Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Henrietta Harris

# AN ORAL HISTORY WITH HENRIETTA HARRIS

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2002 and 2003

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

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Henrietta Harris photographed by Nadine Wilmot in 2004

Henrietta Harris photographed by Nadine Wilmot in 2003

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Interview History—Henrietta Harris

A proponent of Constantin Stanislavsky's approach to acting, Henrietta Harris taught courses in UC Berkeley's drama department from 1954 to 1969. A native of San Jose, California and a formally trained classical singer and performer, she toured Europe and the United States performing her repertoire of German lieder, art songs, and spirituals. Ultimately she left the world of music for her passion: theatre. In 1964, she founded the Aldridge Players/West, a pioneering black theater ensemble that performed in San Francisco and toured historically black schools in the South. Like many African American faculty at Berkeley prior to 1969, Ms. Harris was not a ladder-rank faculty person; rather, she served as a Lecturer with Security of Employment. She left UC Berkeley in 1969 to pursue a career on the stage in Europe.

This interview took place at Ms. Harris' home at the foot of Telegraph Hill in San Francisco over the course of six interview sessions. The interview was recorded on minidisc and digital video. It was transcribed and sent to Ms. Harris for her review and minimally edited for correct references to names and dates. I am thankful for Ms. Harris' humor, grace, and her patience with me while we engaged in this work.

Appended to this interview is the transcript of an interview conducted with Ms. Harris in July, 1970, from Margaret Wilkerson's 1972 dissertation, *Black Theatres in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Los Angeles Area: A Report and Analysis.* The content of the appended interview with Ms. Harris focuses on her experiences founding and managing the Aldridge Players/West theater group and represents a valuable resource for researchers.

Ms. Harris was interviewed as part of the African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project series. This series of interviews explores the experiences of African American faculty and senior staff at UC Berkeley as part of the broader history of the University of California and its commitment to access and diversity.

This series is grounded in the premise that higher education is one of the primary strategies for gaining social equality--access to employment and income—for historically disadvantaged communities. Moreover, the university, comprised of its students and faculty and administration, with all of its intellectual and financial resources, operates as a critical touchstone in processes of systemic social change. Therefore, the university functions not simply as an educational institution, but also as a significant site of past and future potential for imagining and crafting opportunity for ethnic and racial groups formerly excluded from higher education. This project recognizes that the University of California, as California's premier public educational institution, plays a significant role in the socio-economic mobility of all of California's residents. The story that we hope will emerge from this project is a story of California—its people and one of its most important public institutions.

This interview was conducted under the auspices of the Regional Oral History Office. The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through recorded oral memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in the Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Nadine Wilmot, Editor/Interviewer
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
April, 2005

**Interview 1: December 16, 2002**

Wilmot: December 16th, Henrietta Harris, interview one, Regional Oral History Office. So, good morning.

Harris: Good morning.

Wilmot: I guess I just wanted to start by asking you—we usually start with this question of when and where were you born?

Harris: I was born in San Jose, California, on June 15th, 1916.

Wilmot: And you've told me that you were adopted by a foster family?

Harris: Yes, my mother—[laughs]—I don't know whether I should start off with this shameful part right from the beginning, but—

Wilmot: Well, then let's—whatever you like.

Harris: Okay. You're going to rearrange all this anyway, aren't you?

Wilmot: Well—

Harris: Some of it?

Wilmot: If you want to, we can. It's able to be done.

Harris: My mother fell in love with her pastor, a Baptist minister. She sang in the choir. And I was the result. But I wasn't born yet when she came to San Jose. There was a Baptist convention there at the time, and my father was doing his job at the convention, and she came, I suppose, to be near him. I don't know. I don't know whether I was born immediately, or very soon thereafter, and she either came back to San Jose because she liked it, liked my foster mother, at whose home she stayed, because my foster mother took roomers. And then she left, saying she'd come back and pick me up. Well, she never did, which was fine with me, because my foster mother turned out to be quite a mother, except she was in her fifties, so she was old enough to be my grandmother. It was like being raised by my grandmother.

Wilmot: And your mother's name?

Harris: I don't know! I don't know her first name, and I don't know her last name. Now, I did look it up at one time, because I wanted to know something, but I didn't try to memorize it and I didn't memorize it because I think she didn't use her own name, but I don't know. She came from a very respectable Texas family, had gotten in trouble with me, by having me. So the Harrises took me over.

Wilmot: Okay. So the Harris family. What are the names of your mother and your father?

Harris: The Harris family was fantastic. My father came from Carson City, Nevada, where his father had owned a barbershop, and he—my father—became a professional fisherman

and learned how to be a barber also, so that when he came to San Jose he opened his own barbershop.

My mother came from a fascinating family. They had been slaves, and their master had freed the father, I guess. I don't know how the mother got freed. But anyhow, they crossed the plains together in the usual fashion of the day, and went to Los Angeles. And in I think it was 1850—and didn't like Los Angeles, came up to Mariposa, which was very unsettled at the time, and got a ranch there. Apparently they had money, I think through the help of the master.

Oh, no, my grandfather was a shoemaker. That's how. And his master had allowed him to earn his own money. So they were able to buy their place, and they raised fourteen children there. They didn't all live, but about seven of them did.

Wilmot: In Mariposa.

Harris: And they raised cattle and made quite a bit of money, apparently, because when my mother came down to San Jose, to get out of the country, of course, possibly find a man, [laughs] she was considered rich and very haughty because she was able to either buy or rent her own horse and buggy. This was—it must have been late nineteenth century, because she married my father in 1901. These are my foster parents. I have their picture there.

Wilmot: Let me get it.

Harris: Okay.

Wilmot: I'll bring it over. [goes to fetch photograph] I wonder if you could hold it up over here. Oh, my goodness. You had said that your father was very fair-skinned.

Harris: Yes, he's half white. His father was an octoroon, I guess you call it, and he lived in Carson City. I don't know if he married her or—I don't know those details; I didn't ask. But she was white, and that's why he looks white, because he is half white and half octoroon. Has very little black blood in him. But he never acted that way. He apparently liked black women. [laughs] Because my mother is quite a bit darker than he.

Wilmot: I can see from the photo. Did they tell you the story of how they met?

Harris: I think in church. They both sang in the choir, so he probably saw her, because I'm sure she was there first. He probably saw her in the choir and joined—they weren't particularly religious, but they went to church. I mean, that's what people did in those days. [laughs]

Wilmot: You also had an older brother in the Harris family.

Harris: Yes, I did. Yes. I have many pictures of him, by the way. He was fifteen years older than I, I think, fifteen or sixteen years older. He went to World War I.

Wilmot: What was his name?

Harris: Walter Ward Harris, but he was called Ward. Ward was my mother's maiden name, Louise Ward.

Wilmot: Is your mother's name.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And your father's name?

Harris: He was just John, John Walter Harris.

Wilmot: So in the years that you were growing up, was your father working as a barber?

Harris: Yes, he had his own barbershop for a while, and then, according to my mother, he lost it because he talked too much.

Wilmot: What do you mean? Was he a very loquacious person?

Harris: [laughs] No, I never asked, but he talked with his customers too much, I think was her reasoning, and he had to find other work. He remained a barber and was very good, but he didn't have a shop anymore. So then he got whatever he could get. Although he was fair-skinned, he wasn't educated particularly, so I think he worked in auto shops, and I know he did janitor work but always with businesses, of course. So they became poor eventually, although they had started out quite grandly—he, an independent barber and she, an heiress, one of the heiresses, [laughs] who had her own horse and buggy.

Wilmot: I don't think I understood how she was an heiress.

Harris: Well, she wasn't really an heiress, but she had money. In those days, say the nineties, I guess, the late 1800s, most blacks didn't have—

Wilmot: Much.

Harris: Well, they had some. My grandfather had had money, which he'd earned on this ranch. They were well off, in fact, for those days. All the daughters—none of them worked as servants or anything like that. They were much above all that. [laughs]

Wilmot: Did any of your aunts live in San Jose as well?

Harris: Yes, one, Aunt Abby. In fact, she raised me. She didn't tell me anything about my past, but my little friends could hardly wait, and when I was nine years old, they'd all heard about my mother coming to San Jose and so on, my birth mother. So when I was nine, I got the news that I really wasn't the child of the Harrises, an adopted child. It was meant to, I think, hopefully keep me in my place, but it never did. I was supposed to be ashamed, but I never was.

And as I got older, I thought it was kind of romantic, and I used to tell people about it, much to some people's embarrassment, because it was not the sort of thing you talked about in those days. You didn't admit that your parents—your real parents—were not married. Nowadays, it's another thing, but in those days, oh!

Wilmot: It was a big deal.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Did you ever go and try and find your birth mother?

Harris: I thought about it a good deal. My mother would sort of half urge me and half pull me back, but I never found out anything. Then I got sort of proud, and I thought, "Well, since they all knew about me"—at least I was pretty sure they did—"How come they didn't try to find me and take me back?" So I just was very disinterested. I didn't care. [laughs]

Wilmot You mentioned your Aunt Abby.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Can you tell me, what kind of person was she? You said she raised you.

Harris: Well, she had—she was rich compared with the others. Her husband had been a rancher also, I think, and they lived in Stockton. [pause] And when her husband—they owned property there. She was very, very proud of property. She owned property. Big deal. And so I knew she had money. When her husband died, she came down to San Jose and lived with my mother, and my mother—by then they were poorer, and she had to go out, and so my aunt was there to raise me.

She was good. She trained me. I knew my alphabet. I knew everything before I got to school. The result was that I skipped three grades in grammar school, because I'd already been taught this stuff. And it was she who did it, not my mother, at all, but my aunt.

Let's see, I had an Uncle Charlie, and I have a picture of him somewhere. He was a great big fat fellow. He used to be a cowboy. It was interesting, because none of them—the lowest they got was to be dressmakers, but they never—there was a thing about working for somebody, that is, as a servant.

Wilmot: Where do you think that came from?

Harris: It came from having—their mother and their father had both been slaves.

Wilmot: This is on your mother's side.

Harris: Yes, not on my father's. I don't know about my father. My father's father had been—there's my grandmother. [shows photograph] That is, their mother, my mother's mother. You can see she looks like her.

Wilmot: Yes, she does.

Harris: Except one, she's dark, and the other one's light, quite fair-skinned.

Wilmot: And there's you as a little baby.

Harris: Yes! Being teased by my brother, who was older than I. Let's see, he had been in the war by then, because I was born in '16, and I think we entered the war in '16. Anyway, her husband bought his freedom, because he had a very liberal master, and he was a person who worked with shoes, a shoemaker, I guess, in those days. They actually made the shoes. I don't know whether they lived in the same family or what, but he bought his freedom and apparently got hers, too, and they traveled across the plains in 1849, I guess, coming to California. They arrived in 1850, I think it was.

Wilmot: Did your mom tell you this story?

Harris: Of course, because I don't think I ever met my grandmother, her mother. She came to San Jose, and she obviously knew the family, because the picture I showed you is with my brother when he was about seven, but I think by the time I came along, I think she was dead. But they told those families and really ingrained it in me so that I told the story also. I thought it was fascinating. So [sneezes]—

Wilmot: Bless you.

Harris: This was the answer to—I started out to answer a question of yours. What was it?

Wilmot: My question was about—let's see, I've asked several questions.

Harris: Yes, but the last one had to do with—

Wilmot: I asked you who told you that story, if your grandmother told you that story or if your mother told you the story about her family.

Harris: No, she never told—

Wilmot: I also asked a question about where do you think that came from, that your family was so proud, essentially very proud, and—

Harris: Oh, I know. I was talking about the fact that they never worked as servants. I don't think any of them. The lowest they'd go would be dressmaker, and, of course, there was great need—you can see from the clothes, all handmade—there was great need for dressmakers. And the men—I only know of two uncles—they were cowboys.

Wilmot: You attributed to your aunt your academic upbringing, just kind of making sure you knew everything to know. How would you describe your mother in that respect, in terms of how did she raise you? What did she bring to you?

Harris: A fear of men. [laughs] And a fear of being immoral. By immoral, she meant having a child without a husband.

Wilmot: Mm-hm.

Harris: That was her big thing. "Be nice." "Behave yourself." Nothing about—no drives in the way of getting an education or anything like that. I was expected to go to school and do well. My aunt saw to that. And I was supposed to stay clear of boys. [laughs]

Wilmot: What kind of messages did your father bring you in terms of raising you?

Harris: He never consciously did anything of that kind, but I admired him very much because he could do anything. If anything went wrong in the house—anything, plumbing, anything—he could fix it, and did very well. I knew he had done a good job, and he loved doing it. He loved it. Whatever he did, he obviously enjoyed doing work—on the car, when they finally got a car. He always took care of it. Anything mechanical—he was a mechanical genius, and I admired that very much. But he didn't—it wasn't the sort of thing a girl did. So he never urged me in words about it.

Wilmot: So when you think of yourself, how would you describe yourself as a child? In this environment, with the players you've described.

Harris: I tried to be a good kid.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: And I was—because of my aunt, Aunt Abby, and because, I think I had a natural aptitude for the lower grades, anyway, I skipped three grades. I did well in school, in spite of the fact that I have this background that people thought I should be ashamed of, I never was, as I said earlier. I used to kind of brag about it. [laughs]

Wilmot: That's just this wonderful image. Can you tell me a little bit about your education, like, when you were in elementary school, in high school? Can you talk about what those places were like?

Harris: Yeah, well, in grammar school, of course, I was smart, and I loved it. I enjoyed it, and I got skipped three times. That should have, and probably did, affect my education in high school because by the time I got to geometry, I was weeping over my homework because I found it so hard to do. See, I missed some of the basic arithmetic, I think. But I enjoyed high school. I'm trying to think what it was I enjoyed in the lower grades. I don't know. I enjoyed school.

When I got to high school, the thing I remember is that I took Latin, which practically nobody took. I took three years of it, and I just loved it. We were a special group. We had come from junior high school together, and it had just started then. It went through the sixth grade. It used to be grammar school was one to eight, and then it became one through five or six, and then you went to junior high, and then you went to high school. That's the way we had it. So the group in Latin in high school—so high school was just three years, and we all took Latin together and loved it, and that's the thing I remember.

Let's see, mainly my Latin class.

Wilmot: And this was a public school.

Harris: San Jose, the only high school in town.

Wilmot: And who were your classmates?

Harris: [sighs] I don't think I had a single black classmate. I'm trying to think—can that be so? There must have been. There were a few, but they were younger or they were never in my classes, but it was a group of kids who, like most kids that age, liked to dance and have fun and weren't good students, particularly.

Wilmot: Were not.

Harris: No. Oh, and my best friend, of course, was—not my best friend, but my best friend's brother, was a contemporary of mine, so there were one or two, maybe more, but they were scattered around. The blacks weren't together in any sense.

Wilmot: Who was your best friend?

Harris: Her name was Mary Isabelle Adams, and we just were about the same age and were raised up together, played together and lived a few blocks apart. Until I began to skip, of course, and I sort of—in school.

And I think the other problem was that my mother was very strict because of my background—my mother and all—was very strict about me going out with boys, so that I really wasn't part of the crowd as much as I would have been otherwise.

Wilmot: Because you were more of a stay-at-home person?

Harris: Well, I had to be more careful. [laughs]

Wilmot: I'm thinking about your response. Not exactly stay-at-home, but more careful. Okay.

Harris: More careful, yes.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I didn't get too involved with boys, although I liked them, and I went to the parties that everybody gave, but I just—you'd hear stories about other girls my age—not my best friend but other people. And they were all at an early age involved in sex. I got involved, too, but I was sixteen before it happened. They were starting at twelve and—

Wilmot: Wow!

Harris: —thirteen.

Wilmot: Wow! That surprises me, actually.

Harris: Well, I don't know that, because you never saw any of this, but it was whispered.

Wilmot: Okay. If you can think a little bit about your community, your social circle that yourself and your family moved in, how would you talk about that social circle? Who was your community?

Harris: Well, mine was a little different from my family's, because I went to church. There was a Baptist—black—Antioch Baptist Church a block away, but that wasn't my father and

mother's church. They had sung in the choir and I guess met at the AME Zion Church, which was some blocks away. I couldn't go to that until I got bigger, so as long as I was—I think I was twelve or thirteen before I was allowed to go to the other church. That was their church, AME Zion, and I sang in the choir there.

Wilmot: So when you say you weren't allowed to go to that church until you were twelve or thirteen—

Harris: Well, because it was too far. I had to cross many big streets, and so—whereas with the Baptist church—my parents didn't want to take me. By then, they had stopped going to church. They'd go if I was doing something, or on rare occasions, but as a regular thing, they had stopped going to church altogether. And they certainly weren't Baptists. But the Baptist church was a block away, and my best friend went to the Baptist church, so I went there until I reached twelve or thirteen, and then I was allowed to cross the bigger streets and go to my family's church, which was AME Zion, Episcopal.

Wilmot: So was your social circle mostly comprised of people from church?

Harris: Well, blacks went to church. If you didn't go to church, I don't know—there was one girl that I became good friends with later, who wasn't part of that crowd, whose family didn't go to church, but she was the only one I knew of. Everybody went to church, including their children. Well, the older people didn't. They fell off. But the kids, at least the ones I knew, went to—what do they call the church part for—not kindergarten. What do they call it?

Wilmot: Sunday school?

Harris: Sunday school. They went to Sunday school, yes.

Wilmot: And so who were these folks at church? Who were these people at church?

Harris: They were people in the black community, which was not very large. It was about three hundred people, and by no means did all of them go to church, but the respectable ones went to church. And so, in a sense, I really grew up in the—now, the Baptist church was part of a white organization, Antioch Baptist Church. The central core of the church was white. By central core, I mean the ruling group was white. The African American Episcopal, of course, was African American. And so I don't know that they had more people, but they always had a pretty good congregation.

Wilmot: So your church, the one that you went to initially, the Antioch?

Harris: Antioch Baptist.

Wilmot: That was an integrated church.

Harris: No, it was not integrated, but the ruling body, which was off somewhere, was white. We knew that. But the AME Zion, African Methodist Episcopal, started with "African." I should have followed that. I wonder. It probably was one of the first African churches. I wonder, what did the slaves go to? I don't know. But it must have been an early one, because "African" was the first word in the title. It's still an important church.

Wilmot: Still, definitely. I hear of AME Zion—

Harris: AME Zion, yes.

Wilmot: It is very important.

Did you feel like going from a place where the congregation—there was a ruling body that was white, and then going over to the AME Zion—

Harris: No, Baptists were all black.

Wilmot: But the ruling body—

Harris: Yes, but we didn't have any—the pastor had contact with them, but we didn't see whites in that church. And both churches were in a white neighborhood. There was no such thing as a black neighborhood in San Jose, there weren't enough blacks. They were all scattered.

Wilmot: So the neighborhood that you grew up in, was that a mixed neighborhood?

Harris: Oh, absolutely. In fact, we were the only blacks in our block, and this was North Seventh Street. Down the block from us was a much, much poorer family, and it was very large, and they were black. We lived a block apart. My best friend and I lived four or five blocks apart. We all lived, as far as I know, pretty much on the north side of town, the north side of town, but we didn't live in any kind of community. My second-best friend lived over on Eleventh Street, you see, which was quite far way at that time.

Wilmot: At that time, what industries was San Jose kind of organized around?

Harris: The cannery, Del Monte. And when my mother and father got poorer as they got older, my mother worked. As soon as the cannery began, my mother went off to work. She never worked as a servant. [laughs] She could have made money if she worked as a servant!

Wilmot: So for most of your growing-up years, she was at home.

Harris: Except during the cannery season, which was—oh, I don't know, five or six months long?

Wilmot: The other thing I recall talking to you about was that your residence was large enough that there were often boarders?

Harris: Oh, yes, yes.

Wilmot: That was maybe one of the sources of income?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Can you tell me about that?

Harris: Oh, yes. They lived in a big Victorian, which they had bought when my mother had money, when they both had money. You entered downstairs, and there was the living—I don't know how to describe it, but anyway, the piano was there. We had a—oh, it's a famous name. Starts with C. But anyway, we had a grand piano. Not an upright, but a grand. In fact, I have a picture of it somewhere. And then the next was a long hall, which led to the living room, and back of the living room, which was the entire width of the house, and a kitchen, which was the entire width of the house.

And then, as you entered the door, there were stairs that went up, and there were three bedrooms up there, so there were four bedrooms in this house. My mother and father had one, the one downstairs, and I had one upstairs, and the other two were always rented.

Wilmot: Was that an interesting way to kind of learn about people?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Were there interesting people coming through the house?

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had fascinating people come. One of them particularly—I mentioned him, Ben. He really loved being there. He was an uneducated black, very black in color, very funny, and an excellent cook, a professional cook, so that the very first job I had was to work as a waitress in a restaurant where Ben was the cook.

Wilmot: So he was a long-term boarder?

Harris: Oh, he was there, and he took care of my mother. He loved the family. He just became part of the family. I loved Ben. Just remembered him for the first time.

Wilmot: How old were you when you had your first job?

Harris: Oh, I must have been sixteen or seventeen. [laughs]

Wilmot: Were there other people you remember who were boarders, who stayed in the house, who stayed with you?

Harris: Well, you know, that picture I showed you with my brother peering through—that was a boarder. We couldn't have gotten along, I realize now, if we hadn't had these people who came and stayed. And one of the ways we got boarders was that a Mr. Jordan, who was the head of the Sunday school at the Baptist church, also worked in the train station, so that when blacks came in and they didn't know anybody, as my birth mother had, they asked him where could they find a place to stay, because there was no neighborhood that you could go to. You'd have to know an individual, and he of course knew individuals. He knew my mother, and it was he who sent my birth mother to my foster mother.

