marionettes made?

RC They are carved out of wood. In some instances the heads are carved out of wood and in other instances plaster molds are made from clay models and then a plastic wood cast is made from the molds. Then this is refinished like a piece of wood. You have moveable parts like moveable mouths and eyes. Plastic wood casting is preferable because it is hollow, whereas the solid wood carving for the smaller figures worked very well where there were no moveable parts in the head. The joints, the body parts are made of wood. You combine it with different materials - - cloth sometimes, sponge rubber, chicken wire for some things. Animals require certain shapes and we found that chicken wire worked very well because it is light and it gives you something to build a skin around.

MM What size were they - - about two feet?

RC The human figures ran around two feet - - eighteen inches to two feet. In my own theater I used smaller figures. When I did Shakesperian productions, I used an eighteen to twenty-inch figure - - very slender and tall. They weren't very big, but they were very slender to they seemed huge on the stage even though they were only about twenty inches. Then you could work them into a large stage and into a complete setting

like you would in a modern theater - - lighting, and the figure became the important unit rather than the head or the face, which is the case in the hand puppet for instance, where you concentrate on the head and the hand. This is usually oversized and over exaggerated, whereas in the plastic type of marionette, you strive for a plastic proportion, plastic movement and simple movements of the body and as little movement as necessary to put over your dialogue.

MM With the workshop and actually operating the marionettes with actors, you must have had a very large project.

RC Locally, it wasn't as large a project as it could have been, although we borrowed people who were on the theater project where we needed them. Actors, for instance, were on call. Sometimes we would have ten or twelve people on the bridge and we would have a half a dozen actors or so along with us who would read parts while we manipulated.

MM The bridge is the part above from which they suspend the marionettes?

RC The bridge is the framework between - - on each side at the front of the stage and back of the stage. You have a front bridge which makes the scene of your theater and then back of that is the stage floor and back of the stage floor is the back bridge. You have operators on each bridge. You have approximately four feet between the front and the back bridge. You have operators on each bridge. You have approximately four feet between the front and the back bridge so that you can work back and forth and one operator can hand a marionette to the one at the front bridge and vice versa. Then you have the under bridge. Your bridge is high enough so that you have space for settings for sky drop in back and for lighting. You can use the depth under the bridge for distance. We had incorporated shadow figures, for instance, in

conjunction with shows like "Emperor Jones." The apparitions in "Emperor Jones" were all shadow figures that moved on a very stylized movement coming up and disappearing with lights in back. This is the advantage of the marionette theater over the hand puppet theater, I feel. The hand puppet theater concentrates entirely on the head of the figure itself, and is usually oversize, but it has a greater centrifugal potential than the marionette because you are right on top of it and it is larger and stronger in that way. It is not as classical in its form.

MM How large an area would the Proscenium actually be?

RC You had about a ten by six opening - - six feet high and about ten feet long and then you had a space on either side in the wings of ten feet. In other words, your stage was about fifteen feet long which gave you plenty of proportion for a two-foot figure. If you have a two-foot figure and a six-foot proscenium opening, you have a very fine height proportion so that your figure can look very large.

MM This is almost the end of the tape and then we can go into the art project.

RC On the art project, one of the activities that I became involved in and something that I had never done before was silk screen. I had done other types of prints. I had done wood cuts and drawings, but I had never done any silk screen and there I learned how to do silk screen prints. I was very glad to get into it because I had never done any silk screen printing before. The studio they had - - the old pickle factory it was called - - 950 Columbus Avenue - - had quite a complete art setup there. They did everything from silk screen printing to large murals. The artists were used in different ways. Sometimes you were put to work on painting murals and sometimes you were put

to work on silk screen prints, and sometimes you were assisting someone in painting a mural in some school, for instance, as I did in the case of Jack Garrity at State College. You were not entirely on your own. Some of the artists were permitted to paint at home and could bring their work into the project, but I worked in the art project studio which combined various activities among the artists. We did everything. We painted murals and we worked with other people. I was also for a short time in the art project in Los Angeles, but when we were shipped back to Los Angeles after the Federal Theater closed, I worked with Lorser Feitleson on the Los Angeles project and we did murals there too. There were mural projects going on too.

MM You worked with him on a mural?

RC Yes.

MM Where was the mural located?

RC That was done in the studio.

MM Oh, I see, it was an oil painting mural.

RC These were assignments for schools in different places. There were oil murals and they were done on canvas and rolled up and installed in schools.

MM You were only on the art project about a year?

RC About a year.

MM Who was your supervisor?

RC Lorser Feitleson in the Los Angeles project. I am trying to think of this sculptor who was head of it here.

MM Was this the silk screen project?

RC No, he was supervisor for the whole project. Silk screen was merely one of the activities that we were involved in.

MM It must have been Gaskin or Danysh.

RC Gaskin and Danysh were heads of the art project from the beginning here. I was trying to think of the name of the immediate supervisor who was in charge of this unit that I was in.

MM Did you design the silk screens yourself?

RC Yes, when we were assigned to do a silk screen, we made our own designs and they let us carry out whatever ideas we had. I think they were banked - - I don't know how they stored them or how they distributed them or what use was made of them, but they had a regular art bank. They had paintings and sculptures and all sorts of things.

MM Looking back on it very briefly, how would you sum up your experiences on the WPA? Do you think it had good effect on your career as an artist?

RC I don't think it had an effect on my career as an artist outside of the fact that it gave me an opportunity to work and to do things which I probably would never had a chance to do on my own because it was subsidized. But it didn't influence me as far as my style of work was concerned, or it didn't change my way of painting, and it didn't change my ideas as far as puppetry was concerned. I maintained that. They gave you a free hand in that respect; they didn't try to force you to do a certain style or a certain type of work. They let the artist retain his individuality, which I think was a very good thing.

MM Do you think it would be a good idea to extablish a Federal Art Project again?

RC I had thought of it many times. After the experiences that we went through with WPA, I wonder how good it would be. If the artist is given a free hand and he isn't bound up with a lot of red tape, it can be a very good thing. The same is true of the theater and the same is true of artists. The WPA projects all had very specific project outlines. The writers, for instance, did research. The theater,

documentary types of things which they called "living newspaper," which were all very definite contributions, but the minute they tried to interfere with that, then the theater lost its touch; they were merely imitating Broadway and doing things which were successful shows on Broadway and I don't think that that made any particular contribution. I think if the Government is going to subsidize something, I think it should be something to stimulate new movements in art and to level things out and to eliminate what we feel is bad and to stimulate interest in the public in things which are good. I think the biggest job that the Government could become involved in right now is to educate the public as to what the meaning of art is, and why. People have educations but not in that respect.

MM Thank you very much for giving us your time for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH RALPH CHESSE

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