I forgot your question. What was it?

Wilmot: Were there any other people who stood out in your mind? It's good. Answering the questions any way it strikes you is pretty nice. Well, you described your neighborhood as being this kind of mixed neighborhood where you were the only black family.

Harris: Kind of? It was an entirely mixed one.

Wilmot: So I'm wondering, was that a kind of a—

Harris: There were no Chinese, by the way. Italians, ordinary Americans—I don't know what we called them in those days, Anglos. But there was no black neighborhood. There was a Chinese neighborhood, however. I don't know if that meant Chinese couldn't live anywhere else. I don't think that was true. But they had—I know, they had a section of town where they had their restaurants and so on. I think they lived over there.

Wilmot: So did that mean that your family and the families of the white people who lived in that neighborhood—everyone got along very well?

Harris: Oh, yeah.

Wilmot: There was no—

Harris: Oh yeah, we visited each other. Oh, my family was so proud, especially my mother. No one would have condescended to her. [laughs]

Wilmot: As you got older and started entering your teenage years, socially did you mix with white people, or did your social circle—

Harris: Not very much. In fact, early teens, I'd say not at all. I had a best friend in junior high, I remember, who was white, and we used to do things as individuals together, but we never mixed socially. That is, she never came to my house, I never went to her house, we never went to parties. No, there was no mixing, as I recall. There were no white people in our social life. Interesting, because we didn't have any prejudices against them, but it was just completely separate. Hmm.

Oh, I mean, I could have been invited, and I think I may have been invited to someone in the neighborhood, because they were all foreign—not foreign, but either plain white or, say, Italian background or something like that.

Wilmot: Were there any Mexican Americans or Mexican people?

Harris: No. [laughs] There weren't very many Mexicans. It wasn't till the Second World War that the Filipinos, for instance, began to come in. I began to know who Filipinos were. No, it must have been before then, because by the Second World War, I went away, in '40.

Wilmot: You were up in Oakland.

Harris: Yeah. There were just Filipinos, I remember, but no Mexicans. I don't think many Mexicans had come to this country in the twenties and thirties. When did they come?

Wilmot: Well, it depends, I think, on how you look at it, because there are some people who were here all along.

Harris: Uh-huh, that's right.

Wilmot: Because it was theirs originally. It depends on how you look at it. But then, if you look at it in terms of when were there waves of migrations, again, I'd have to go back and think about that.

Harris: Yes. I bet Second World War, I bet they began to come. I don't remember, either.

Wilmot: I want to ask you a little bit about when you were—did you read a lot when you were little?

Harris: Oh, boy, did I!

Wilmot: Can you tell me about that? Were there any favorites that you had?

Harris: *Heidi* comes to mind immediately. Oh, yes, I read, sure. That's why I got ahead so fast in school, I think. I'm trying to think what the other ones were. I remember *Heidi* because the name was so strange. Offhand, I don't recall any, but I apparently did have some favorites. What was that—about slavery? There was—oh, and there was one about a family of girls?

Wilmot: *Little Women*?

Harris: *Little Women*, of course.

Wilmot: The one about slavery, I don't know, unless you tell me more. The one that I would think would come to mind would be, like, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Harris: Oh, yes! That's right.

Wilmot: Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Harris: Yes, Harriet Beecher Stowe. That's right. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, yes. I knew that. That's interesting. Nobody's ever asked me that. Huh! I don't know. There weren't many stories, I guess, that blacks would have been particularly fond of. Harriet Beecher Stowe, after all, was white. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

You getting cold?

Wilmot: No, I'm just covering my neck.

Harris: Put the heat up.

Wilmot: Okay, I'll get it.

Harris: You know how to do it?

Wilmot: I do.

Harris: Just on the right. You push the one to the right up till it makes a noise.

[fan motor sound starts]

Wilmot: Were there any teachers that you remember well?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Who encouraged you and were just supporting to you?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Who do you think of? Who comes to mind?

Harris: Well, my Latin teacher, but she just supported me, not because I was black but because I was a good Latin student. I can't remember her name, but definitely she did. There must have been others. You meant at the high school level.

Wilmot: Is there someone who comes to mind from your elementary school?

Harris: I can't remember their names, but there were a couple I remember, the ones that pushed me on. It's been a long time ago.

Wilmot: I know.

We've talked a little bit about your girlfriends, your dear girlfriends, your best friends. Was there a first boyfriend, someone you really—

Harris: We had problems with boyfriends.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: [laughs] Well, everybody wanted a good-looking boyfriend and there weren't all that many really good-looking boyfriends, but I got one once, I remember. But—

Wilmot: [laughs] Okay.

I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your church, because I understand you were singing in church.

Harris: Mm-hmm.

Wilmot: Can you tell me about that? What was your role there in the congregation?

Harris: I didn't ever sit in the congregation. I always sang with the choir.

Wilmot: Was your talent recognized very early on?

Harris: Oh, yeah—by the people in the Baptist church, too. In fact, I did concerts. We had a group, which I founded, and I can't remember why, but it was mainly Baptists. We called ourselves—I named them—NYOSAN's, N-Y-O-S-A-N-apostrophe-S. And that stood for "Negro Youth of San Jose." [laughs]

Wilmot: That's a wonderful name.

Harris: And that was because I wanted to do—well, we performed. We did whatever. We did a play, and we worked for the Baptists, and we worked for the Methodists.

Wilmot: What kind of music did you sing?

Harris: I don't remember quite. We did spirituals, for sure. I had sung at the school choir, and I suppose we picked up things from that, but mainly it was spirituals, church music.

Wilmot: Was there anything that was a favorite of yours, any hymns or spirituals? Anything that you really loved to wrap your voice around?

Harris: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

Wilmot: That's a good one to wrap your voice around.

Harris: Mm-hm!

Wilmot: Yes. Were you an alto voice, a soprano?

Harris: Yeah, mezzo.

Wilmot: A mezzo-soprano?

Harris: Alto, mezzo-soprano. At that time, Marian Anderson was just arriving on the scene, as I recall—late twenties, early thirties, yes.

I'm sorry, what did you ask me?

Wilmot: I asked you if there were mezzo-soprano—if you were a mezzo-soprano—

Harris: Oh yes. She was the only concert singer that I knew of. There have been others, but I hadn't known of them. She was a contralto, so since I wasn't a soprano, I must be a contralto. I think I was a mezzo, halfway between contralto—I wasn't a real contralto; I couldn't go deep the way she could. Her lower tones were wonderful. I didn't like her, by the way, very much because everybody said, "Oh, you must be somebody like Marian Anderson." That was just drummed into me all the time. "You must become Marian Anderson, Marian Anderson." And I didn't particularly care for her voice, but I did notice that it was very much more beautiful, I thought, in the lower part than in the higher part.

Wilmot: It is really hard to hear all the time who you're supposed to be.

Harris: [laughs] Yeah!

Wilmot: It's very interesting to me, because when you're describing your background—and I know your whole life, you are a performer, that's what you became—

Harris: Well—

Wilmot: So I'm trying to find the earliest influence of that, so that's why I'm asking you.

Harris: Well, I wanted to do acting, even as a young kid, and there were no actors—black actors around. Had we even heard of black actors? We must have, somehow, but there weren't any around. But I could sing, and that got me on stage, anyway. But we never did any theaters. Negro Youth San Jose, NYOSAN—they did one little theater piece. I don't know where we found it. But that's what I wanted to include, at any rate. There just weren't any examples in those days. Blacks, Negroes—what did we call ourselves? Negroes, I guess. Colored? I don't think that was so popular. Negroes. We were supposed to sing, and we sang spirituals. And I sang enough so that I was recommended to a voice teacher, and I began to study singing.

Wilmot: This is while you were in San Jose?

Harris: In San Jose, yes.

Wilmot: Who was your voice teacher?

Harris: Oh, I should remember her name, and I cannot, but she taught some in high school. I don't think she was actually connected. I don't think the schools at that time would recognize a singing teacher so much, but somebody at the school recommended that I study with her, and I did.

Wilmot: Did your voice teacher also encourage you to sing spirituals, or did she introduce a new—

Harris: Oh, she introduced lieder, German lieder and so on. Did I sing in German, though? I don't think I did. How did I begin to sing in German? Not very good German, but I sang in German. By the time I finished high school and went to the East Bay, I was ready to do German lieder, so that's what I did mainly. Art songs, they called them.

Wilmot: Art songs?

Harris: Uh-huh, German lieder and French art songs, by [Claude] Debussy and people like that.

Wilmot: I remember you telling me that people in your congregation at your church were always saying, "You have a gift. You have a gift from God."

Harris: "Have a gift from God, and you better just follow it. Don't you think about anything else. God gave you that gift. You're to be a singer." [laughs and claps hands once]

Wilmot: That was frustrating?

Harris: Oh, yes! [claps hands] "God's gift. You have nothing to say about it. God gave you the gift, you have to fulfill it."

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I don't think they meant to be mean. I'm doing it as though they were being very mean about it. They weren't. They were sincere. But at an early age, I wanted to explore more. I wanted to see about this acting thing. Led me to form a theater group, but it was in San Francisco, never in San Jose.

Wilmot: Was that the Aldridge Players/West? Okay.

I wanted to just ask you some questions about going to college. You said that in your family, save for your aunt, higher education for you was not part of the plan.

Harris: My aunt was out of the picture by then.

Wilmot: How did you come to go to San Jose Teachers College? How did that happen?

Harris: Well, San Jose High School was on the same grounds. It was on the front part of San Jose State Teachers College, and it was just there all the time, and I was expected to go on somehow. I didn't know how, but I was keen for learning, finding out things. But there was nobody pushing me in this direction. In fact, I think when I got there, there had been just one black person go to San Jose State, and we talked about her. I think she was part of the family that lived down the block, closer to the college. If you went straight from my house, you came to the college finally.

But nobody thought about college. They began to think about it, though, later. My generation began to think, and they at least—I don't think there was a contemporary of mine who finished. There was—one person came, Faricita Hall [Phillips]. I don't know if that name—she was a sister of Theresa [Tarea?] Hall Pittman. She came, and she stayed and went to San Jose State College. I think—I'm pretty sure Faricita—I don't know whether she graduated from there or not, but that was unusual. There had been nobody until then.

So then I went, so I was the first in my group to go. And then there were a couple of others who went maybe a couple of years, but nobody that I know of finished. There may have been one or two other people from out of town, but there just weren't any blacks around.

Wilmot: Okay. I'm going to stop this tape and rewind it and put a new tape in, so we're just going to take a quick minute to transition.

Harris: Okay. I hadn't thought there was this much about San Jose!

Wilmot: Really?

Harris: No, you know, because my life began, so to speak, when I came to the East Bay, because there I got some approval. I was disapproved of, generally. [laughs]

Wilmot: When we pick up again, I'm going to ask you about college courses, how that changed your social life, if it did or did not.

Harris: Hmm.

Wilmot: And your involvement with your sorority and also—

Harris: Oh, yeah, the sorority.

Wilmot: I'll wait until we're back on again.

Harris: Okay. That was because we took roomers. Well, I'll wait. What is this for? [referring to minidisc recorder]

Wilmot: That's recording.

Harris: Oh! It is?

Wilmot: Yes.

[interview interruption while recording media are changed]

Harris: Never seen anything like that.

Wilmot: Isn't it cute?

Harris: Mm-hmm.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: Where's the receiver?

Wilmot: Right there.

Harris: Oh, oh, okay, all right. Gee, those are cute stockings.

Wilmot: Yeah.

Harris: Are they supposed to swirl like that?

Wilmot: No, I think I put them on that way.

Harris: You put them on that way. They could be straight. Ooh, they're pretty. I kind of like them swirled around. [laughs]

Wilmot: So, you arrived at San Jose Teachers College. Did you think you were going to be a teacher?

Harris: Never.

Wilmot: That was never on your horizon?

Harris: Never. Although I went all four years. Why didn't I want to become a teacher? I can't remember, but I remember that I had a strong feeling about it. No, I didn't want to become a teacher. Isn't that funny? A teacher in the sense that my voice teacher was a teacher, I could see that, but to teach in classes didn't interest me at that time. Of course, that's what I became, was a teacher. [laughs] Oh, God.

Wilmot: What kind of courses did you take while you were there?

Harris: Where?

Wilmot: San Jose Teachers College, a.k.a. San Jose State.

Harris: Oh, yeah. Oh, I think I changed my major at least seven times. [laughs] English certainly was one of them, and mainly literature, I was interested in.

Wilmot: Ah.

Harris: I read so much as a child. Music—of course, I was in the music department, so I'd say literature and music were the chief things.

Wilmot: By this time, you were also taking voice lessons?

Harris: Oh, yes, private. That was private.

Wilmot: Every week?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: And at that time you were learning pieces that were German lieder?

Harris: German leider. Yes, the art song, it's called art songs. Not opera. There wasn't any chance, or I didn't even think—to be like Marian Anderson was the thing. Whatever Marian Anderson did, I was supposed to do. In other words, lieder, art songs, the non-operatic, serious music of any country. I don't think I did [Manuel] de Falla—Spanish. French. Debussy, Fauré, a number of them. But mainly German, German lieder. It's the reason I ended up in Germany finally. I think most—well, my teacher had been there, you know, I just—

Wilmot: Did you have any favorites, music that you loved to sing?

Harris: Oh, I loved Debussy, oh! But my French wasn't very good, so—and it turned out my German wasn't very good either, because I had learned it from Americans. Debussy and Fauré were really my favorite composers, but I didn't get to sing them very often. And Schubert. But the one I adored was Hugo Wolf, W-o-l-f.

Wilmot: This was back then?

Harris: Oh, yes, I loved Hugo Wolf.

Wilmot: Were you performing?

Harris: Oh, my dear, I've been performing ever since—I started performing in high school.

Wilmot: So you were having, like, recitals at that time?

Harris: Oh, yes. For the church. And did I do something for—San Jose State had—I can't remember what we did. There were a few of us, a few blacks, and we performed. I don't know if those were the NYOSAN's. By now I've forgotten. Negro Youth of San Jose. I don't remember. But anyway, I performed. And the serious German things, which my teachers loved and knew, were not particularly favorites of the black community for whom I sang, but I also sang at State College, too.

Wilmot: So your audience was generally in the black community?

Harris: No, for the lieder and so on, I did the white community. But San Jose was not a very cultivated town in those days. Maybe still isn't. I don't know. But I'm sure now it's much better. God, I hope it is!

Wilmot: There's a lot more money down there.

Harris: [laughs]

Wilmot: I have a question. So when you were in college and you were exploring literature, did you run across any threads that were especially exciting to you, any books or authors that were especially exciting to you?

Harris: I can't think offhand, because that was in the thirties—

Wilmot: Were any of the writers from the Harlem Renaissance at all—?

Harris: Well, what's his name? The poet.

Wilmot: Langston—

Harris: Langston. Langston Hughes.

Wilmot: How did your social circle change once you started?

Harris: Well, I still hung out with the old gang. By now they were older and carrying on. Having fun, really. We had a lot of parties. We didn't, at <u>our</u> house, have parties, but there was one family there, the Brown family, five girls, handsome, attractive women, and they had parties, I think, every weekend. It was just party time all the time. You could go there. I enjoyed that very much, because everybody came. I can't think of any other place.

Once in a while, my friend, Mary Isabelle Adams, would have parties, because she had a brother, about my age, and they would have parties, but mainly it was the Browns. Everybody went to the Browns. Five women and a lovely house. Not a big house, but a very nice house. We had fun. We danced and talked to each other. Made boyfriends and girlfriends when it was appropriate, and possible. [laughs]

Wilmot: How did you come to pledge Delta [Delta Sigma Theta]?

Harris: How did I what?

Wilmot: How did you come to pledge Delta?

Harris: Well, by this time, San Jose State was flourishing, and people were coming from other places. Faricita Hall Pittman, youngest sister of Theresa Hall, and she came, recommended to the Harrises as a place to stay, so she lived with us. She was a Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority, so I got in with that crowd, so to speak. They knew about me, and I think I pledged Delta before I even left San Jose, I think.

Wilmot: Was that a very active social life, becoming part of the black Greek community?

Harris: Not until I came up here did that become so. But it led to my being presented in my senior year at San Jose State. I can't remember the fraternity. There were two. There was Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Phi Alpha, I think, the women's sororities, and there were two men's: Alpha something or other. One of the men's group that began with Alpha—they presented me in concert at International House in Berkeley, in my senior year. So there was that degree of interest.

Wilmot: Wow.

Harris: I have that picture standing on the International House steps.

Wilmot: Was the Bay Area, then, kind of like a lure to you? No?

Harris: No, neither white nor black, there was not much interest in concert songs. If you'd been in opera, if you'd been performing an opera or something like that—which was out of the question here—but lieder, that is, art songs were just not very popular.

Wilmot: Did you still live at home when you were at San Jose State College?

Harris: Oh, yes. Where else would I live? Oh, I worked for—important time—I worked for a very rich white lady called Mrs. Barry, because she was the woman who hired Pearl Bailey—I mean, Pearl. I can't remember Pearl's—not Pearl Bailey. Pearl. Pearl was a <u>marvelous</u> cook. I mean, I've never tasted cooking like that. Ben was a good cook, but he was crude. He did restaurant cooking. But Pearl worked for families, and she did what was to me just incredible. My mother didn't care about the cooking.

Wilmot: And Pearl was someone who lived—

Harris: Pearl was my brother's—woman, so to speak. He never married Pearl. He was younger, quite a bit younger than Pearl, and she had been captivated by him, I guess, and so it was through my brother that I got to know Pearl, and it was through Pearl that I got my first job working for a family. I went there as a maid, partly to earn money but also to be able to eat Pearl's cooking every day. [laughs] And my mother was <u>terrible</u>! She was a <u>bad</u> cook. She just didn't care. And Pearl was so wonderful. Ooh!

Anyway, how did Pearl come up?

Wilmot: You were telling me about your first job—well, not your first job but your job working for Mrs. Barry.

Harris: Yes, my first job was working with the help of Ben, in the restaurant, and then during the summer—I went to State for two years, and I knew I had access to this job anytime I wanted, so I took off and worked there and had about a year and a half of wonderful food every day. [laughs]

Wilmot: Did you live there while you were working for Mrs. Barry?

Harris: Yes. My day off, I think, was Thursday. I'd go home on Thursday and I think come back on Friday. Mrs. Barry was the type of woman who every month or so would have her living room rug turned over so she could have the back of it vacuumed. I never knew anyone before or since that vacuumed not just the surface but turned it over and vacuumed the bottom, every month. She was very—

Wilmot: Does that mean she was very fastidious and controlling?

Harris: She was what?

Wilmot: Fastidious and controlling?

Harris: Fastidious, yes. Very fastidious. Oh, I didn't mind. I was getting this good food, and Pearl was my friend—of course, much older, and in love with my brother—but she would help me and console me if I needed it, as I sometimes did when I did the wrong thing, like throw out precious photographs that Mrs. Barry had put out, I thought, to be thrown away. In the garbage! That was my first real—well, I guess you'd call the restaurant job real, too—but I made pretty good money there, and I had this good food.

Wilmot: Uh-huh, I understand the food was very good.

Harris: Oh! Oh!

Wilmot: Did you learn how to cook at all from Pearl?

Harris: No.

Wilmot: It's interesting to me when I hear you talk about your brother and his relationship with Pearl because it makes me wonder, did your family have the same kind of moral standards for him that they had for you?

Harris: Oh, no! Goodness! I was a woman—or a girl. And furthermore, my mother had done this wicked thing: she'd had me out of wedlock. And anyway, the times were such that in those days—I mean, you just didn't openly—everybody was doing so-called "bad" things on their own, but you didn't do it openly. Ooh, ooh. And so the fact that he wasn't married to Pearl didn't matter because Pearl was very generous, in every way, with food and I don't know—I just had the feeling that she was—I know my brother was frequently in trouble, and she was helpful. She absolutely was beyond criticism as far as my family was concerned, especially my mother. But my brother was impossible. He

was so good-looking. And he had good hair, from the black point of view, that was—[kiss noise].

Wilmot: What kind of work did he do?

Harris: Good question! [laughs] I can't remember that he—he worked very little, that I recall. Later in life, when he grew up and came up to the city, he became a longshoreman.

Wilmot: Wow.

Harris: But he wasn't trained to be anything. After all, he'd fought in the war, hadn't he?

Wilmot: I hadn't realized that he had been up in the Bay Area with you also.

Harris: He wasn't. Oh, later, yes. They lived in the Fillmore District, but that's when he settled down and got married and so on. He lived in San Francisco.

Wilmot: I'm wondering also what kind of—you're in college in the 1930s. Was there any sense of—what was the political terrain like?

Harris: Leftist.

Wilmot: Yeah?

Harris: Communist.

Wilmot: What did your involvement in this terrain look like?

Harris: I became a Young Communist.

Wilmot: And what did that—

Harris: Oh, my mother was absolutely horrified. She wouldn't let me have them around or anything of the kind, but it was very much "the thing." The young intellectuals of the time at San Jose State and otherwise were perhaps not quite that far out, but they interested me. I thought they were doing interesting things. I didn't know much about it, but—

Wilmot: What did your involvement in that group look like? Was it just kind of social, or were you actually doing—?

Harris: Well, we had—I think we had—I'm positive we must have had a group in San Jose, because I remember being visited by Edith Jenkins, who is still alive to this day. She was a beautiful woman.

Wilmot: Eve Jenkins?

Harris: Edith Jenkins. And her husband. I can't remember his first name, but [Dave] Jenkins. He was the leader in the left circles in those days. I remember her visiting when I was at San Jose State—I can't remember. Is that true? No, I guess it was—she did visit, but not

in my home. In my home in Berkeley, she visited me, and we talked about those days, yes. Because I lived at home the whole time I was in San Jose.

Wilmot: Was she African American?

Harris: Edith Jenkins? No. I think she's Jewish. I'm not sure. Very handsome woman. Do you know her? She's still around. Edith Jenkins.

Wilmot: Were there other African American persons in the Young Communist group?

Harris: Not from San Jose. I'm trying to think. In Berkeley and in Oakland, which is where I shared, between Berkeley and Oakland, and a little in San Francisco, there were a few blacks, but generally speaking, no.

Wilmot: How did you get involved with that group? You've described a social scene that was somewhat separate?

Harris: Well, because I was a member of Delta Sigma Theta, my dear. And, of course, they would have nothing to do with that—anything like that. How did I get involved? I got involved through some leftist-leaning teachers. I remember one. She's long dead. Hancock was her name. She told me about them. And at that time, remember—or you wouldn't remember, of course—in the thirties there was all this build-up to—I can't remember. But the leftists were very, very active. They were quite horrifying to most people, but I thought that they were—they were good people, I thought, the lefties.

But my mother had been shocked by the antics of Harry Bridges and all that group here, the longshoremen in San Francisco. She knew about them, and she just thought they were terrible. My mother came from the old school, you know. She thought all that was awful. That her daughter should be involved—now, wait a minute. Was she even alive? I can't remember.

Wilmot: It's odd to me that she had formed that strong an opinion about labor.

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, Harry Bridges, I remember, was the big villain. I don't think Harry Bridges was openly leftist, but he was a longshoreman. Oof! I was like most kids, too, I think. I was—no, I was genuinely interested, but I never became, you know, a socked-in member. And oh, I know who was—oh, what's his name? The baritone singer, the black singer.

Wilmot: Robeson?

Harris: [Paul] Robeson. How do you know these names?

Wilmot: I just—I pay a little bit of attention.

Harris: Yeah. That's right. I admired him so much. And through my leftist friends, I met him. He took my hand and looked into my eyes, and I [claps hands together] just nearly died.

Wilmot: When was this?

Harris: [laughs] This was in the thirties.

Wilmot: So this was not when you were in San Jose?

Harris: It was while I was in San Jose, but by then I was coming up through my—I sang at a San Jose auditorium. I remember singing "The Star Spangled Banner" and stuff like that. I wasn't active in the group, but the group was spread out, you know. And I met him somehow. He came to the department of someone I knew who was, I'm sure, a lefty. Well, I know she was. Anyway, he came. I've never gotten over that! Ooh! [laughs] Took my hand and looked into my eyes. He was wonderful—what do you call that kind of personality? There's a word for it. I can't think of it.

Wilmot: Charismatic?

Harris: Charismatic.

Wilmot: Yeah. I understand that you were working during this time. You were working in service to Mrs. Barry.

Harris: Mm-hm.

Wilmot: And also you had waitressed before.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: So I'm wondering what was feeding your vision of becoming a performer, when you didn't have a family that necessarily wanted you to be a performer? What was feeding that?

Harris: Well, other people, people who listened to me. Mainly white, not black. And I was taking singing lessons with Gertrude Beckman, who lived on Chabot Road, and, of course, she fed me, and I was being asked to sing for the English song festival. Through people like Gertrude Beckman, who had contacts with—oh, Bennet [Richard Dyer-Bennet] the folksinger, Richard—I can't remember, but he was a famous folksinger. Had studied with Gertrude Beckman. And so I was gradually meeting the people who later were very helpful to me.

Wilmot: So was that something that solidified for you that this was the career you were going to pursue after you moved away from San Jose?

Harris: Oh, yes. I mean, my introduction was the sorority and fraternity. I knew it was a respectable kind of thing to do. Yes, I had decided I would be a singer. I wasn't very keen about it. I wanted to be an actor, or I wanted to be able to act. I took some courses in it at San Jose State, but nobody black was involved. If you wanted to get involved in acting, you would have to go to the East, and there was not much then for blacks to do in theater. You don't remember, of course, but if you look at your history, you'll see that blacks weren't—Paul Robeson, of course, acted, but what did he act in? There were a couple of things he could act in, but there wasn't much.

Wilmot: Was there a defining moment for you when you knew this is what you were going to commit yourself to and dedicate yourself to, even though it would definitely be a harder road than other paths?

Harris: What, the singing?

Wilmot: Being a singer and an actor.

Harris: Oh, I didn't worry about that. I just wanted to get a chance to act. It was the reason I founded a drama group, the Aldridge Players/West. I mean, I wanted blacks to have an opportunity to act. But that didn't happen until the sixties, '64.

Wilmot: Was singing, then, something—that was something that came to you easily, but it wasn't your dream?

Harris: That's right. God had given me a voice, hadn't he?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: So I had to sing. I was trained, and people seemed to want me to sing, so I sang. But always in the back of my mind was this wish to, well, ideally, sing and act or act and sing, and I finally was able to do that when I got to Europe and got cast in *Porgy and Bess*. Got a chance to act and sing. I would have loved to just be able to act alone, but that didn't seem to be possible.

Wilmot: What I would like to do is close for today.

Harris: Good.

Wilmot: And pick up next time, moving from San Jose to Oakland.

Harris: Okay, fine. [laughs] Oh, dear! It brings back memories.

Wilmot: Good.

Harris: I'm not sure.

[end of session]

**Interview 2: January 2, 2003**

Wilmot: Good morning.

Harris: Good morning.

Wilmot: Happy New Year.

Harris: Happy New Year to you.

Wilmot: Today's date is January 2nd, 2003, interview number two with Henrietta Harris. When we left off last time, we were just about to talk about your move to Oakland, but I thought we'd just spend a little bit more time on how you finished up your time at San Jose State, so I wanted to ask you just a little bit of that.

Harris: Yes. I didn't finish until 1940, although I had begun in 1933, the reason being that I had taken two years off in between to work for people like Mrs. Barry.

Wilmot: Was that due to money concerns, or—?

Harris: I was just bored. And I wanted more independence from my family. So I did that, and went back to State, and I think I must have had some sort of work after I went back to State, I'm sure.

Wilmot: While you were there.

Harris: Yeah. Correcting papers, I think, for the English department, because I ended up as a drama major, I think. Oh, I know I ended up as a drama major, but I think I was also an English major. Let's see, did I write it down? Yes, English and drama.

Did I speak before about having—and I think it may have been in the early days of San Jose State, after I left high school, I began to write, and the teachers would send my compositions to the *San Jose Mercury-Herald*, and frequently they would publish. I don't think I said that.

Wilmot: No, you didn't. What were you writing about?

Harris: Well, for instance, the one thing I remember, because I wrote on several occasions, was about my foster grandparents, because they crossed the plains in 1849 and landed in Los Angeles in 1850, and then came up north to Mariposa and bought their ranch. And that was interesting, I found. I took it for granted, but the teachers— [laughs]—I'm smiling because you're sitting up straight.

Wilmot: I'm trying to.

Harris: [laughs] So that was what kept me feeling I was an English major, I guess, partly, the fact that I liked to write.

Wilmot: Do you remember any stories? Were they staying with you?

Harris: Well, there are some, but they're personal.

Wilmot: In terms of literature?

Harris: [laughs] No!

Wilmot: No?

Harris: It was interesting. One thing was interesting about it all, and that was that my friends, the people, the kids, so to speak, that I had socialized with became very distant for a while. But when some of them entered State College—then it was, Teachers College, not University, as it is now—I think they felt, because I was going to a school where no one in the community had gone before—I think there was one person, and there were about three hundred black people in San Jose at that time, and there had been fewer, but none had ever gone to State College. So the fact that I went I think caused some friction between—they just thought I was being a little snooty again, you know. It seems crazy now, but in those days, black people in small communities that I knew anything about didn't go to college.

Wilmot: So that was really a departure—

Harris: Mm-hm.

Wilmot: —from what everybody else in your community was doing.

Harris: They did other things. I used to list them. There was a plumber, there was a minister, and that was about the top of the—the two ministers and the plumber, who had his own business. And, of course, my father had originally had his own business, but years before.

Wilmot: When he was a barber.

Harris: And the women hairdressers, and that was it. That one plumber, mmm! Well, he had his own business!

Wilmot: How did you wear your hair then? Did you wear it the same as you wear it now?

Harris: Oh, I have pictures. No, I wore it differently. Shall I get the pictures?

Wilmot: Mm, I'm thinking maybe we should look at them—

Harris: Later.

Wilmot: —later.

Harris: Okay. I have pictures from that.

Wilmot: Are they very close by?

Harris: They're right there.

Wilmot: Okay, let's get them.

Harris: Oh, boy.

Wilmot: I'm just pausing this for a minute, okay?

Harris: Yes. [interview interruption]

Wilmot: So you were showing me these pictures of you and your—still in San Jose—

Harris: Still in San Jose.

Wilmot: —as a teenager and a young adult, when you were in college, at San Jose State.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And you answered my question about how you wore your hair. Could you show them towards the camera?

Harris: All right. Now, any particular one?

Wilmot: No, just all of them.

Harris: I'm fond of this one because we had a Chickering piano in our little tiny front room. We called it the front room. Couldn't call it a living room because nobody lived there, you just went to the front of the house. And had this great big piano. I don't know how we got it, because we certainly couldn't afford it at that time, but there it was. I don't know where it came from, or I don't remember where it came from. There are flowers there, so I guess I had—I can't believe it. I played at church or something.

Wilmot: People brought you flowers after your recitals?

Harris: I guess. I don't remember that at all, but—let's see, here am I about that time, I think. It looks like high school, those short socks and the school book. [laughs] I think I was a little older here. That's my best friend, Med, Mary Elisabeth Adams, she was then.

Wilmot: You were so cute!

Harris: [laughs] And there I am, very happy about something.

Wilmot: Maybe getting your picture taken.

Harris: [chuckles] And this is the last one from San Jose, and it's actually—I'm still living in San Jose, but I've come up to Berkeley at the request of I believe my friend, Faricita Hall, who wanted me to do a concert. So those are the steps of the International House in Berkeley, and either I'm on my way to the concert or I've just come back. I don't know which. Must be on the way.

Wilmot: Was that concert where you would have been performing the German lieder?

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, I haven't spoken of the fact that I don't believe that I was encouraged very much—it must have been my piano teacher or someone—to take singing lessons. Have I spoken of that?

Wilmot: A little bit, but I'd like to hear more about it.

Harris: Yes. Nothing much. But I think that's where the flowers came from in this picture, where I'm seated at the piano, because I guess that was the custom, yes. Oh, that's definitely a concert dress, so I have been performing. I began to study when I was fifteen and perform when I was sixteen, formally. And we did folksongs and spirituals and the beginning of German lieder, [laughs] although I hadn't had any German at that time.

Wilmot: Yeah, you did mention that.

Harris: Okay.

Wilmot: May I see this picture of yourself and your brother as well?

Harris: Where?

Wilmot: Your brother, Ward.

Harris: Oh, yes. He was looking very conventional then. That's not his usual look. And a bit stout.

Wilmot: And he was fourteen years your senior?

Harris: Fifteen, I think.

Wilmot: So he was about thirty, and you were about fifteen here?

Harris: Uh-huh, it looks that way, I think. And don't I have on the same dress in this one?

Wilmot: Yes, it's the same picture.

Harris: Taken at the same time. With a necklace! Oh, my! [makes a surprised noise]

Well, those were the last things I did in San Jose, and led to the picture—oh, this one, which was the final thing in San Jose.

Wilmot: Mm-hm. So what inspired you to move to Oakland?

Harris: The fact that we had a roomer named Faricita Hall, and she lived in Berkeley, and she had gone to San Jose State and I think graduated from there. She always talked about joining Delta Sigma Theta and doing important social things in Berkeley, and I knew the university was there, and so it was her talking. I would say it was mainly she who encouraged—I didn't dream of going anywhere else. Where else would a young woman go except to Los Angeles or New York, and they were out of the question. To go north

to Berkeley meant to go eventually to the University of California, but I didn't have any immediate plans because the war began in '40.

So I came to Berkeley, but the first thing I did was get a job in the Kaiser shipyard.

Wilmot: Where did you live when you first came to Oakland or Berkeley?

Harris: I lived with a friend of my mother's, an old lady, as I recall. We had known her. She had visited us in San Jose. I can't remember her name. But I stayed with her a very short time.

Wilmot: Where did she live? Do you remember? What part of Oakland?

Harris: She lived in North Oakland, quite close to West Oakland.

Wilmot: And you were there only for maybe a couple of months?

Harris: I would say about a half-year at the most.

Wilmot: And then what happened? Where did you move to?

Harris: I think—well, I could always live with my aunt, who lived on Grove—it was Grove Street then, Martin Luther King now—and 36th, so I could always live there, but I didn't want to live there because that meant like being still at home. I think when the job came, I moved to Berkeley, to the southernmost part of north Berkeley, on Shattuck Avenue. Yes, that's what I did, in fact. My father helped me make over the back part of a real estate office, because it had a kitchen and living quarters. I remember his coming up and fixing the electricity, although he wasn't trained in any of this, he could just do any of that very well.

I think the very first thing I did was to work for Kaiser, as a welder.

Wilmot: As a welder. Where was your work located?

Harris: In Richmond.

Wilmot: In Richmond.

Harris: And I knew absolutely no one outside of Berkeley, so the idea of living in Richmond—and at that time, there weren't any blacks, as far as I knew, in Richmond. So the thing to do was live in Berkeley, and I think I must have gotten special rides from people. Lots of people must have been going.

I didn't know how to weld, of course, and I had to go through a training period. And there were a few women who were welding, of course. Isn't there a song about somebody the welder?

Wilmot: Rosie the Riveter?

Harris: Rosie the Riveter. Yes, riveting is something that was new, of course, I think, for women. This is the Second World War, of course. Do you happen to know where that Rosie the Riveter song is placed? Is it earlier?

Wilmot: No, it's World War II.

Harris: World War II.

Wilmot: That's when women entered the work force in great numbers, in response to the war demand. How did you find this job? How did it come to you? I'm imagining you kind of arriving in the Bay Area and having your family and a few contacts, but—

Harris: No, we knew people. We knew practically no one in San Francisco, but my father had a relative, one relative, and that's also—I didn't even think of San Francisco, the town which I admire so much now. It didn't even enter my mind except as the place where the terrible earthquake took place that my family used to talk about. So all our family friends were on the East Bay side. It was quite appropriate and quite natural for me to move, but there weren't any blacks that I knew of in that northern part of Berkeley. But the Halls, Faracita's family—

Wilmot: Tarea?

Harris: Theresa Hall Pittman. Yes, she married a dentist, Dr. Pittman. They lived on what was then Grove Street, just above Ashby, in fact. So there were a number of blacks living there, and I knew a few of them because I was associated through Faricita with the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, black sorority, and most of the people that belonged lived in that area.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. You mentioned that in your community growing up, there were several times when people kind of had an attitude towards you because of your birth mother. I was wondering, when you entered the sorority, were people concerned at all?

Harris: I don't think they even knew about it. This problem in San Jose began when I was nine years old. Some of my little friends, who must have been around nine or ten, told me about it. They couldn't wait to tell me. But then, I mean, I did well in school, you see. I skipped three grades. I don't know if I mentioned that.

Wilmot: You did.

Harris: And so I began to feel I was smarter than the others, I guess, because they didn't skip, and I skipped three times, I think to my detriment when I got to high school. I was not very good at math. I think I had missed a lot of stuff.

Wilmot: There's always drawbacks between skipping or not skipping. But by the time you pledged Delta Sigma Theta, that group of young women were very accepting of you?

Harris: Oh, yes, yes. Entirely. I don't even know if Faricita knew about my background, because someone, after I began to go around socially and met people in Berkeley—I remember there was one couple that lived on Ashby, near Grove, near them, who told

me more things about myself. But it was told kind of secretly, so the sorority people didn't know.

Wilmot: They told you things about yourself you didn't know already?

Harris: Yes, about my birth father. The name that they associated with him was a well-known one. There were very few people in the faculty at UC Berkeley, and this particular man was an important person in the athletic field, but I can't remember his name.

Wilmot: Okay. And were they African American?

Harris: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes! There never was any question of white blood, except through my foster father, who of course was one-eighth—what do you call them, an octoroon, I guess.

Wilmot: So you had this extensive network of family and kind of friends and social contacts.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Is that how your employment at Kaiser came to you? How did that come to you?

Harris: I don't know. I think just everybody was working if they could. It was a very exciting time. This was 1940. Were we in the war? No, we didn't enter the war in 1940.

Wilmot: In 1941.

Harris: Was it '41?

Wilmot: I think it was after Pearl Harbor.

Harris: So maybe I didn't—

Wilmot: I may be wrong about that.

Harris: I didn't come—did I say I came to Berkeley first? I didn't.

Wilmot: You came to Oakland first.

Harris: Oakland, and then moved to Berkeley. By the time I got there, everybody was wanting a job, and it was just some casual—it was a white friend, as I recall, someone I had met who told me about the job and where to go, and I did. Nothing to it.

Wilmot: What was your training program like?

Harris: I don't remember much about it except that it was brief, but there had to be some training, and I think I decided I would do welding, without knowing anything about it. I don't remember anything except the business of actually learning to handle that welding rod so you didn't hurt your eyes. It was something for a woman to weld in those days.

Wilmot: Were most of your other co-workers men?

Harris: Mostly men. There were very few women. I remember one boss, and he was white. I don't remember. There may have been a few black women, but I don't remember any black men. There must have been some, because at that time I remember hearing that a lot of people—a lot of blacks were coming into the area from the South and the Midwest to work because of the possibility of working. Shipyards. Wasn't that when—no, I guess it was later that *Grapes of Wrath* was written. But—

Wilmot: It was about that time.

Harris: Yes, people were coming from the South and Midwest. I don't remember much about that. It's hazy. Except the whole business of handling that welding rod so that you didn't blind yourself. I remember the handling of the light was very important, so we must have worn special glasses. And, of course, the special hood. You've seen those hoods.

Wilmot: What was your job exactly?

Harris: Welding. Getting down and welding. Seams. Seams. It was on a boat. I remember that everything we were doing was on a boat, yes. And I remember kind of having nervous dreams about not doing my welding job well and the boat coming apart, possibly.

Wilmot: While in battle.

Harris: Yes. [laughs] No, just—I think we were working on merchant boats. Yes, merchant seamen we were dealing with. But even so, they were carrying goods to the war front. It was very important that you do your job well so that the boat didn't come apart.

Wilmot: Were you part of a union?

Harris: Must have been, but I can't recall. I remember the name Kaiser was at that time associated strictly with this company that I worked for. And this Kaiser that I now belong to is a hospital.

Wilmot: An HMO, yeah.

Harris: HMO, yeah. But that was some time after the war.

Wilmot: It's funny to link those two industries.

Harris: Mm-hm.

Wilmot: But they are indeed linked.

I think it was during that time, as far as I understand, there was a Boilermakers Union, and then there was maybe called A-19 or A-39, which was the auxiliary union that was set up for black wartime workers.

Harris: I don't remember belonging to anything that was exclusively black.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: In fact—oh, I do remember having a friend who was black, who was a welder.

Wilmot: Was she a woman?

Harris: A woman. Hmm. She just popped into my mind. So there were a few blacks, but they weren't local blacks, as far as I can recall. They were blacks who had come into the area specifically to get work, because there was so much need for people. I wish I knew more about that period.

Wilmot: I have some good books for you.

Harris: Oh, have you?

Wilmot: Yes. I'll bring them next time. Were you making good money?

Harris: Well, it was for me at the time, yes. Heavens! Never earned that much money. I'd only worked as a domestic. Let's see. Oh, I guess I had corrected papers and done that sort of thing at San Jose State, but outside of the college, I just worked as a domestic.

Wilmot: You made enough to pay your rent and buy things?

Harris: I guess so. I remember having a job in Berkeley near—Jewell—I remember the name of the family, yes, the Jewells. Ray Jewell was the husband. I didn't see the wife much, but Ray was suddenly out of work because he was considered sort of left wing, I think. His wife continued to work, but he was home. She hired me to do some domestic work. But, now, this must have been after the shipyard. Yes, after the shipyard experience. I was living out in the lower part of north Berkeley, on Shattuck Avenue, in that real estate office, yes. And worked somewhere in that neighborhood, north of University, for the Jewells.

Wilmot: Was there a common thread? You had said that when you were at San Jose State, you were a member of a Young Communist League.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And I was wondering if there was a common thread between that affiliation, and then was there any kind of affiliation also—

Harris: Well, there must have been.

Wilmot: —with your welding work.

Harris: There must have been. There must have been, because I remember that being a constant. And the lefties, so to speak—many of them were middle- and upper-middle-class whites. Now, I don't think there were many blacks.

Wilmot: What was that community like when you got to Oakland?

Harris: I don't remember them at this time, but some time in the Berkeley period, when I moved into Berkeley, I must have had some contact with them because it seems to me

that that was a constant thing until I just decided that I didn't want anything more to do with them. But they were pretty active, not as Communists openly, but as left-wingers. I mean, that movement was springing up at that time.

But there were—for instance, socially, it seems to me I would have been connected with the Pittmans, and the blacks were not openly left-wing. There was no such thing at that time, not the nice ones.

Wilmot: "The nice ones."

Harris: The nice blacks were not openly—[laughs].

Wilmot: Oh! All right.

I'm kind of just enjoying this idea of you having this work that brought you a sizeable, unprecedented amount of income. I'm just wondering, like, what did that mean for you as a young woman who was just independent? Were you buying clothes?

Harris: Not too much, apparently, because it was after that that I worked as a maid. There weren't high-paying jobs like that, so—

Wilmot: How long were you in the shipyard?

Harris: I was just thinking. I must have gone in late in '41 or early in '42, and then—do you remember when the war was over?

Wilmot: 1945?

Harris: Yes. Let me see what I have here. [looks at document] Moved to the East Bay. Oh, I see. A concert sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha, International House. Oh, my goodness. I got very active—by 1945—hmm, I've left Gertrude Beckman out of the picture, and she was very important. She was my singing teacher.

Wilmot: We'll get to her.

Harris: I started to study with her in 1940.

Wilmot: Immediately, as soon as you moved to the Bay Area?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: How did you find her?

Harris: Through—I can remember the woman's name, Hancock. She was a professor at San Jose State. She advised that I go to Gertrude Beckman. G. W. Beck—let's see, what have I got here? War began. Worked at Kaiser in Richmond, yes, as a welder. So I must have quit by, yeah, '45. Started vocal study with Gertrude Beckman. Concert sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha at the International House, UC Berkeley. That must be what that picture is. That was it. That's why I was carrying flowers.

So that happened sometime between very early—as I said, it was the first picture I have. By 1945, I was singing in the chorus on stage at the Greek Theatre at UC, in their UC production of *Trojan Women*, and I'm sure I got into that because Mrs. Beckman, Gertrude Beckman's daughter, was going to UC Berkeley and she told me about it. That's how I got into that.

Wilmot: What was Hancock's first name?

Harris: Who?

Wilmot: Hancock's first name.

Harris: There was no Hancock. Beckman?

Wilmot: Hancock who referred you to Beckman. Hancock from—

Harris: Oh, I gave you her name. You didn't put it down. I can't remember.

Wilmot: I have—

Harris: Well, whatever her name was, the one in San Jose. I never saw her after that.

Wilmot: So you began taking singing lessons?

Harris: Singing lessons.

Wilmot: With Gertrude Beckman immediately after moving to the Bay Area.

Harris: Apparently, yes. Between '40 and—

Wilmot: Where?

Harris: She lived on Chabot Road, up near the lake, Lake Temescal. I used to walk up there all the time. No other way to get there. [laughs] Yeah, and it was through her daughter that I knew that Cal needed singers for the—hmm, the most important step in my life at that time. They needed people to be on board, on stage, in the *Trojan Women*. We didn't participate in the action in the pit, because this was at the Greek Theatre and it was out of doors, of course. But we sat on the stage and sang original music written by the man who—he's retired, I'm sure, by now—but he then later went to Stanford. Good music, I thought.

Wilmot: What role did you take on?

Harris: In the chorus, I was part of the chorus, alto. I didn't have a role. The people who sat on the stage sang this original music that this chap who later taught at Stanford—we were the musical background. It was fun. And it was directed by Fred Harris, who was the husband of Mary Harris, who became the most important person in my life after that. She was the wife of the head of the department, who also directed this production. She was a drama coach, and very bitter about the fact that she, because she was a woman, could not get a job at UC Berkeley.

Wilmot: Whereas her husband was chair of the drama department?

Harris: I don't know if there even was—it was just coming into a department. Before that, Cal really looked down its nose at anything like drama, and so they didn't have a department for the first early years. There was a famous group, and I can't recall—it may come up later—that performed and did all sorts of things, very well known. He worked with them and through them—this was entirely outside of the university—he became known. Fred Harris became known, and was in line for becoming part of the department, and actually was the head of the department. He formed a department. There was no department, a formal department. I don't know how to describe it now because they don't have things like that now. You were connected with a department, but there was no department. I know, you were connected with any kind of theatrical goings-on, but there was no department.

Wilmot: As such.

Harris: As such, until around '45 or '46.

Wilmot: So were you studying with Mary Harris?

Harris: And then I began to study with Mary Harris.

Wilmot: As early as 1945 and 1946?

Harris: Yes. Yes.

Wilmot: Can I just go back to your time with Gertrude Beckman?

Harris: Well, I'm still with Gertrude Beckman. I'm with her throughout. San Jose had taught me that I must sing, remember? So it wasn't separate. I worked—

Wilmot: With both of them.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Over the years.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: How long did you study with Gertrude Beckman?

Harris: Well, at least until I went to New York, which was in the late forties.

Wilmot: Okay. What do you feel that you learned from her?

Harris: Gertrude Beckman?

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

Harris: [laughs] She taught me to respect lieder, and that's because she had done her training in Germany. She was very respectful. I have pictures of her and her husband, and a tremendous respect for lieder, and I began to do French art songs and the regular concert material. I began to have a great respect for—I think Marian Anderson was singing then. I'm not sure. But that whole world, that whole cultural—the music of the cultural world, at any rate, I began to learn about through her.

Wilmot: As far as technique?

Harris: Oh, yes. Whatever technique she had, she was very strong on, although, I must say, I didn't get it. It sort of went in one ear and out the other.

Wilmot: What kind of exercises did she have you doing?

Harris: I was reluctant to do them, but I did them. The regular stuff. I mean, so it seemed to me. I can't think of any other way to describe them.

Wilmot: You're talking to someone who doesn't have a voice-training background, so I'm very interested. What do you mean when you say "the regular stuff"?

Harris: Well, the scales, and I learned the limits of the range of my voice. I learned that I could go to the G below middle C, but that I wasn't very good—that really G an octave and a half above middle C was the top for me, but if I tried and if I got good enough, maybe I could get up to high C, which is two octaves above middle C. So I learned about vocal range. I learned that it was very important to sing evenly; that is to say, that there shouldn't be a break, as there frequently normally is, when you go from the G below middle C—in there—I can't remember the name of it now, but there is a place where the voice tended to break, in every voice. In my case, it would depend upon the—I had a mezzo voice, so that break for me would come just below the C above middle C. That's an octave from middle C. You know about middle C.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: And then from there on, that was the higher voice that you would use, but you were to keep the strength of the voice exactly the same throughout, even though you went below middle C, which was quite low, and then into this middle section, which became lighter, and then transfer to the head voice. Beckman was different from most teachers in that most teachers talked about the lower, the middle, and the high. She taught that the important thing was that it should all be done in exactly the same way. In other words, even though there might be a tendency to break in those places, you didn't do it if you were clever, if you were properly trained. It was all one smooth, unbroken bend from, in my case, the G below middle C to high C, which I never reached—publicly. Once I did, yes. When I began to work with Leon Kirschner. [laughs]

Wilmot: I have a question also about your earliest kind of song and music that occurred in the church. How did you bring that experience there to this formal training? Or how did they mix?

Harris: Well, the fact that I was used to performing. I mean, it was just the thing one did, much to one's annoyance, in my case. [laughs] You sang! Because your mother and father

had sung in the church choir, you sang in the church choir. Because you had a little better voice than most—it wasn't an outstanding voice, it was just a good voice, and I was a pretty good musician. That is to say, I could read quickly. I could read at sight, and as a child, I'd been trained in piano, of course. I was a pretty good musician. That's different from being a good singer. Do you understand that?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Yes. So I was a pretty good musician, trained perhaps better than most. Did not have an outstanding voice, but had, I would say, a pretty good voice, and was naturally musical. I don't know what else to say.

Wilmot: During this time with Gertrude Beckman, did you have your own favorites? We've talked a little bit about this. We were talking, and you were talking about [Claude] Debussy, and you were also talking about—what's his name? I forgot his name, but it will come to me.

Harris: Well, [Robert] Schumann, [Franz] Schubert—Hugo Wolf was my favorite. French art songs.

Wilmot: What was it about Hugo Wolf that you—

Harris: He loved poetry, and he had a sense for the dramatic. You see, all the time, I'm yearning to get into a point where I can tell a dramatic story. I mean, Schubert is very well and good, and some of those earlier composers up to the Middle Ages—[Claudio] Monteverdi, the Italian composers, and so on—they were, of course—you were singing in operas which were a dramatic work, but it still didn't approach what I call theater. And nobody was interested in teaching me about theater.

Wilmot: Theater of the voice?

Harris: Theater! Acting! Opera! I guess what I really was longing to do was be in an opera, although I didn't dream about it as a black person, of course. And I began to work with Gertrude Beckman. People who were at Cal, young people would go over to San Francisco and usher and get to see things for nothing, if they ushered, and so I had no illusions about my ever being in opera. Everybody talked to me about Marian Anderson who sang in concert. "You should be like Marian Anderson." [laughs] Who was the last person I wanted to be like! But she had a low voice. Mine was higher. But she was a success! She was famous, and there were no black opera singers. I heard one or two maybe off in the East somewhere, but never had I seen one or heard one, nor was I ever talked to about it.

Wilmot: Why not Marian Anderson? Why was she last person you wanted to be?

Harris: I didn't like her manner. She didn't have enough theater.

Wilmot: Yes, she had a different way of presenting herself.

Harris: She wasn't theatrical. She sang as though—in my opinion, she seemed obedient, like having a teacher like Gertrude Beckman and doing all the right things. She sang

German *lieder*, and she sang some French, I think, but I never caught in her a sense of the possibility of the dramatic.

Wilmot: So this man, Wolf—

Harris: Hugo Wolf. He was interested in—who was the poet that he admired? But at any rate, he offered, for me at the time, dramatic possibilities.

Wilmot: What kind of stories did he like to tell?

Harris: He didn't have much chance to tell stories. His songs were short. They were lyric, called lyric poems. Narrative poems tell—

Wilmot: Stories.

Harris: —stories, but lyric poems express a poet's feeling about—mostly it was love, of course. Various stages of love. [laughs] Not much variety there in terms of—well, Schubert had songs that—all of them had some song that perhaps could be dramatized, but most songs, you know, are about two pages long. I could show you examples of them. Two or three pages long.

Wilmot: Was singing in your life—singing and performance and theater—was this something you pursued in a very single way, or did you have peers or other young people who you could sing back and forth with or other people who you kind of socialized with and talked about the music?

Harris: Well, if you were in church choir, you certainly did, and if you were at UC Berkeley, they had a chorus.

Wilmot: But for you as yourself, did you have other people you could kind of spend time with and talk about your—

Harris: There weren't too many other—no, I was still not so interested in singing. I wasn't so interested in music, even. I was interested in literature. I remember one friend. Her name was Harriet Feldman. And we were interested in poetry. We were interested in the literary side of things, not so much the musical.

Wilmot: When did the shift occur for you, when drama and theater began to become what you focused on?

Harris: As soon as I met Mary Harris, head of the drama—

Wilmot: Do you remember meeting her?

Harris: Of course! She was singing in the chorus. Her husband directed *Trojan Women*. I was singing on the stage, and I heard, through gossip and talk with people, that she gave drama lessons. That's when I began. That's what I was waiting for all this time.

Wilmot: Was she very well known?

Harris: Well, she had an excellent training with—I can't remember the group. She and her husband trained in the same place in New York, and later we'll come to that, I guess. She also taught at the Pacific School of Religion. She was up there. She was active in her church, which was half a block away from her house. But she had been the teacher in this acting school that I can't recall the name of at the moment, but it's one in New York where she and her husband both trained. Oh, I have pictures. We'll get into that, won't we, later?

Wilmot: We can go back to that. So am I correct, then, in understanding that while you were working in the shipyards, you were also pursuing singing lessons?

Harris: Apparently. No, apparently—I didn't start—I sang in the chorus. Yes, that was in '45. Then I sang in 1946, I sang the role of the sorceress in the UC production of *Dido and Aeneas*.

Wilmot: Good.

Harris: And I have a picture of that. And then I sang in a chorus sponsored by Alpha Mu, which was in the Department of Music at UC Berkeley, and in '46 I also sang two songs by Leon Kirschner, who went finally to Harvard and taught there, but he was a composer, a young composer then. He had written these two songs, and I sang them. Let's see, what else? Soloist for songs and English festival, where we did music by [Peter] Warlock and Kirschner and many contemporaries.

Wilmot: So it seems that 1945 and 1946 were really watershed years.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: It seems like working with Mary Harris really brought you firmly into the circle of UC Berkeley.

Harris: That's right. That's exactly what happened. Being in that production with Fred Harris meant I met her, and then I was a singer, and I was an alto. Of course I could do—what was the first role, in *Dido and Aeneas*?

Wilmot: The sorceress.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: I want to ask you a little bit about Mary Harris.

Harris: Yes. I've got a picture of her, too.

Wilmot: Did you approach her to ask her for acting lessons?

Harris: I must have. Or maybe I approached her husband.

Wilmot: What was she like as an instructor, as a teacher?

Harris: She was fantastic, as far as I was concerned. She was "it." Not Gertrude Beckman, who should have been "it" for me; it was Mary Harris, because Mary Harris was connected with theater, and I'd been longing all my life to get into theater. Here was someone who could teach me what to do in theater, and she did.

Wilmot: What did she bring to you? What did she teach? You mentioned that they were both adherents of the [Constantin] Stanislavsky technique.

Harris: Oh, yes. Well, acting was not something you put on; acting was something you searched for deep in yourself. You got the reality of things from inside of you. You didn't learn certain gestures that this [demonstrates] was sorrow, and this [demonstrates] was elation. None of that phoniness. What was an accepted form of acting, for the most part, learning the gestures, learning how this [demonstrates] was sorrow or something. That was totally out of it. You had to first experience it, according to Stanislavsky's point of view in theater. You learned to go inside yourself and feel the real thing, and then allow it to come out. You didn't make gestures.

If you were in the Greek Theatre, where it was important—where a gesture had certain meaning, you couldn't do that so easily in Greek Theatre, because anything you did had to be big enough to be seen by that audience that was some distance from you. You could still do it, but you had to have the external way of acting. One is internal, that came along with Stanislavsky in the what, early 1900s, I guess, and the other was the way of acting that had been in vogue for centuries, the external.

Wilmot: Okay. Let's take a break.

Harris: Okay.

[interview interruption while recording media are changed]

Wilmot: Interview number two, disc 2, Henrietta Harris, January 2nd, 2003.

When we left off, we were talking about the Stanislavsky technique and how it really drew from inside. How did you make the journey in learning how to do that?

Harris: I could have done it only with the help of someone like Mary Harris, who saw me at least once a week. I went to her house, and she gave me exercises, which I worked on with her but also whenever there were opportunities to be with plays—she was connected with a group outside of the university, of former students, people who'd finished at Cal, and they had a group. I can't remember offhand, but it's still in existence. They formed a group, and they produced plays.

I had not many opportunities, and I of course never played a black character, but I got to play gypsies and people for whom I could reasonably pass. Never anything big, just small things we performed in. And also, she had a very coherent and profound, I thought, philosophy of just living. She incorporated that into the acting. In other words, things were—I don't ever remember doing any comedy with her. It was all very deep and serious. I liked it. I thought it was wonderful. [laughs]

Wilmot: Did you become friends as well as teacher and student?

Harris: Well, she was considerably older than I. I don't consider that I ever became her friend in the sense of friendship having to do with equality, but nobody else did, either. She was a very special person. Where are the pictures of her?

Wilmot: One second. I'll give it to you. [looks through documents]

Harris: You found a picture of her?

Wilmot: No, I didn't. I found something earlier than that, so I'm taking a quick look. Oh, yes.

Harris: Oh, no, this is Gertrude Beckman. She was my singing teacher.

Wilmot: Oh, I'm sorry. Can you see her, as well?

Harris: That's a very good little [inaudible] I mean, he was very famous.

Wilmot: Conrad Boes.

Harris: He was the accompanist for Elena Gerhardt, who was the famous contralto of her time. She was German, of course, but didn't like being in Germany and had moved to England, to London. In fact, when I left here, my intention was to, and I did work with Elena Gerhardt. So I really did what I wanted to do, finally. [looks through documents] This is all much later. You weren't around when he was alive. That's my friend, Frieda; my friend, Adam, a teacher [inaudible]. He was part of the Aldridge Players[/West]. Oh, he was—! But we hadn't come to him. George Markey. Did I tell you about him?

Wilmot: Let's keep panning, if that's okay.

Harris: Yes, yes, yes.

Wilmot: I want to stay with our story. Your glasses are right there.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Okay, now where were we? We got up. We were looking for a picture of Mary Harris.

Harris: I have one of her. I saw it just yesterday. She's a fascinating woman, but of a strict nature, not—what would be another word contrary to that? I mean, she was disciplined, and you had to be disciplined, too. She was not a very good actress, interestingly enough, because this thing in her was very strong.

Wilmot: "This thing?"

Harris: Well, her husband was jovial, had a totally other quality. I suppose it was part of the reason they were drawn to each other. He was very good with people. She was not particularly good with people, but if a person was bent on getting information she had to offer, I mean, if you really gave in to her point of view, then you got results that were very exciting and very right for serious drama, not for comedy. I never did any comedy, but I did the big Greek [laughs]—what shall I call them?—they were queens, mainly. They didn't write for ordinary women, they were queens or princesses or something.

Wilmot: Queens and princesses and also, at some point, when we get to Clytemnestra, we'll talk about—

Harris: Clytemnestra was a queen.

Wilmot: And also she had a lot of wrath.

Harris: Oh, they were—well, Medea, who was one of these women, killed her children! [laughs] They were terrible, but they were queens!

Wilmot: When you played the part of the sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas*—

Harris: Not an important part.

Wilmot: It wasn't an important part, but it was one of the first parts where you kind of came into the front—

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Wilmot: So it was important in some ways.

Harris: Well, it certainly was important for me, and it was important as a contralto. When people think of the singing voice, they think mainly of the high soprano, and it was not a soprano voice, or a soprano role.

Wilmot: Where did you pull from in order to play the role of the sorceress? After having kind of talked about this technique that you learned, where you had to pull from true emotion, where did you pull from?

Harris: Yes, but I had just started. She helped with that, but this was at the very beginning of my work with her. I didn't meet her until—what was it that we did? It was *The Trojan Women*, wasn't it? Yes, yes. The roles we had on the stage were not roles, really; they were just singers, and you sang. You couldn't act differently from what was going on down below. The attention was not upon the singers on the stage, that was for the ears.

Wilmot: Even when you were playing the role of the sorceress?

Harris: But that was not *Dido and Aeneas*. What was it?

Wilmot: I think it was.

Harris: No, that was *Dido and Aeneas*, yes. What was the—oh, *The Trojan Women*. I see. We're in the same era.

Wilmot: Who else was part of the cast of *Dido and Aeneas*?

Harris: Mm. Arabelle Hong played *Dido*, which was, in itself, an important thing. Was it in this book? It must have been.

Wilmot: Yes, it was. A couple of more pages in. Because she was Asian American?

Harris: Well, it was because she could sing the part, that's all. But there was no racial casting. She had a lovely soprano voice. So it was rather unique at the time. Here it was, UC Berkeley, with a Chinese girl in the lead and a black woman, young woman playing a secondary lead.

Wilmot: In this article, it says that you were a graduate student at UC Berkeley at the time.

Harris: I got my degree in San Jose, and in order to be in things, you had to take some music courses, so I did. I worked with the people in the music department. It's that little wooden house. I don't know if it's still there. It's right in back of—what's the big white building?

Wilmot: The College of Environmental Design?

Harris: Oh, no, no, no, the big building which you see when you enter Sather Gate.

Wilmot: Oh, okay, yes. In back of Sproul?

Harris: Sproul, I guess it is, yes. Well, it's to the side. It's on the west side of Sproul. [Dwinelle Hall] I don't know if it still—I think it is still in existence. It's a dark wood building, right in back of Sproul, and the music department was there for years and years. [Dwinelle Annex]

Wilmot: When you were working with Mary Harris, did you find it difficult at all to get to those feelings, the true feelings of love and rage and all those things?

Harris: Well, I found it difficult to please her.

Wilmot: But in terms of getting to your own feelings, how was that for you?

Harris: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed trying to do it. But I, of course, never succeeded, from her point of view. [laughs]

Wilmot: And she let you know that?

Harris: [laughs] No one who worked with her ever reached <u>the</u> goal. I mean, it was all an effort to reach the ideal, which was to feel—and interestingly enough, when she performed, she didn't reach it, either, because what came across with her was—oh, dear, I guess I shouldn't say this. [pause] Well, self-conscious. You were very aware that she was aware of herself. What she was after, and it's what all acting people that I know of today are after, is something that resembled reality, very, very deep. She was interested in serious drama.

I don't know what you'd say about comedy. I suppose you'd say the same thing. But comedy is not something I can really speak of, since I had practically no experience doing comedy. Drama. The deep thing, the thing you feel deeply inside of you, and have trouble expressing: love, hate, all the deep, serious, dark emotions. Happiness too, of course. But nothing like—well, comedy was not part of it as far as she was concerned. She knew about it, but we never talked about comedy. Lighter things, mainly, but mainly it was serious drama, the repertory of the Stanislavsky people, Greek drama.

[Henrik] Ibsen was a great favorite. I'm trying to think who the lighter writers were. Oh, Eugene O'Neill, of course, was fine. There aren't many O'Neill comedies. Serious drama.

Wilmot: It's hard in retrospect, but at that time, what was your dream role to play? What would you have loved to do? What role were you hungry for?

Harris: Well, I got all the Greek things. I can't remember. I wasn't so keen to do a particular role. I was just keen to live a life that required me to act in a certain way: act out of a sense of reality in myself. In other words, I don't think real actors, except the very greatest ones, maybe, are like that. I think the normal actor or actress plays and does the best he or she can do in whatever they get a chance to do.

Wilmot: I see what you mean.

Harris: Yeah. And I wasn't that way. I just wanted to do certain things, although later, I changed. When I got to Europe and got with the cast of black actors, then I was interested in anything. I loved the idea of doing comedy, and did it. And serious stuff, too, and not so serious.

Wilmot: Comedy also is a different tradition, I think, within black culture.

Harris: Yeah.

Wilmot: Which is not actually unrelated to tragedy, irony, and all of those wonderful other things.

Harris: Yes, right, right.

Wilmot: So when it came time for a role that you were playing to experience great grief, where would you go for that? How did you find that?

Harris: At that time, it was all "go to Mary" and try to do whatever you could do, call upon anything in your life that you could, but you simply waited for her to say, "That's it." I remember playing—what was that great role that I played? I never got it right. Oh! I've told you about the role, haven't I?

Wilmot: Clytemnestra?

Harris: Clytemnestra, yes.

Wilmot: Was that the one you're thinking of?

Harris: Yeah.

Wilmot: But that wasn't until later, right?

Harris: That was later.

Wilmot: We can talk about that now.

Harris: Clytemnestra. Her husband had urged me to find some character in real life that I could call upon, and I thought of someone I knew of that I had been reading about in the news, who lived in Los Angeles and was a housewife. He accepted that, because I seemed—as a contemporary model for me, that I could identify with directly. He accepted that. She absolutely rejected it.

Wilmot: A housewife who had experienced a husband who had killed her child?

Harris: Does she kill her children?

Wilmot: No, but her husband did, and then she—

Harris: That's right. You know the story better than I! [laughs] You did your homework! Yes, yes. For her, you would go to a very deep source for that, and we didn't go, her husband and I—now, her husband was directing.

Wilmot: Fred Harris.

Harris: Yes, Fred Harris. So we discussed it, and the reason she came into it was that she was performing in the chorus and, after all, was my coach. She was my drama coach. And so she asked me what Fred and I had decided as far as the role was concerned. Since he had agreed, I told her very enthusiastically what we had decided upon, and she absolutely rejected it. It wasn't good enough! And I don't remember what I finally found, but it was not that, because it was too superficial.

Wilmot: It was not a housewife?

Harris: No, no. No, no, nothing like that. Too ordinary, you see. Didn't probe deeply enough into things. That's the way she was.

Wilmot: But at the same time, though—

Harris: She was right, of course.

Wilmot: Was she, now? Because it would be very interesting to take that role and filter it through the role of someone who was an ordinary housewife and not a queen and wife of Agamemnon.

Harris: Well, she didn't seem to think I could do it, anyway. She rejected that kind of thinking. So I sort of just did what I could do, because I had some experience with her. I did what I could do, and when she indicated that that was pretty much the right direction, we let it go at that, but I don't quite know what I did, because I hadn't had any experience of that kind. But to reach into the deeper recesses of your life was her specialty.

Wilmot: That's kind of where I'm, like, confused, because I'm like, okay, so you haven't had the experience of being married to a king who you think murders your daughter, Iphigenia.

Harris: Iphigenia. No, we don't—

Wilmot: Iphigenia. And then he comes back and you have a lover, and you smile in his face, and then you usher him into the hall and murder him. So you haven't had that experience. So where in your life to go you to bring it, is my question.

Harris: Good point. You don't go to Los Angeles! You don't go to Los Angeles and find a housewife!

Wilmot: So—

Harris: [laughing] Your question still remains unanswered!

Wilmot: Okay. Maybe the more broad question. It's hard, because I'm asking you about the very mechanics of your craft.

Harris: Well, it has to do with things, of course, basically for a person like myself, to go to things that hurt. You would go to the things that really got to you, and you would depend upon that. What did I know at that age and with that background? What did I know about a Los Angeles housewife? I didn't know anything except what I'd seen in the movies. So she was saying, essentially, "Forget all that, and think about things in your own life," because she did believe that practically everybody had had experiences which could match, in some way—except the people who were doing and very fond of comedy all the time. There were deep things in everyone's life.

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

Harris: And I can't remember what I called upon. But at any rate, she was in the chorus. She had her eye on me all the time. But she also had a job to do, because she was supposed to be acting, even though in the chorus. Of course, the choruses in the Greek plays that we did, did not sing. You understand that. It was poetic. They were called the chorus because they all were saying the same thing.

Wilmot: I understand.

Harris: Yeah.

Wilmot: Let me just ask you one last question. Who did Mary Harris consider to be doing their job as an actor dutifully? Who did she like?

Harris: Good question.

Wilmot: Who did she put forward as a model?

Harris: Good question. She would have put forward any of the people who came out of the Stanislavsky approach, people who—I'm trying to think of—[pause]—hmm. Sarah Bernhardt, I guess, but she'd never seen her, I don't think. I'm trying to think of American actresses or actors. I cannot at the moment remember a single name, but there were people. It isn't that there weren't people. It was the people who were active at that time in bringing the whole Stanislavsky approach to theater surely had some people—see, but I never asked her, because that would have been a challenge, I

suppose, and I didn't dream of challenging her. She really was the master, so to speak, of any situation she was in, or she simply wouldn't deal with it.

Wilmot: And she was well known on both coasts?

Harris: She taught as an acting teacher in a school on the East Coast, where the whole Stanislavsky thing got its start, in this country. I forget the name of the theater.

Wilmot: We'll get it. We'll get it. [Actors' Studio?]

Harris: And then she—she was married at that time, so when she and her husband moved to the West Coast and he got a job at UC Berkeley, then—everybody didn't go to her, you weren't pressured in any way to go to her, but if you wished to, you were welcome, if she accepted you. Her main job was at the Pacific School of Religion.

Wilmot: Were classes with her very expensive? You were taking classes now—

Harris: I don't even remember paying her anything. I must have.

Wilmot: Because at that point you were taking lessons with both Gertrude Beckman—

Harris: Now, with Gertrude Beckman I did pay.

Wilmot: This is during the 1940s.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: When did you get the job at Berkeley in the library? Was that 1947, or 1942 through 1947?

Harris: Whatever it says on the—

Wilmot: Yeah, I think it was 1943 through 1947.

Harris: Until I left and went to New York, I think.

Wilmot: Let me ask you a little bit about that time then. When you went to go work in the library at UC Berkeley, which library did you work in? What did you do?

Harris: I worked in the main library, right next to the main desk, just to the left of the main desk. There was an information desk, and I was there.

Wilmot: So you knew the library inside and out.

Harris: Well—[laughs]—you could hardly say that. I knew enough to either answer the question directly myself, or where to get the information.

Wilmot: Did you like the work?

Harris: Oh, I did. I enjoyed it.

Wilmot: How did you get that job?

Harris: That's a good question. I had connections, all sorts of connections with all the leading musicians, with the head of the music department, the head of the drama department, and I picked up the information that I needed from one of those sources, the leading composer.

Wilmot: Roger Sessions?

Harris: No, not Roger Sessions. He was beyond—I could have gotten it from him, and certainly to get into New York, I went through Roger Sessions, but to get into the higher circles around Berkeley, you needed to know the head of the music department, head of the drama department. I had all I needed in terms of—the leading characters, the leading students in drama and music were people I called upon.

Wilmot: So you think that's probably how you learned about the job at the library?

Harris: I don't remember how I knew, but it was easy. I have the feeling that it was someone outside the university, but I lived—finally, after I left my home on Shattuck Avenue, I moved down closer to the university, and I don't remember. I suspect it was through the Harrises, through Fred Harris, mainly. Fred Harris was the head of a department, a new head of a new department. And they did a lot of theater, and so that means I knew, to some degree or another, most of the older and more experienced actors who had left the university, many of them, and gone out and formed their own groups, and some of them who hung around as graduate students and so on, so I knew these people.

Wilmot: While you were working at Berkeley's library, did you have a sense—first off, were you promoted while you were there?

Harris: I don't remember that, but I never felt that it was somewhere I wanted to go. I wanted to get beyond Berkeley and beyond that particular job.

Wilmot: It was just an income stream while you were pursuing your life as an artist.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: You worked there for five years. Were there other black people who worked in the library? Do you recall?

Harris: My life was mainly with the white folks.

Wilmot: I see.

Harris: Except I was a member of the sorority.

Wilmot: This is a question I've been thinking about. Did you ever get the sense that there were other employees who were black but passing for white or passing for Latino?

Harris: No, no.

Wilmot: No?

Harris: Never. Well, there wasn't any passing going on. I was black. I had a certain talent, and I was accepted by the people who were in that field, that's all. It wasn't a matter of—I don't recall racial things. Of course they were there. But, for instance, when Leon Kirschner needed a singer for introducing his songs, he chose me because I had the right—what do you call it?—the right type of voice, I guess you'd say. That's not the—he chose me because of my interest in the poetry. You see, he was among the first that I knew of who cared about the words. For him, the meaning of the poetry was the big thing. Plus his music, of course. This was an attitude that I was sympathetic to, and there weren't too many people at this time who were.

Wilmot: What do you mean?

Harris: They were still hanging onto the older way of—you know, having a marvelous voice and so on.

Wilmot: When did you start to know Leon Kirschner?

Harris: As soon as I entered the department.

Wilmot: As early as 1940—

Harris: He must have gotten to know me through my singing in *Dido and Aeneas*, so he knew I had a voice. So we were in and out of the community, in the department, but I wasn't thinking about getting a master's or anything like that. I was just doing graduate work there, because it was a department that was beginning to produce—the department, itself, yes—beginning to produce. They were in things, and here was a singer who was friendly to—she was also a student of Gertrude Beckman. So really it was through this person, who studied with Gertrude Beckman and was also at Cal.

Wilmot: That's very interesting to me because I get the sense that it was not a world that very many African American people had access to.

Harris: That's right.

Wilmot: And yet it sounds like you had a lot of access.

Harris: Well, yeah.

Wilmot: It was your social circle.

Harris: Yeah.

Wilmot: So I'm very intrigued about how that happened.

Harris: Yeah. Well, it just happened because we shared the same interests. The racial thing—now, if it had come up where a kind of—well, what can I say? The racial thing took second place. It was there. I don't mean to indicate that it didn't exist. It did. But I never ran into it very much, maybe because I didn't make demands. I was just wanting

to sing, I wasn't wanting to get married or start a serious social relationship. If I had, maybe I would have run into this, but the people I—Leon was Jewish. The racial thing just didn't enter into it, and part of the reason was because there weren't many—there weren't any—singers around who were doing this kind of work.

Wilmot: Work that was focused more on the poetry?

Harris: Yes, yes, on meaning. Maybe there were, out in the community, but if there were, they had been taken over by the community.

Wilmot: That's interesting.

So, can you describe for me your social circle? What kind of things did you get into during this time? You were in your—gosh, you were in your late twenties, so you were just out in the world. What was your social life like?

Harris: I had some contact with the black community through the sororities and fraternities. I wasn't keen about that. I was a little snooty about sororities and fraternities. I wanted to deal with people who were serious about life, like myself. [laughs]

Wilmot: Serious artists, or serious about life?

Harris: Yes, serious about life and serious artists. There weren't too many! There weren't any singers. There were some singers, like Marcus Hall, for instance, was—I think he was a baritone. There were a few, but they weren't also involved in the University. I think somehow the University played an important part for me. And I kept in touch with the black community through the sorority and the fraternity.

Wilmot: I wanted to ask if we could spend a little time with this. This is probably my last for today, just to look at this. This is this program for a concert that you gave for the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity in June of 1946, just after you did your performance as the sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas*. I was just kind of looking through. First, I just noticed there were so many—it really reads like a "Who's Who" in the upper-middle-class black community in terms of who sponsored the concert. That was really interesting to me, to see about that and the connections to Alpha Phi Alpha.

Wilmot: But then I was just looking at your music that you were playing at that time. As you say, they're different ones. There's the French art songs. There's the German lieder—

Harris: Yes, and there's always spirituals.

Wilmot: And there's spirituals, rounding up your concerts—

Harris: Always.

Wilmot: —with spirituals.

Harris: Always, always.

Wilmot: I'm wondering if you could read the names of the songs and the composers and if you could just tell me a little bit about what each of those songs meant to you and what your rendition was. How did you do it?

Harris: The [Johann Sebastian] Bach—I mean, I was crazy about Bach. I also was—

Wilmot: Which Bach was that?

Harris: "My Heart Ever Faithful." And "It Is Finished," "*Es ist genug"*? I don't know. No, that is "enough." I was also, at the same time, chosen as soloist for the chorus, the university chorus, which was very good and did very fine works. I just was one of the soloists, so I got familiar with works of Bach that I never would have otherwise.

And [George Frederic] Handel, of course, is obvious. All singers knew him. And [Johannes] Brahms was a very popular composer. But Hugo Wolf was not. He was not so well known. Brahms, Schubert, Bach, [Felix] Mendelssohn—they were the main ones, not Hugo Wolf.

Wilmot: Where was Hugo Wolf from?

Harris: He was a contemporary of Schumann.

Wilmot: From Austria? Germany?

Harris: From Germany, I think.

Wilmot: What songs did you perform by Hugo Wolf?

Harris: Songs that had great words.

Wilmot: What were they?

Harris: That's a good question. "*Leberwohl."*

Wilmot: What was that song about?

Harris: It's about love. They were all about love. [turns pages] Where is—they don't—this doesn't have the translations.

Wilmot: It has one of the translations.

Harris: Of—

Wilmot: Hugo Wolf.

Harris: *"Fussreise."*

Wilmot: What's that song about?

Harris: That's going on a walking trip, which the Germans did a lot, and being in touch with your Creator and so on.

Wilmot: That's nice.

Harris: Yes, it is—because the rhythm, especially if you're walking, is—

Wilmot: How was the rhythm of that song?

Harris: Oh, that's a good question. I don't know. But it was a walking rhythm. And, of course, I loved "*Leberwohl*," but it isn't here. [turns pages] Don't understand why it isn't.

Wilmot: And that was another Hugo Wolf?

Harris: Yes, they were just Hugo Wolf. I was just getting used—how did I meet—I don't remember Hugo Wolf in San Jose at all. It must have been someone I got acquainted with after I came up to the big city. Now, these other composers, I think I knew the Americans. These are Americans, except Warlock, who's British. Carpenter, [Samuel] Barber—oh, he was great. "Bessie Bobtail."

Wilmot: What's that song about?

Harris: She was a kind of crazy woman who was around town. The rhythm—it was realistic. It was not like the lieder, which pretty much followed a pattern. But by the time you got to people like Carpenter and Samuel Barber, you were dealing with people who were really—Barber was modern. The modern composer wrote whatever he felt was appropriate to his subject matter, and if it was wild, then the music was wild. If it was love, then it was something else, you see. But in the old days—that is, the nineteenth century—people like Brahms and Schubert, they pretty much had a pattern that they stayed within. They were original, but the music had a definite form.

By the time that you get to these modern composers, it was, to me, crazy, because most of it was not harmonic. Modern, contemporary music was very crashing and in a contemporary mood, which at that time, for music, was very unmelodic. I didn't like that very much. But Barber was the one who was most like that, of this group that I have here. I liked him because his music, although it wasn't in the old style, it seemed to me was very appropriate to whatever character he had chosen. I still think he's good.

Wilmot: Did you choose the selections of songs here?

Harris: Oh, pretty much. I was still with Gertrude Beckman. I'm sure she had a lot to do with it. She wasn't so familiar with Hugo Wolf, who was all right, but—

Wilmot: When it came time for you to—you said that the spirituals—"Of course, there were spirituals," you said.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: When you say that, was that because—?

Harris: I'm black!

Wilmot: So did that mean you needed to have spirituals—?

Harris: Absolutely.

Wilmot: Or did someone else want you to have spirituals?

Harris: No, no, you always ended your program with spirituals.

Wilmot: Really!

Harris: Well, Marian Anderson did. [laughs]

Wilmot: You're being ironic.

Harris: I'm being ironic, but it's true. It just annoyed the heck out of me, because I didn't want to have to do this. But you more or less had to.

Wilmot: Did you choose out of your spirituals which ones—?

Harris: Oh, yes, I liked them.

Wilmot: What are the three that you have there?

Harris: "I've Got a Home in That Rock," "Done Found My Lost Sheep," and "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." Of course, that was a favorite of mine. That's a great song.

Wilmot: "Joshua—?

Harris: Joshua "Fit" the Battle—Joshua "Fought" the Battle of Jericho.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: [speaks in the rhythm of the song but does not sing] "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho." Rhythmically it's great. It's a great song. And very appropriate. That was convention. You had usually a group—this would be true of any group in those days—you had a group, and you would always end on a pretty much fast or at least powerful song. "*Leberwohl*" is a slow song, but it's very powerful. "It Is Finished," of course, of Bach, is very powerful. I don't remember "The Shoemaker of Warlock."

Wilmot: Do you mean in that you're having four different groupings within your program?

Harris: Pretty much.

Wilmot: And each of those ended on a fast—

Harris: Pretty much. You can do whatever you want with the first part. Usually, you opened slowly. You could do whatever you want, but by the time you got to the end—I guess it was based on the idea that you wanted your audience to clap. I don't know why. But you

chose a powerful song, either so powerful, as in "*Leberwohl*" that it would make the audience hesitate to clap, it would be so powerful, or would be powerful rhythmically. In other words, you built to the last song before the applause came. [laughs] Apparently. That's really what it was.

Wilmot: Henrietta, let's close for today.

Harris: Okay.

Wilmot: Next time, let's talk about New York, going to New York. Is that okay?

Harris: Sure.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: Gosh, New York. What did I do in New York? Not much. I didn't stay there long because my father had a stroke, and I had to come home.

Wilmot: You were there for two years, though, right?

Harris: Was I?

Wilmot: I think so. I may be wrong. We'll talk.

Harris: I worked for the library there, too.

Wilmot: Yes, you did. That's a good job. Carried you through.

Harris: Did you ever work for the library?

[end of session]

Henrietta Harris as Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia,* c. 1958

Henrietta Harris photographed by Minor White, c. 1959

**Interview 3: January 3, 2003**

Wilmot: Interview three, Henrietta Harris, January 3rd, 2003. So, good morning.

Harris: Good morning.

Wilmot: I wanted to start off today just talking about in 1947—I wanted to ask you a little bit about your performance in the piece, of *The Trial of Lucullus*?

Harris: Lucullus.

Wilmot: Lucullus.

Harris: I played the part of an old woman. It didn't interest me very much. There's a picture of her here, but the important thing was that the music was by Roger Sessions, who was a very well-known and established composer who'd come to work just temporarily at UC Berkeley, and they presented his opera. I played the role, not an important one, I don't think. Now, it's called the Shadow of an Old Woman. I see [reading] they had—oh, they had good singers, though. They had Edgar Jones, who was later one of my partners in—oh, what was our group called—Singers Guild. And Arabelle Hong, who had done with me, or I had done *Dido* with her. And Orva Hoskinson, who later had a great deal to do with all of us who sang in San Francisco. He was the head, finally, of the—oh, what's that group of—I can't remember the name of the group, but they did all British songs.

Wilmot: Campion?

Harris: The what?

Wilmot: Campion?

Harris: No, no, they did plays.

Wilmot: I don't know.

Harris: You don't know. Oh, they're very famous, and I think they're still in existence. [auditor's note: The Lamplighters?] He formed that group, and their specialty was to do the music dramas. They were comedies, almost. Well, all of them were comedies. I cannot recall the name. It will come later. So it was an important part, and I think—oh [she sees on program], "libretto by Bertolt Brecht." Oh, I see! It was an important opera and production, but I had a very small part in it. So in those days, if you weren't a star, you didn't pay much attention, and I wasn't a star.

Wilmot: At that time. How did the idea come to you to think about moving to New York?

Harris: Oh, I wanted to go to Juilliard mainly. That was the main idea, was to advance my career by going to New York.

Wilmot: Was New York kind of the place then?

Harris: Well, my dear! Juilliard School of Music was the big school. Yes, of course. Berkeley was, and is, but was particularly in music at that time very important, but saying that you have performed at UC Berkeley or in San Francisco was not the same as performing in New York. So to go to New York, where the leading composers were, many of them and where the Juilliard School of Music, at the time, had a very high reputation for performers particularly.

Wilmot: How did you manifest that opportunity?

Harris: I had drawn the attention of the man whose letter you found.

Wilmot: Roger Sessions?

Harris: No, no—

Wilmot: Noel?

Harris: Noel Sullivan. He was the nephew of Senator Phelan who was an important senator, and I had known about the family through San Jose State. He got interested in me because he had wanted to be a singer; that is, Noel Sullivan had wanted to be a singer.

Wilmot: So you met him through San Jose State? How did you meet him?

Harris: I don't remember how I met him, but I did. Oh, I must have met him through being at UC Berkeley and doing these performances. I don't know whether it was Roger Sessions. Probably, it sounds to me, probably through one of these important people like Roger Sessions. At any rate, he was a great follower of vocal music, and I had done, I think by this time, enough performing so that he knew my name. It says somewhere that it was through him that I decided to study with Elena Gerhardt. And it was through him that I got letters of introduction to her, and that she accepted me.

Wilmot: So was he like your patron?

Harris: He wasn't "like" my patron, he was my patron.

Wilmot: What's that relationship like?

Harris: Well, he told me that he was funding my study with Elena Gerhardt. That was the important thing. He knew that I was going. Already I had made the decision to go. But then he is the one who made it possible for me to study with Elena Gerhardt, because he had worked with her.

Wilmot: That was in Europe or New York?

Harris: No, in London.

Wilmot: In London, so that was much later.

Harris: Oh, no. It was—

Wilmot: I'm thinking about when you went—

Harris: When I went to New York. Is that what you're thinking?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Well, I went to New York because I wanted to get advanced study at Juilliard, and Roger Sessions knew that. And, as I say, this letter [which she holds in her hand] introduces me. I had applied for the Rosenwald [fellowship] and received it. Roger Sessions was impressed with my work, he says here [reading document], in *Dido and Aeneas*, and then, of course, I sang in his opera. So in this case, he is writing a letter—

Wilmot: To recommend you.

Harris: —to the head of—well, he calls him Fritz. Oh, I see here. Yes. He knew I wanted to do the opera. I never did, but I was interested in working at the opera school at Juilliard, so he attempted to help me by sending letters to the right person. Well, in this case it's to the head of the opera school. But I already had a Rosenwald fellowship, and that came through the man I mentioned.

Wilmot: Sullivan?

Harris: Sullivan, yes.

Wilmot: So did you have any friends or family in New York?

Harris: Not a one.

Wilmot: So can you just tell me how you arrived there? Where did you go stay?

Harris: I went to live in—oh, I did have friends, I'm sorry. They had been students in the drama department, or at least one had been, and his friend later became the leading actor in the drama department, but this was afterwards. At this time, Les Mahoney had studied with the Harrises, and when they knew I was going to New York, they suggested that I contact Les, so I did, and he was very helpful. I went because I'd heard of it. I went to live in the Village, just because I—

Wilmot: What had you heard?

Harris: Well, I don't know, that it was kind of romantic. It was a place where artists went. So I did that first. And I also got a job, because I had worked in Berkeley, in the library—I had contact somehow with the New York Public Library, and I went to work there. And meanwhile, this application which I had made through Noel Sullivan, through his urging, came through. It came through in April of '48, which told me that I had been selected for a grant by this last grant year of Julius Rosenwald Committee Fund, it was called. And that meant that I could stay on in New York, not working in the library but going to music school, and that's what I did.

Wilmot: Can I ask you a little bit more? Where did you live in the Village?

Harris: Through my friend, Les, I got an apartment, and I can't remember exactly where it was, around thirties, in the thirties somewhere. I haven't recalled those years. That's been a long time ago. But I lived in the Village, in the beginning, and then later moved up, after I got acquainted—I then moved up, much later, to Harlem, 148th Street in Harlem.

Wilmot: A hundred and forty-eighth and what?

Harris: It would have been a street or an avenue. I forgot.

Wilmot: A hundred and forty-eighth Street and maybe—

Harris: Seventh Avenue, or near Seventh Avenue. I loved that. Thought it was very exciting.

Wilmot: What were your first impressions of New York?

Harris: Oh, I was crazy about it. [laughs] Just crazy about it.

Wilmot: Tell me about that.

Harris: I can't remember. Part of it was because it had been so romanticized. You know, the Village! I mean, to live in the Village! I mean, it really was—and to be connected with the Juilliard School of Music! It was still in the old place out in the avenues, its original place. Just everything. And I got a place finally when I began to do this work. And I lived at International House, which was off the Hudson River. Oh! Imagine! Living at International House, which I had known here in this area, only at Berkeley. Now, this was the New York International House, where there really were people from—well, I didn't meet the people here from International House, I met local people. But now I was meeting gentlemen from Nigeria, and it was wonderful. I was crazy about it. It seemed to me very distinguished and romantic. That was the thing I liked about it, because you met people from the world. They were here, too, in those years, more now, of course. But I wouldn't meet them, a little girl from San Jose.

Wilmot: Did that change your awareness of yourself?

Harris: Well, I didn't get grand ideas from it about myself, no.

Wilmot: Did you start to not think of yourself as a little girl from San Jose?

Harris: [laughs] I still think that, from time to time. I didn't think of myself as a world person yet. No, one had to go to Europe to do that.

Wilmot: Yes. You hadn't done that yet.

Harris: No.

Wilmot: But you did later.

Harris: Oh, I did eventually, and I got to the point where being a musician in London didn't seem so wonderful. You really needed to go to the source of things, which was in Germany, which I did.

Wilmot: We'll talk some more about that.

Harris: Yes, that's later.

Wilmot: So did you find a community in New York?

Harris: No, not a community.

Wilmot: How did you make a circle of friends?

Harris: I had the beginnings of it with this former student of the Harrises here.

Wilmot: Les Mahoney?

Harris: Les Mahoney. It was through Les, and he had a friend. Through them, I got connected with drama things, but I didn't do any theater there. What I did was try to work through whatever opportunities I had, which were musical ones. I tried to work the drama in some way, however I could, through songs. Which was not a very effective way, because you needed to be in theater, I felt. But that didn't happen, you see, till I got to Europe finally. Finally it did happen.

Wilmot: Can you talk a little bit about how you feel you developed your tools while you were in New York? What happened? What was going on in New York—?

Harris: I didn't develop them very much, because I was there less than—well, a little more than a year. I worked in the library, and I did take some work at Juilliard, but my mother had—I guess it was my father had a stroke, and I was sent a message by the people who lived at our house with him, and so I dropped everything and went home.

That looks good. Can I have a little piece? Just one little piece.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. You said that while you were in New York, you did most of your studying actually with the Dalcroze School.

Harris: Yes, I did.

Wilmot: I don't know much about—

Harris: —The Dalcroze School of Music. It was because I didn't have the basics, really, and Dalcroze dealt with the basics, that is, how to sight-read. That was what I wanted to know almost more than anything.

Thank you. [accepts piece of fruit]

How to read at sight. I never had been taught that. Well, that isn't quite true. I had taken some lessons early on in sight reading, but I never had become adept at sight

reading, and that's what I wanted to do more than anything. And Dalcroze dealt with fundamentals in a way that Juilliard did not, because Juilliard assumed that you knew this stuff. So you were supposed to be more advanced than I really was, so that's why I went to Dalcroze, and I took sight reading there. I never was really gifted at it, but I'm certainly better than I used to be.

Wilmot: Where was Dalcroze located?

Harris: Some street south of Juilliard. I can't remember the specific street.

Mmm, this looks good. [refers to food]

Wilmot: It is good.

So when you were in New York—

Harris: Excuse me, is this a grapefruit?

Wilmot: Grapefruit.

Harris: Mmm, good!

Wilmot: Isn't it nice? Yes. Sorry I didn't offer earlier. When you were in New York, how did you notice the black community in New York to be different from California, if at all, if you did?

Harris: I just thought they had more fun. [laughs] And also they seemed more at ease. When I went up to 142nd Street, as I remember, she was an old landlady, but she had a kind of poise that I felt all the blacks in New York had, from my point of view, when I compared them with people from San Jose, for instance. [laughs] I loved New York. I loved being in the Village, where the artists were, presumably, and I loved being in upper Manhattan. I think I stayed at the apartment of someone who lived on the East Side for about—one of the musical people that I had been—in fact [looks through document]—no, she doesn't appear, but I had met, through Sessions, I think it was, I had met a couple of New Yorkers who were important in helping me in any way that I needed help, but I didn't need help, presumably, after I got—

Wilmot: The library job.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Now, what did you do at the New York Public Library?

Harris: You didn't need to be specially trained to work at the library, if you had a bachelor's, which I had, from San Jose State. That was enough.

Wilmot: So what did you do there?

Harris: I had worked at Berkeley, too, you know, in the library. I can't remember. I didn't do anything very special. It was mainly a matter of punching out books.

Wilmot: Did you make friends with people who worked there, too? Your co-workers?

Harris: Not that I recall. I did have friends, but if you weren't into music—I wasn't in the music library; I was just regular library.

Wilmot: So your friends at this time were all musicians?

Harris: Or theater people.

Wilmot: Or theater people.

Harris: Les Mahoney, for instance, came back here while I was still in New York, and he went to work in the drama department at UC Berkeley. He had a friend who also went, who became quite a star at Berkeley, John Heatherington. Les Mahoney is still alive. I hope to see him. He's very young. He was in his twenties, I think, when he began to teach, his late twenties. He was a very difficult personality, but very gifted. And had been—I hate to say good student, but an impressive student as far as the Harrises were concerned. They were very much—

Wilmot: In his corner.

Harris: They made his getting work at UC Berkeley—well, in fact, they asked him to come out, to become a member of the faculty.

Wilmot: That must have been a pretty incredible opportunity.

Harris: Ooh-hoo-hoo!

Wilmot: For a young actor.

Harris: Indeed.

Wilmot: When you returned from New York, and if there's anything—

Harris: I came to San Jose to look after my father.

Wilmot: Where was your mother?

Harris: She by this time—she had died some years before that.

Wilmot: When you were up in—

Harris: I can't remember. I had left home, so it was in the forties sometime.

Wilmot: Okay. So when you returned in 1949 to San Jose, your father was ill?

Harris: My father had had a stroke.

Wilmot: How long did you stay in San Jose?

Harris: Not very long.

Wilmot: Did he survive that stroke?

Harris: Yes, he did. Yes, but he couldn't live alone. We had this big house in San Jose, and roomers had moved in, and they became attached to the family, some of them did.

Wilmot: The person who stayed and took care of your father was one of them?

Harris: I didn't mention in the early talk anything about Ben, did I?

Wilmot: I think you did. You said he was a cook?

Harris: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Wilmot: And he helped you get your first job.

Harris: Oh, yes, yes.

Wilmot: So—

Harris: So Ben was still there.

Wilmot: When you returned, did you move back up to Oakland or to San Francisco?

Harris: Let's see, I think this time I moved to San Francisco. My brother lived in San Francisco, not that I thought he'd be much help because he wasn't interested in music of this kind, or of any kind, particularly. But I had one other family on my father's side, and I thought I would go to San Francisco, and I did.

Wilmot: Did you have the opportunity, then, to reconnect with people like the Harrises?

Harris: Oh, I never broke contact with them. Never.

Wilmot: And Mr. Sullivan as well, Noel Sullivan?

Harris: There's a letter in which he regrets the fact that I'm not studying anymore. I think I did a concert for him. There's a letter from him. Do you have it there?

Wilmot: I think it's actually a little later on.

Harris: Later, yes.

Wilmot: That actually may be after you came back from Europe. I'm not certain.

Harris: Yes. He had made it possible for me to study with Elena Gerhardt. I mean, he had sent her money. In other words, he paid for my lessons. He not only introduced me to her, he paid for my lessons.

Wilmot: And so that was the role of the patron, then, was to—

Harris: Oh, yes, money. And also I did a concert at his place in Carmel Valley. He was very distinguished in musical circles and had given money—I remembered later that he had come to San Jose State when I was there and had given a talk, but I didn't know him then. I didn't meet him then. I met him through another sponsor. In those days, sponsors or patrons were—I guess maybe they still are, I don't know—the way you get ahead. And he was connected with Santa Clara Valley, and my other patron, a woman named Marie West, was a friend of his. She was one of my patrons.

Wilmot: Was there interest primarily in your talent?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Were they very clear about their role as patrons?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: That they understood what they were to do, and you were to do?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: They understood that they were there to give money?

Harris: Oh, yes. I had already achieved a certain—"fame" is not the word, or notoriety. People knew about me in Santa Clara Valley because I had sung a good deal. I had already received money for a teacher, through—I can't remember now where that came from, but I didn't pay for my lessons. But it had been a special grant. I was considered talented musically.

Wilmot: That's very clear to me. I was just trying to understand that relationship, because I think oftentimes when people are introducing money into a relationship, it's kind of like—I was just trying to understand how clear and up front people were about having a patron and having a sponsor.

Harris: They were the same thing, pretty much. Oh, yes. I think I had—I was very poor. We were very poor, so I had no illusions about it, myself. In the case of Marie, she had other musical friends or friends in the arts. She wasn't particularly interested in music. But she knew, for instance, Noel Sullivan. It seemed to me that all the rich people of Santa Clara County, down as far as Carmel, that these people were all united in some way. They had either married into the same families or—they all seemed to know each other. When it became time to present me or sponsor me, [looks through documents] they knew, for instance, that Noel Sullivan had been helpful to me was impressive to the woman who later became a sponsor of mine. She was also a friend of mine. I had known her through a friend. In fact, she remained a friend, and sponsor, to some degree, until she died in the late seventies. But I also became a friend, in her case. I visited her. She lived down in the Santa Cruz Mountains, outside of Los Gatos.

Wilmot: What was her name?

Harris: Marie West.

Wilmot: When you say Marie, are you—M-a-r-i-e?

That's what I thought.

Harris: Only she never pronounced it muh-REE. It was always MARE-ee.

Wilmot: Maa-ree [pronouncing it as if it were French].

Harris: MARE-ee. Not mare-EE. What was it? Yes. But MARE-ee. I don't know if that's French or what. We say muh-REE, don't we?

Wilmot: When one is a sponsor or a patron of a young and talented artist, what is the benefit to the patron or the sponsor?

Harris: Just satisfaction. I gathered that they felt—I had two, that is, Noel Sullivan and Marie West—that they felt, to some degree, obligated to be of help. They weren't obligated. If they had money, if they then had friends who could present me in a concert. Marie was not particularly musical but was the friend of someone in San Jose who'd been a singer and had wonderful concerts in her hilltop home outside of Los Gatos. Through Marie, I was invited to do a concert there.

Wilmot: Did you then feel obligated to perform in a certain way or develop in certain directions as a result of this patronage? No? Okay.

Harris: Well, they didn't know much about it. Noel Sullivan did, because he had studied with Elena Gerhardt, to whom he recommended me. But Marie was a poet, and a very fine one. I have some of her works up there. You can't see them.

Wilmot: Let's go look at them in a minute.

Harris: Yes, she was a good poet.

Wilmot: She had a whole different—

Harris: She was mainly interested in—I don't know if you know the poet, Muriel Rukeyser. She sponsored literary people mainly, because she, herself, was literary. But she had these friends, and they were interested in music. She developed a friendship with a woman, through Muriel Rukeyser, the poet, through whom I had met her to begin with; that is, I have a friend named Freda Koblick, who was a great friend and an admirer of Muriel Rukeyser, and it was Freda who liked my singing, I guess because of the emphasis upon meaning.

She was a friend of Muriel Rukeyser, who was a friend of Marie West, so Marie West heard of me indirectly through Muriel Rukeyser, and since we lived in the same area, we became friends, and I frequently visited down there. But I didn't feel any compulsion. Well, in a sense I did, but like a good girl sort of thing, not any musical compulsion, because she didn't know music.

Wilmot: I understand.

Harris: But she had friends who did, and who was that famous writer? Through these people, this group of people that knew each other and met, I met—of course, this is getting ahead of the story, I met a couple of famous writers in London, so that when I went to London, they didn't know much about music, either, but they were people who entertained me and so on. And I had been an English major. I was interested enough to be fairly knowledgeable when I'd be in their company.

Wilmot: What did your father make of your career at this point? Was he supportive?

Harris: I just went off the board, as far as my parents were concerned. I mean, what did they know about German lieder? Nothing. They knew about spirituals, and they had sung in church choir, in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion. That's what they knew about music. My mother came from the country, or from a ranch. She'd never been involved in music beyond that, nor had my father, who was involved primarily because of my mother. They knew nothing. If I sounded okay—the Baptist church in San Jose did give me a concert, but whatever fame, so to speak, I had in San Jose came from the church or San Jose State.

Wilmot: So was your father supportive? Did he feel you were on a good path?

Harris: My father was never critical of my career choices. Not in the least. He was just supportive of whatever I wanted to do, but not interested.

Wilmot: When you moved back to San Francisco or to San Francisco for the first time, where did you move to?

Harris: Way out. I can't remember the name of the street, but I remember going straight up Market and veering slightly to the left when I reached—just under the very hilly part, when you go straight out Market. Elizabeth Street. I lived on Elizabeth Street. I remembered!

Wilmot: Did you get an apartment?

Harris: Yes, I did.

Wilmot: Did you live with someone?

Harris: No, no, I lived by myself. In fact, I lived for a short time, while preparing for my debut concert here, I lived at Freda's apartment, but aside from that, I've never lived with anyone. Well, a couple of friends, boyfriends, but—

Wilmot: When you came to San Francisco, where did you work? Were you working during this time?

Harris: I got a job. By this time, '49 and '50, I converted to Catholicism, so that when I came home and stayed with my father for a while, and then I moved to—not Bush but one of those streets that runs the same way that Bush runs, and I was in the Fillmore, about two

blocks from the very beautiful, tall Catholic church which is there, one block beyond, one block west of Fillmore. I want to say St. Ignatius. It wasn't.

Wilmot: Is it in a very modern style?

Harris: It looks like a cathedral.

Wilmot: Does it look like a tent or cathedral?

Harris: No, no, no, not a tent.

Wilmot: Okay. We'll figure it out.

Harris: I can't remember the name, but a beautiful church, and I had just converted the year before to Catholicism.

Wilmot: When you were in New York?

Harris: I think so. It must have been, yes, because when I came back, I was ready for—St. Dominic's.

Wilmot: What was the motivating force that moved you to convert to Catholicism?

Harris: I felt I needed some kind of spiritual work that was inner, and the churches I'd been raised in didn't speak anything at all, except they would "go happy," they would get happy. I don't know if you know what that means. Fall out, many of them. "Fall out" meant fall out on the floor, have spasms and things. That didn't appeal to me at all. But there was no talk that I could understand at that time about the kind of spirituality that I felt stirring in me at the time. And I began to read books on spirituality. So I wanted to be connected somewhere where there was less socializing. I didn't care about that. I wanted to find out about this deeper spirituality, and I thought maybe the Catholic church could provide me with that.

Wilmot: Did you know someone who introduced you to it?

Harris: I had a friend in college, and he was interested in music. Bill. I can't remember Bill's last name. [Father Blaise Schauer, OP?] He's dead now. Has been dead for some time. I knew him through Cal, the music department at Cal. He was Catholic, and not a proselytizing Catholic at all. He just was. And so I knew a little bit about him and his family, and it wasn't he, except he converted—not converted, he joined the Dominican order. That was a level beyond just being a Catholic. He became not a brother, but he studied and became a father. I used to visit him. I'm just remembering this now.

It was on Chabot Road, where he trained, which had been the road I traveled to go to my singing lessons. No, it was near there, it was one of the cross streets. [St. Albert's Dominican Priory, Birch St., Oakland] Quite close by was the school where he trained. And I would go and visit him there, and so I got interested, not through any proselytizing on his part. He didn't make any effort that way. But we had just known each other in college, and in New York. He had been there when I had been there.

And now he was deeply involved in becoming a priest. So I visited him then there many, many times, and I got to know more about Catholicism. When I went to San Francisco, I lived, as I said, a short distance from St. Dominic's, so I would go there, but I had, by now, been converted. On my own. Just indirectly through him, through knowing him.

Wilmot: Does that mean that you had a whole baptism and learned everything?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Okay. Wow. Okay. So this was connected to the work that you were doing in this period after you came back from New York.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: What kind of work were you doing?

Harris: You mean what kind of job did I have in order to earn a living?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: That's a good question.

Wilmot: In order to survive. I know that you were performing a great deal during this time.

Harris: I can't remember having a job. I must have had a job. And I can't remember saving much money, either, so that's a good question. I must have gone back to work, because I did eventually, for a short time, I went back to work at the university library, because I had already worked there.

Wilmot: When did you meet Freda?

Harris: Oh, I met her in 1952. I remember very well. Let's see, I had come back. I was singing for John Edmunds, and I must find out about John Edmunds, but he was the one who organized the Campion Festival, which was to place the emphasis upon songs in English.

Wilmot: So no more Hugo Wolf.

Harris: Well, you could do it, but at least have some real command—I didn't take a position one way or another, I didn't care in those days. But I liked the idea of songs in English, sure. They were beautiful, some of them, if the composers were good.

Wilmot: And Freda?

Harris: Oh, yes. So she came to one of these Campion Festival concerts. It was advertised. It was big stuff in the papers, you know. And she liked my singing. And this was while I was still—I had briefly lived in an apartment quite near St. Dominic's School, because it was not only near St. Dominic's School, it was also close to where I used to take

singing lessons, worked with Gertrude Beckman. So I had moved there, but mainly it was for religious reasons. I just wanted to be close. The apartment became available.

And I also was close to some friends who had been at the university. They lived in that neighborhood. So I was living there, and Freda heard the concert and invited me to have dinner. She had just moved to a studio apartment that had an upstairs apartment next to it, on Hyde and North Point, very interestingly, just above what later became the Playhouse. I guess you wouldn't know about that, no.

At that time, there was a very strong development in little theater in San Francisco, and the Playhouse, which was down the street from Hyde—now, what would it be? North Point? Just down the block from her was this theater troupe, and I was interested in that.

She convinced me that I ought to think about a real career in singing and ought to maybe have a debut concert, and go abroad and so on, and so I began to work with that idea in mind. Actually, it was Freda who knew this Muriel Rukeyser who, in turn, knew Marie West, and there was the connection to money. I hadn't been interested in that, but everybody else was.

Wilmot: How was Freda so much part of this world? What is her background?

Harris: Freda is in a family of three. Two brothers and herself, of people who came from Russia and settled in San Francisco in the early 1900s and raised their children in the East Bay and in San Francisco. Freda longed to be a singer, but she was raised to be practical, and plastics had just come in at that time. I don't know how she was convinced, but she was, to train in plastics, so she went to southern California and became a plastics technician and came back up here and established herself in a studio on Hyde and began to do not just things like doorknobs and practical things in plastics but began to do artistic work in plastics.

But she had wanted to be a singer, and so she was very interested in—yes, there's a picture of her there. She had wanted very much to be a singer, and her parents had discouraged it because it wasn't practical. But this plastics work was practical, so she became quite good. In fact, she still does it. She has some beautiful stuff, and I'll take you there sometime. Interesting.

Anyway, this is where she had her studio, and she was like this about anybody trying to become an artist, a singing artist. She wanted to be helpful. So she was. She urged me to go ahead and develop a career in singing, and then we began to plan for a debut concert.

I moved in, let's see, in the early fifties, and we made a decision on giving a concert at—I can't remember the place, but it's there in my book somewhere, and proceeded to do it, and you've seen the pictures.

Wilmot: Yes. I wanted to ask you. Yes, there are these beautiful photos by the photographer, Minor White?

Harris: Oh, she knew people like that. She knew the artistic community. She knew Marie. She knew Muriel Rukeyser. She knew many of the artists. She was part of the artist community. And it was on the basis of having—I already had Noel Sullivan, but now I had Marie, who was a friend of Muriel's, who was a friend of Freda's, and so I had a kind of community there, and I had people from Berkeley and so on, so I gave this concert. And this was to be the basis of my work, the spur to go to Europe, which meant go for a serious singing career.

Wilmot: This was a concert, your debut concert. Did it take place at Marines Memorial Theater?

Harris: That's it.

Wilmot: And it was September 19th, 1952.

Harris: Yes! So I hadn't been back long.

Wilmot: No, you hadn't been back long at all.

Harris: I'd come to San Jose and then moved to San Francisco. It was my early days of Catholicism, in fact.

Wilmot: The choices that you made—it looks like you sang Franz Schubert, Monteverdi—

Harris: Oh, I'd been influenced by the—

Wilmot: —and Bach.

Harris: Standard stuff.

Wilmot: John Edmunds, Leonard Ralston, Mussorgsky?

Harris: Mussorgsky.

Wilmot: Barber and Ives.

Harris: Ives. Ives was an early American composer, a very interesting one, one of the few.

Wilmot: You finished off with some spirituals.

Harris: That was the way you did it! You could go as far afield as you wanted, but the standard thing was to do early music: Monteverdi, anybody born before 1800, mainly Italian or people like Handel, early music, seventeenth century, eighteenth century, sixteenth through eighteenth century. You do that, then you do lieder, because that was the great music: Bach, Brahms, Schubert, in my case Hugo Wolf, and then, if you could handle it, you did a French group, and you also did an American group, if you could find enough strictly in-English things. You would do that. And finally, because you were black, you would end up with a group of spirituals. And I didn't like that. I didn't like the fact that you felt you had to, but that was the style of those days.

Wilmot: But you still sang the song, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

Harris: Oh, yes. Crazy about it.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Do you know it?

Wilmot: I know it a little bit, yes.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Wow. The next year, in 1953, you performed at the Crocker Art Gallery.

Harris: Where?

Wilmot: It was at the Crocker Art Gallery.

Harris: Where?

Wilmot: In the ballroom.

Harris: Oh, in San Francisco, yes. I was gathering steam, though, to go to England.

Wilmot: Yes, and there were a series of performances that you did to lift yourself off.

Harris: With my friend's help, and with Noel Sullivan's help.

Wilmot: What's also interesting is then, again—

Harris: Is that the period during which I was in the little opera?

Wilmot: This is when you worked with the Actors Ensemble of San Francisco to present Giancarlo Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*.

Harris: Yes, yes, yes.

Wilmot: It looks like you were the Old Maid.

Harris: Yes, yes. [laughs]

Wilmot: Miss Todd.

Harris: Yes!

Wilmot: So that was your acting—

Harris: In English. See, I was very interested by now in songs and performing in English. And to act! Oh, Lord. I wanted to act, as I say, at least. I would have studied to become an actress except where were the jobs? Where were the opportunities to perform at that time? New York would have been the closest. And who were the famous black actresses? There weren't any.

Wilmot: And I see here in 1953 also you performed in the seventeenth annual Bach Festival.

Harris: Oh, did I?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I forgot that. Where was that?

Wilmot: In Bach's *B Minor Mass*.

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, Lord, I loved that, but I loved the *St. Matthew* more. Where was that? In Berkeley?

Wilmot: That was at the Calvary Presbyterian Church.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: And then there was a series of seven concerts.

Harris: Oh, the Singers Guild.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Yes, we founded it. I mean, there were three of us. We'd all been at Cal. Dorothy and Edgar and myself were all people who'd been at Cal.

Wilmot: Dorothy Renzi, Edgar Jones.

Harris: Edgar's now dead. Dorothy is big-time music in Fresno, California.

Wilmot: And you performed a whole set of Hugo Wolf.

Harris: Oh-ho-ho! At last!

Wilmot: Yes, you did. That was the fourth concert, at the Legion of Honor, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and also at the Berkeley Women's City Club.

Harris: We were, as far as I know, the only group of that type in the area. I never heard of any before or since.

Wilmot: It seems to me that something in that set of concerts—at some point, you really focused on contemporary composers, like Hindemith.

Harris: Yes, we had—

Wilmot: And [Seer?].

Harris: I wasn't keen about that, frankly, because I liked people like Peter Warlock. There were American and English writers who wrote music that was harmonic, but most of the

modern composers, like my friend, Leon Kirschner, wrote music that was very strident. I didn't care for that. I still don't.

Wilmot: But you still maintained a relationship with Leon Kirschner?

Harris: Oh, you bet. That was the thing. I mean, it was modern music, and—who was the man who recommended me? He was a composer of that kind.

Wilmot: Sessions.

Harris: Sessions. Oh, very modern. I sang his songs.

Wilmot: Yes. How did you kind of feel that this new kind of music that was really becoming dominant?

Harris: You had to do it. You had to do some of it, at any rate. I was influenced by Leon, of course, and the Music Department at that time at Cal was just taken over by the people with that point of view. There were a few standard music lovers, but not many. Modern music was the thing.

Haven't I gone to London yet?

Wilmot: You go to London in 1954. I think that we should begin there the next time.

Harris: Okay.

Wilmot: Let us end for today.

[end of session]

**Interview 4: January 8, 2003**

Wilmot: January 8th, Interview 4, Henrietta Harris, with Nadine Wilmot. So was it 1956 when you went to London? Can we just talk a little bit about your time in London?

Harris: Oh, God! My time in London.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I studied with Elena Gerhardt, who was the very famous—

Wilmot: First, why did you go?

Harris: Why did I go to London?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I wanted to do a concert. People thought I should. But I wanted to go, too. I loved the idea of going to London. Let's see. [looking through documents she is holding in her lap] I wanted to get away, mainly. Or, rather, because after I had done the program here, the debut concert, it seemed like the logical thing to do. 1953. No, wait a minute. Here, Noel Sullivan. Now, I have mentioned him, have I not?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Here's a letter from him written in 1953. I thought it would tell—I must have another one. No, this was about a concert which I did for him, and it was down in Carmel. But later he speaks—I know. [pause]

Wilmot: Do you want to take a minute off the tape?

Harris: Yes, yes.

[interview interruption]

Harris: [reads a clipping of a review of her concert in London]

"—for American Negro singers as for the French. They are few who master the problems of vowel and consonant. Miss Henrietta Harris who comes from California and who sang at Wigmore Hall on Friday, is evidently determined to try hard. She is evidently also a serious student of lieder, for she chose intelligently and inquisitively, and has been studying with Madame Gerhardt and earlier with the late Conrad Boes. She is beginning to round out the vowels, but she still encounters some trouble. The racial addiction to scooping has also cropped up here and there, but this, she is also set on vanquishing.

"What she still has to conquer is a certain shyness in face of the great masters. She was retrained almost to impassivity in her contact with Schubert, Brahms, and Wolf, on the subject of passionate love and even on humor. Yet she can convey these

emotions willingly, and she can sing even more gratifyingly, as she showed in the American second part of her program—"

[stops reading] How condescending can you get? [with a chuckle] This is by an English—

Wilmot: What year was it?

Harris: 1955.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: [reads further]

"…as she showed in the American part of her program, which comprised Negro spirituals and some admirable songs by Samuel Barber. Here she was obviously an artist whom we will be glad to hear again. In lieder, it was Mr. Gerald Moore, the Englishman, who provided the interest and the style, notably in the Wolf group, which gave much score for his pianistic, human sympathy."

[laughs] They didn't think anything of my lieder! [laughs] That was the *London Times*. The *Daily Telegraph*. They're kinder. They say,

"Henrietta Harris, a singer from California, gave a successful recital at the Wigmore Hall last night. With the help of Gerald Moore at the piano, she sang the various songs. The singer has a full, rich contralto voice and a fine musical intelligence. Throughout its range, the voice has flexibility and good variation of tone color. She was best suited in the Barber group."

They preferred me to sing English. [with a laugh] I think they were right. The reason I think this is I later developed some German friends, and my German is done—was, at that time—done with an American accent, apparently. I didn't know, because I had only an American teacher, Gertrude Beckman. Whatever German I had was affected by the fact that she was an American. If I had studied originally with Elena Gerhardt, who was German, it would have been a different story.

Wilmot: So how did you find Elena Gerhardt?

Harris: That was through—

Wilmot: Sullivan?

Harris: That was through Noel Sullivan, yes. Yes.

Wilmot: It appears you were in London in 1955. How long did you stay there?

Harris: Well, apparently I stayed there a year and a half or two years, and then went—I didn't come home right away, I went to Italy. I went to Florence, *Firenze*. Oh, boy, did I love that! I don't have anything about Firenze. I <u>loved</u> the places where you viewed the art, but I didn't care anything for the city, itself. It was a medieval city. I didn't understand

that then, and they're not very interesting. They don't have—very few modern structures, but wonderful, wonderful—it's funny. I don't have any evidence of that here. But the Michelangelo—no, who was that wonderful statue by?

Wilmot: David?

Harris: Who? The one of Apollo. Oh, you see it in all the ads for the city. Oh, I'm so sorry! When I left London, and I did—now, why I left London, I don't remember. Apparently, I was a little dissatisfied—oh, here, this is the reason.

Wilmot: Why did you leave London?

Harris: Because I was dying, apparently, to go abroad. I wanted to reach Europe, and I almost did, through the American Embassy. They wanted me to come and sing in Germany at the—this is a letter from the United States of America, from the American House. Well, it was already scheduled. Oh, no, he was—

Wilmot: We talked about this last time, Henrietta. You said you turned down that invitation.

Harris: I did. Yes, I did.

Wilmot: Can we approach this whole area, your whole time in London, like where you lived and what it was like. Can we try and do that?

Harris: Stick to that.

Wilmot: It would be appreciated.

Harris: I lived in the north part of London. I can't remember offhand, but I certainly knew the place.

Wilmot: Did you live by yourself?

Harris: I went and lived in a house where a lot of other people lived, a rooming house, I guess you'd call it, but it had been a private home. Oh, this is an area of my life that I have blocked out completely, this early part—Miss—I can't remember her name. Oh! I have nothing to remind me of it, either, unless—no, the journal that I was keeping during this time, I destroyed. Yes, I lived in the north. Hampton? Oh, Lord, there was a beautiful park that's very well known.

Wilmot: Hampstead Heath.

Harris: Hampstead Heath! I lived—here was one side, and I lived on this side. I'm facing the map. Do you know London?

Wilmot: I stayed in north London, so I know exactly where Hampstead Heath is, yes.

Harris: Well, I lived—what was the name of the place that was on—if you were facing it, on the map? It was on the right side.

Wilmot: Islington?

Harris: No, north of that.

Wilmot: I'm not sure. But then there was also, I think, the heights area, Hampstead Heights. It was right next to the heath.

Harris: Oh, I have maps, but we don't want to take time for that, I guess. Isn't that strange that I have cut that out? Except for this letter, which was addressed—aah! I lived at 37 Wood Lane, London North 6. But that wasn't the name of the section. Wood Lane was where I lived.

Wilmot: Did you work while you were in London?

Harris: I'm trying to remember. I don't think I did. Offhand, I cannot remember, and it seems to me I would have remembered. Oh, I know why I didn't work. I was studying. I was taking voice lessons.

Wilmot: What school were you studying at?

Harris: I didn't study in a school, I studied with Elena Gerhardt.

Wilmot: And she also lived in that area?

Harris: [no immediate response]

Wilmot: What did you learn from Elena Gerhardt?

Harris: Wait a minute. What does this say? This is a letter from Gerald Moore, who was my accompanist and very distinguished. He was recommended to me by Elena Gerhardt, and he wrote—it was written to me. "By this mail, I am sending a letter to Mr. Philip Hodges. It is an enthusiastic letter, not a short note. I wrote not only about the beauty of your voice and your musicianship, I particularly stressed your knowledge of the field of contemporary American composers. So be prepared. I told them how all the papers enthused over your singing of the Samuel Barber songs. Let me hear of the outcome. All the best, Gerald Moore."

And then I have made a note: "The letter mentioned was about a possible concert tour in Germany, under the auspices of the United States Information Service." So apparently he's the one—he and Elena Gerhardt are the ones who made my connection with the Foreign Service of the United States. Yes [reads from another letter] "Mr. Hodges asked me to thank you for your letters. Because I'm directly concerned with the scheduling of musicians for our American [inaudible] here in Germany, I greatly appreciate your interest in giving concerts." I did finally, but not right then. "Please do not consider this a formal commitment."

Oh, goodness. [long pause as she reads documents silently to herself]

[interview interruption]

Wilmot: When you returned, when you came back to the United States, how did the opportunity to come and work at Berkeley's drama department come about?

Harris: That came about through my friendship and long study with Mary Harris, who was the wife of the head of the drama department. They had it in mind, I guess, before I got there—but they hadn't done anything much about it, if anything; that is, working in the Greek Theatre. Apparently that was something they wanted to do. I now wonder if the fact that they wanted to provide me with opportunity, since Mary Harris certainly knew that I wanted to act and also knew that there were no opportunities, even though I did play a gypsy, I think, in one little one-act play that they had done. [chuckle] But generally speaking, there was no way to develop in theater.

I wonder if that didn't have something to do with their using the Greek Theatre, although that's such a big project. The Greek Theatre meant moving all the accoutrements, all the things that you needed for acting, meant moving them up almost off campus, although that's the top of the campus, so to speak. No, I guess there are laboratories still above that. But to anyone who wasn't too familiar with the campus, you look up and you know that the Greek Theatre is up that way.

Anyway, they decided to do—it was a big decision—to do the Oresteian trilogy. Aeschylus, of course, was the first Greek that we know of, the first Greek writer, playwright. And to do all three of his plays—the *Agamemnon*, the *Choephori*, and the *Eumenides*.

Wilmot: What was the second one?

Harris: The *C-h-o-e-p-h-o-r-i.* I don't know what it means, chorus, I think.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: The *Agamemnon*, of course, had to do with the return of Agamemnon to his home in Greece. *Choephori* has to do with the chorus, I think. At any rate—this doesn't—it was an oldie, written twenty-five hundred years ago. Let's see, I don't think we did—I see what we did. We did Thursday, Friday, Saturday. We took three days to do the three plays. It was, to me, a marvelous experience.

Wilmot: How did you get involved, again?

Harris: Through the Harrises.

Wilmot: Through the Harrises.

Harris: Fred Harris was directing. Mary Harris was in the chorus, working down in the pit. So I was able to consult with her every day, if I wanted to, with him and with her, in the rehearsal. To me, it was just wonderful. Although it was archaic language, still the situation was human, a very human situation. The fact of a wife's having an opportunity, when her husband came home, to deal with him. She was involved with someone else, and it was a very human situation, in spite of its being so ancient.

And, of course, very unlike ordinary plays. As you see in this picture, I'm making lots of big gestures, the sort of thing you don't do in ordinary plays, especially nowadays, ever since Stanislavsky. The idea is to be as natural as possible. In this production, naturalness wouldn't work because it wouldn't be seen by the audience out there. The gestures had to be big, and the voice had to be big, and everything had to be big. And a great deal of the action was down in the pit.

I loved it. I loved being in it.

Wilmot: You've said that was your favorite role. When you came to Berkeley in 1957, what was your appointment? What was your title?

Harris: Lecturer. I'm not even sure I was given the title of lecturer. I think I was just a temporary employee for a while. I had to work a certain number of years before I became a lecturer, I think.

Wilmot: A guaranteed lecturer. Did it offer fair compensation? Was it a position that gave you good income?

Harris: When you think of present-day income, it doesn't seem like very much, but I think it was around $4,000 a year. This was in '57?

Wilmot: Fifty-seven, '58.

Harris: Fifty-seven, yes, '58. It wasn't very much, but I thought it was pretty good, and I was pleased with the idea of being on the faculty. And I loved the beginning acting classes.

Wilmot: Teaching them?

Harris: I <u>loved</u> it! And I had no idea I would, because I'd never taught it.

Wilmot: Why did you love it?

Harris: I think because it allowed me to speak from my heart, and because it was using the Stanislavsky method, which I, of course, had been trained in by Mary Harris. But all the time I worked for her or with her, I had never any opportunity to be in any relationship to the audience, except once in a great while. But now I not only was in relation to an audience, but I was responsible for communicating Stanislavsky's ideas to students, and I found that I would get such surprising results that, of course, I had no idea. I didn't know this was a possibility, and I was just thrilled, very interested in it.

And people who hadn't had any theater experience at all suddenly became aware of parts of themselves they didn't know existed. Well, they knew they were interested in theater or they wouldn't have taken the course, of course, but that they could get certain results was very exciting to them. They didn't know it, but it was very exciting to me, as well, so I shared things with the students. I felt very close to my students. I really loved it.

And I still have friends who were in those first classes. Not a lot, but a number of people are still around. It was, for me a wonderful experience, to have that opportunity, and it came as a complete surprise. I had no idea I'd be so keen about it.

Wilmot: Did any of your students go on to careers in theater?

Harris: Yes, but I can't—oh, one chap who went to Hollywood. Many of them took part in the theater movement that arose most forcefully, I think, in the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties in San Francisco and in this area, so that they would take part in what we call Little Theater. But I don't remember any—except this one chap who went to Hollywood and did make a career down there. There could have been others, but I didn't know about it. But there was a lot of enthusiasm about appearing in local theater.

Wilmot: Is that what Little Theater means?

Harris: Well, that's what it meant to us. Non-professional. That was before ACT [American Conservatory Theater] arose, but there were a number of neighborhood theaters, only one that I knew of in the East Bay, in Berkeley, and it's still in existence as far as I know, Actors Ensemble.

Wilmot: How would you communicate the ideas of Stanislavsky to your students, if you recall? How would you convey to them what it meant to pull from themselves?

Harris: We had a text. That was one way. I wish I could remember the name of it. I wish I had saved that beginning material. And by exercises. Oh, maybe you have it.

Wilmot: I don't know if I do.

Harris: Hah! What is it?

Wilmot: This is from—no, it's—well, maybe.

Harris: What is it?

Wilmot: [shows document]

Harris: Yes, yes, yes, yes, of course! *An Actor Prepares*. This is a wonderful book. This was their text. There was another one. It was a woman. But this was—hmm. How did you find this? Did you look under Theater Arts?

Wilmot: No, I just went to the library.

Harris: This was it. I wonder if I have things that I've saved in the acting section. You don't see Stanislavsky there, I'm sure. [referring to her bookshelf]

Wilmot: If you point me in the right place.

Harris: That's in the second—third from the top shelf down, I think. Or is that—no, that's black stuff. One section should be devoted to theater, I don't know which one.

Wilmot: I see that, yes.

Harris: Boleslavsky was another one. In other words, we really relied upon their experience in Moscow, and then the translation of it to the United States, especially in New York, where my acting teacher, Mary Harris had studied. And I showed you the pictures. In fact, that picture of her, which was published by one of the—I showed it to you. I opened it out.

Wilmot: Yes, you did. Wow. Okay.

So what were the dominant kind of trends when you came into the drama department? Was there another school of thought around acting?

Harris: Was there any other?

Wilmot: Was everyone there kind of devotees of the Stanislavsky?

Harris: They weren't. Nobody thought too much about Stanislavsky. They were considered very offbeat. It wasn't at that time as accepted as it is today. There were two schools of thought—the Stanislavsky people, who believed that you should go inside to the spirit and derive your material from truth, and then they talked about truth in acting, that could only be brought about by your inner development, the inner development of the individual.

The other school of acting, which was the prominent one and which everyone knew about, was the one which used gestures, where they were important. Your movement was extremely important. To have had training in dance, to have had training in speech, to have all the faculties trained so that you could move with grace and with ease and could do anything.

Wilmot: [laughs]

Harris: But was not real. I mean, we in real life don't go about doing this. [gestures]

Wilmot: [laughs]

Harris: Or sorrow [demonstrates], indicating sorrow this way. I mean, maybe in the course of things you might do this [demonstrates], but you would first have had, according to Stanislavsky people, to have felt deep sorrow. And then as the movement came just [demonstrates], it would not be as dramatic or as fun-loving. I mean, it seems to me that there's a great deal of joy in doing this kind of thing [demonstrates], you know.

Wilmot: That is so funny.

Harris: [laughs] So there were two schools of thought. The Stanislavsky was the one which the more serious people had begun to accept. But one can discover these two different approaches very quickly by looking at old movies, old American movies, which were of this school. It wasn't until the thirties and forties that the other school gained any credence at all.

Wilmot: Did you assign your students to watch movies?

Harris: [laughs] No, I didn't. I should have. They weren't so readily available in those days. But there were some people who naturally—the people who—I'm trying to think. I think most people liked the idea of the Stanislavsky. I didn't have any objection except maybe this one fellow. There were a few people who were rather gifted in this, to me, artificial way of going about it. They preferred that sort of thing. I mean, it seemed more real to them than this business of going inward. It was not the ideal, and I suppose that's the reason I had to teach speech, you see.

Skills are an important part of the approach that occurred before Stanislavsky, to develop your skills. Your vocal and your movement skills were the big thing. And, of course, the fact that I was interested in voice and had had some training in speech, but not very much, meant that I, on the surface at least, had some balance in my approach. But the truth of the matter is that I was all for the Stanislavsky. Insofar as I could bring it to my students, that's what I did.

The inner. Go for the inside, what's happening. And then let it express itself in your gestures. But you can see from the pictures of me in the Greek Theatre that I had to practice the other thing. In practice, it had to be big gestures. Had to be big. And because my teacher was in the pit, she kept me honest. That is to say, she kept working at me, to get me not to fall entirely into the habit of doing the external gesture. She kept after me to go inside.

And so that's what I taught. I taught that there were these two ways, and I hope I made them feel that my way—that is, the internal way—was the way, and I think most of them went away with that. And there were people hired by the university, one by the drama department, even, who were people who exemplified the other approach.

Wilmot: Who was that?

Harris: Les Mahoney.

Wilmot: Ah! Who was your friend from New York.

Harris: Yes. Les Mahoney had been "raised," so to speak, by the Harrises, but he was by nature someone who loved the external. He's still living. I don't know what he would think about that, if he heard me say that, but that was the truth of the matter. He was very interested, incidentally, and made a close friend of an actor in New York before he came here and who later came out to Berkeley, who exemplified the other approach. So he knew both approaches.

Wilmot: Who else was in the department at that time? Do you recall?

Harris: You mean professors?

Wilmot: Yes, and instructors.

Harris: Robert Goldsby, who is now in Hollywood. A man who, they tell me, was the head of the department and has died since then. I can't remember his name. And another

man—I can't remember his name, but his wife presently is one of the founders and leaders of the Berkeley—what do they call it? The Berkeley Theater, I think they call it. I have a picture of us all together [looks for picture], I think, in this volume. No, it's the other one. [pause] Here we are.

Wilmot: Oh!

Harris: This is the one whose name I can't recall. There's Mary Harris, Fred Harris, Goldsby, Mrs. Goldsby, Angela Goldsby. These were all people from that—but at that time, I remembered their names, and since then—

Wilmot: Were there ever any other black instructors or professors in the department?

Harris: Not in my time.

Wilmot: And in the time you were there, did you interact with other people who were African American who were also—

Harris: There weren't any African Americans around, except occasional students.

Wilmot: Occasional students.

Harris: Not very many of those. There weren't many blacks on campus at that time, and certainly they weren't in the drama department, so I was, yes, exclusively working in a white world.

Wilmot: And you never saw other professors?

Harris: There weren't any. There were one or two. I heard about them. I remember one man in particular. I don't remember his department. So there were a few, but I never met them, never met them socially at some of the faculty affairs, and I was forced to go to the faculty affairs whenever they were held, but I never met any blacks.

Wilmot: In the time that you were there, from the late fifties through the sixties, how did you watch the students change?

Harris: Well, you know in the sixties what happened.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: There was that student movement. Oh, boy! When did that happen, '66, about?

Wilmot: '64, '65 was the Free Speech Movement.

Harris: Free speech.

Wilmot: And then later on, in 1968-'69, it became the Third World Strike. But I was just wondering, just in terms of, like, watching the aesthetics of the students change, what they came to you and asked for?

Harris: I was supportive of the student movement. I was in sympathy with it. But I had to be careful. First of all, I wasn't interested enough to get involved.

Wilmot: Which student movement are you talking about?

Harris: The first one.

Wilmot: The Free Speech Movement.

Harris: Yes. But the people who were carrying on the strike and who were most vocal about their feelings were people I was closest to. I mean. I was in great sympathy with them, but I knew that if I got too involved, I would lose my job.

Wilmot: Who were they?

Harris: Who were the—?

Wilmot: The people you were closest to. Who are you thinking of?

Harris: I was thinking of the people in general. I wasn't thinking about the people in my classes. They were interested and participated, most of them, in the student movement, but we didn't talk about that, and I didn't in any way withdraw from my duties, as I could have or was tempted to.

I remember one day they sent an airplane over the campus. I think we were in the Greek Theatre, and it was a matter of great distaste on the part of the—I think I showed my feelings by getting my classes moved off campus.

The Unitarians have a place on the north side of campus, and we could meet there without airplanes zooming over us and so on.

Wilmot: Were the airplanes for surveillance?

Harris: I don't know. I'm sure that was it, though. It makes sense. So we moved. I moved the class. I got permission to move the class. Everybody understood what the problem was, to move the class completely off campus. As I say, the Unitarian church had a space north of campus, where we could be free of that.

So the students understood I had sympathy with their point of view, but I didn't enter into it in any way that would cause the authorities to say, "Eh! she's got to be gotten rid of. Can't have her."

Wilmot: Do you know people who did enter into it in that way?

Harris: Seems to me I do, but I can't—anything that made me feel this way, I seem to have conveniently forgotten. [laughs]

Wilmot: I understand.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Wow. So do you recall, like, during the 1960s, which was then the full swing of civil rights movement, the emergence of figures like Martin Luther King [Jr.] and Malcolm X? If you can kind of speak generally to how did people's political—and in particular, how did black people's political awareness change, and how did you relate with that?

Harris: I was all for it. I was thrilled by it. I had been, remember, a little leftie. I think I spoke of this when I was still in San Jose. I was very much for it.

Wilmot: How was it appearing all around you?

Harris: At this time, people were beginning to not only have affairs, and I would sing the national anthem. I remember doing that in an auditorium in San Francisco, one of the civic auditoriums.

Wilmot: "Lift Every Voice and Sing"?

Harris: What?

Wilmot: "Lift Every Voice and Sing"?

Harris: No, no, it was the national anthem, I sang. And Paul Robeson was around a great deal, and I remember his taking my hand. I was at affairs where he appeared, and I got to meet him, and I was very thrilled by that. And I was very interested in whatever was being done in the legislature. Apparently I can remember some of the people I knew, some of the most left-leaning members that I knew were going to Sacramento and trying to pass legislation. I remember being very empathic, sympathetic. I didn't talk to the other members of the faculty about it.

Wilmot: Did you get a read of what their attitudes were towards changes that were taking place or the student activity?

Harris: My recalling that period was that the faculty was, in general, being sort of careful. Remember, I was dealing with white faculty. The ones that were advancing to their being permanently employed were careful. They didn't want to do—. The people who were in charge of things were sympathetic but not very open in their movements or in the expression of their ideas. People were careful. They didn't want to lose their jobs. That was it.

I don't think I cared so much about that. I can't remember quite how I felt, except that I didn't participate very actively, that I was glad when they developed a People's Park. I mean, I was glad when the lefties did things, but I didn't participate, myself.

Wilmot: Was there ever a time when black students approached you and asked you to play a certain role?

Harris: No. See, there were no blacks in the department, that I remember. One or two. I remember a girl. You spoke of a man. I don't recall any man.

Wilmot: Who was the woman you remember?

Harris: I don't remember her name. If there had been any black students in my classes, I would have remembered, but there weren't any. So I was not pressured, I suppose. I'm assuming that the black students that were at Cal at that time were active in this movement, but you didn't see much of them. Didn't see many. Do you know of any blacks who attended Cal at that time?

Wilmot: From the time of 1957 to 1969? I don't know any in drama.

Harris: And I don't know what the drama department is like now, or if it even exists. There was a time there that it went out of existence.

Wilmot: Was that while you were there?

Harris: Oh, no. No, no. I left in '69.

Wilmot: Do you stay in touch with the drama department now?

Harris: No. As long as Fred Harris was alive, I stayed in touch with some degree, to the degree that he stayed in touch, but that became more and more remote. And furthermore, I got involved in my own—in black theater. Yes, it was in the sixties.

Wilmot: Let's take a break, okay?

Harris: Okay. In fact, this period was the Aldridge Player period.

[interview interruption]

Wilmot: I had a few more questions about Berkeley. Whenever you refer to your master's at Stanford [University], you always use the language, "They made me do it." Can you speak to me a little bit about that?

Harris: Well, I had a bachelor's from San Jose State, not very prestigious. That's it. And I had done some performing, but academically I was nowhere, from UC Berkeley's point of view. It wasn't even San Jose State University, it was San Jose State College, because I left there in '40. It embarrassed them, I think. I always had the feeling they were embarrassed by people. They would hire people who didn't even have degrees. I remember somebody in the music department who didn't even have a bachelor's, so it was done occasionally, but they didn't like it. And you had to have some very special qualities that made them accept you. So they felt that I must do something, get a higher degree.

Wilmot: What were your special qualities that made them accept you without that higher degree?

Harris: I had performed! I was a performer. And furthermore, I knew the head of the department. Furthermore, I had worked with his wife for years. The head of the section which dealt with such problems as people's academic backgrounds was a man named—I can't remember his name now. He was Jewish, and he died, and he was very important. He was married to a woman who was born and raised in Santa Clara, the town of Santa Clara, which is in Santa Clara County, of course.

So these were people who were willing to speak for me.

Wilmot: And he was in charge of?

Harris: The faculty committee that considered the question of advanced degrees. So they told me I needed to have one, a master's, and so I didn't know what to do. My first thought and their first thought was to go to UCLA, but that would mean, then, that I couldn't work, so I finally decided and they decided, agreed with me that it should be Stanford.

Wilmot: Were they willing to finance your pursuit of a master's?

Harris: No, I had to finance it myself by continuing to work. That's why it took me three whole years to get a master's.

Wilmot: They didn't help you?

Harris: No.

Wilmot: They didn't make any contribution towards your pursuing an advanced degree?

Harris: They let me do that. That was a contribution. They allowed me to—

Wilmot: Have flexibility?

Harris: Yes, in terms of—I think I taught one or possibly two classes, but not more than that. There were certain days—they made a great deal of accommodation, I felt.

Wilmot: Who did you study with at Stanford?

Harris: Can I be excused just a moment? Let me get my master's degree. [moves away from microphone and then returns] Oh, I had my glasses. Did you see where—?

Wilmot: They're right there.

Harris: [looks through documents and sighs] I got my master's in '62 from Stanford, and the department was—well, the person I worked with on this was Dorothy Huntington, and I think she's still alive, I'm not sure. Dr. Huntington and Dr. Clara Bush.

Wilmot: Is this your thesis?

Harris: Yeah, this is it.

Wilmot: What did you write about in your thesis?

Harris: [makes a face, turns pages and chuckles, then reads] "*An Analysis of Sung Vocal Formants and Their Relation to Singers' Formants*, submitted to the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology and the Committee of the Graduate Division of Stanford University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Master's of Art," in 1962.

And I was also helped by someone who had gone to the University of California and persuaded me that, instead of trying to go south to UCLA, that I ought to come to Stanford, and his name is Griff Richards. He was trained by the Harrises and was active in that department, drama department. He had gone ahead and was teaching at San Francisco State University, and he had gotten his master's and doctor's at Stanford, both of them. He promised to take care of me, and did. He was a tremendous help.

Wilmot: You kind of told me the name of your thesis, but what was it about? It's hard for me to understand from the title.

Harris: [reads] "The question of how the singing voice may most effectively be brought under conscious control, still remains a source of much controversy and disagreement among people concerned in any way with singing." So that's what this was about. The whole process is occupied with studying in particular the main vowels of speech. I think it's entirely vowels, entirely vowels. [turns pages] Studying the formation of vowels. The male singers and female singers.

Wilmot: Did you enjoy this work?

Harris: I think I hated every minute of it. [turns pages] I hated it. I wished I had gone to UCLA, because there, I would have had much more choice in terms of speech courses that I could have taken. But this had to be because of the limitations of the department. It had to be scientific like this. I wasn't interested.

Wilmot: Did you meet interesting people while you were there?

Harris: [laughs] Yes, I met my—[turns pages]—Dorothy Huntington was <u>interesting</u> and very difficult and I didn't approve of her. But Dr. Clara Bush, who also worked in that department, I liked. She helped very much, and so did Griff Richards. He was an <u>enormous</u> help to me. He got the singers together, for instance. It says here sixteen. They got good people. They really made things possible for me, because I was living here and had to drive down to Stanford every—I guess I went down three times a week.

Wilmot: You had a car?

Harris: I had a car.

Wilmot: What kind of car were you driving?

Harris: I got one of the first Toyotas.

Wilmot: In the work of this thesis, had you convening singers and working with vowels with them.

Harris: Did you ask me a question? What did you say?

Wilmot: Did the work of this thesis have you convening singers and working through vowels with them?

Harris: Yes, with—[turns pages]—well, it tells here how we chose the subjects. I think I had to go through a matter of choosing them, and then we used something which I still don't understand. We were concerned with vowel formants, and I think that had to do with vowels on various levels of pitches; that is, the vowels that were high in pitch were different from the ones that were low in pitch and then medium pitch.

Wilmot: As part of your responsibilities at UC Berkeley, you were teaching classes—there was Introduction to Acting and Theater, and then there was also a speech class? Were there other classes you were teaching?

Harris: No, because I think those were the two, because I had about three—I forget what the limitation was, but I had more than one acting class. I was teaching acting and speech. I loved the acting classes, as I think I indicated earlier.

Wilmot: In the Bay Area, what kind of avenues and opportunities for black theater existed in the early 1960s, when you returned from Europe and began teaching at Berkeley?

Harris: Theater for blacks? I had heard of one group that had been active in radical matters, in political matters. I had heard of such a group being in existence in San Francisco. Otherwise, I—

Wilmot: What group was this?

Harris: I don't remember its name. Among the Aldridge Player stuff, there is an account of how we began. When was that? In the sixties.

Wilmot: I think it was 1964.

Harris: '64, yes. Well, after I got through with this, I taught, then, of course, at UC Berkeley, in the department, and then began to be very interested in the possibility of a theater, because as far as I knew, there had been this one theater, but there had been theater before we came along. That, I was sure of.

[moves away from microphone] Let's see—[goes through documents]—that's not it. There was a book I had—maybe it was the sixties one—that dealt with theater. [something drops] That's all right. Oh, yes, here we are. There he is, Aldridge, Ira Aldridge.

[interview interruption]

Harris: We were talking about the—[looks through papers] Hmm.

Wilmot: Excuse me, Henrietta, there's one line of question that I let slip, which is regarding—once you got your master's from Stanford, how did that impact your position at the department at UC Berkeley?

Harris: Immediately I became part of the regular staff, and I could be promoted from one level to another, and I was promoted to a permanent position. I was given a permanent position.

Wilmot: Permanent lecturer?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Lectureship?

Harris: I can't remember if it was assistant professor, finally. It was either lectureship or—but I could be promoted then, so it must have been assistant professor, I think.

Wilmot: Did it impact your income as well?

Harris: Yes, my income improved, and it meant I wouldn't be fired. So it was a good position, and they were very annoyed when I left.

Wilmot: Why?

Harris: Well, I mean, that's something that people really work to achieve, and here I am, a poor ignorant black woman [laughs] at the University of California, a very prestigious place, and I arrive at the point where I am permanently employed, and I decide I want to go off to Europe. [laughs] So I did. I wasn't interested in academia as such. I loved to teach, and I loved the subject matter, but I still hadn't reached the point where I could act and sing at the same time. I had acted at Cal; that was wonderful, at least in the Greek Theatre, but that's not contemporary theater.

Wilmot: Okay. When we left off, I had asked you this question of what kind of venues were there for black theater or for black actors to act in mainstream theater. What kind of opportunities were there in the early sixties?

Harris: I remember, and I was trying to find the name of the group. There had been a group before we came along, the Aldridge Players came along, but that group had disbanded. I don't remember the name of it. But there was no theater at that time.

Wilmot: Where did the idea come to you? Why did you found the Aldridge Players?

Harris: Because I wanted a place where I could both sing and act. I felt it was particularly important for black people, in a big-city area, it seemed to me, like San Francisco, should have a black theater. I wanted to act, and I knew there were other blacks, not many, but I knew there were some who wanted to act also. So we got together at the YWCA, where we later had the theater, on Sutter Street, and we had a meeting and talked about it and quite a few people showed up. It was under twenty, but enough to start a theater.

And so we met and decided to call ourselves the Aldridge Players, and someone told us that Howard University had a theater named after Ira Aldridge, whose picture I have over there, and we decided that then we would call ourselves the Aldridge Players/West. We're in the West, and the other one was, and maybe still is, at Howard University.

Wilmot: Who was Ira Aldridge?

Harris: Oh, he was a black actor of the 1800s, and I have a picture of him that's very quick to find. I think it's that one. Yes, right on the cover. That's Ira Aldridge.

Wilmot: Wow. So that's Ira Aldridge. And what did he do? What was he known for?

Harris: He became an actor. He was the servant of a well-known British actor and they found out about his talent. And he not only acted in England, he acted in America and he acted in Russia, and got his training through this British actor.

Wilmot: What kind of roles did he play?

Harris: He played classic roles. Othello, of course, was the first one. There weren't a whole lot of roles he could play, but wherever he could—I wonder if this isn't—

Wilmot: Looks like it's kind of a Moorish outfit.

Harris: It's that period at any rate.

Wilmot: I just realized I had brought you your whole book, but maybe it's kind of distracting to have it right there.

Harris: In other words, you wish I'd stop turning the pages—

Wilmot: Yes!

Harris: —frantically. Okay. African dramas group. Let's see—

Wilmot: So in naming the group after Ira Aldridge, what were you—

Harris: We were associating ourselves with the Aldridge Players at Howard University. For one thing, Aldridge Players/West meant that we following the same thing that inspired you, you off there in Howard. And we were, as I say, the only blacks at the time, certainly, who were—immediately afterward, then there were other groups, but at the time, we were the first.

Wilmot: Were you the only founder, or was there another founder?

Harris: Well, I called the meeting. I don't know if you call that a founder. Certainly I couldn't have done it all by myself. That's the one thing about theater. You've got to work with other people on it.

Wilmot: Who came to the meeting?

Harris: I have a picture of us all, sitting around a table, and I'm in the position of the chair, so—[moves away to retrieve photograph]. And we met, as I recall, at the Y. Let's see, this is something someone else wrote: [reads] "After discussing the value of some sort of training for the Negro player with a fellow actress"—I don't remember that—"Henrietta Harris, singer, drama instructor at the University of California, founder"—he calls me the founder; I would never say that in the presence of the other Aldridge Players—

"founder of the Aldridge Players, selected three one-act plays and called a meeting of local actors." And that's the picture I'll show you.

"At that meeting, actor Mark Primus"—who is now living in New York—"suggested the group its name." Hm! "Several days later"—he now lives in the East, so he was an Easterner, I guess—"Henrietta Harris, with an entourage of stage technicians and designers from The Playhouse"—of course! I'd lived on Hyde Street, just up the street from The Playhouse, which is no longer there, at the foot of Hyde and Beach. "One of the oldest little theaters in San Francisco began work at the Sutter Street branch of the YWCA."

[continues to read] "Details in the life of Ira Aldridge, the Aldridge Players' namesake, are somewhat uncertain. However, most writers of theatrical history agree that he was a born in the early part of the nineteenth century and that he was the grandson to a Senegalese chieftain. Being fascinated with the theater, he studied in his earliest years under the celebrated English tragedian [pronouncing it tra-JEE-dee-an], Edward"—maybe you pronounce that tra-juh-DEE-an. No, tra-JEE-dee-an. "Edmund Kean." Edmund Kean. He studied there.

[continues to read] "Eventually he made his debut as a fellow at London's Royalty Theatre. This led to his triumphal tour of the Continent in other leading Shakespearean roles as well." I don't know what they would be. What else could a black man, looking the way he looked—what else could he do in Shakespeare? Do you know Shakespeare?

Wilmot: Some.

Harris: Some, yes. He couldn't do Hamlet. Well, I don't know what he did, but that's the information that we got from Howard.

Wilmot: Does that account of the founding of the Aldridge Players/West sound pretty true to you?

Harris: Pretty much, I think. [continues to turn pages]

Wilmot: So who were the other people that you found to join with? Do you want me to take that out of your hand? Let me take this away.

Harris: Adam David Miller was one. [looks through documents] I was seeing a good deal of him. Special friend. I guess you'd say my boyfriend. Where is <u>my</u> book? Nineteen sixty—

Wilmot: I might have put it under. I hope I didn't.

Harris: Is that '60?

Wilmot: Sorry about that.

Harris: That's okay. Have we talked about the fact that I went to Stanford?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: We've talked about that. Here we are! [looking at photo] In the midst of performing—I was still singing, you see, [Maurice] Ravel's protest songs, and after '63—and this is '64, June 1964.

Wilmot: So this is the executive board, and that includes Norman Hill, Adam David Miller, yourself, Kelly Marie Barry, and Marguerite Ray.

Harris: Right.

Wilmot: So how did you all find each other?

Harris: I knew Marguerite Ray. She went to Cal, UC Berkeley graduate, incidentally.

Wilmot: Was she a drama person, theater person?

Harris: I can't remember. It seems to me she was. One of the few. Adam David Miller also was at Berkeley. He was not in drama; he was in English, I think. Norman R. Hill—I don't know. I don't remember. Well, it says here, "Any person interested in joining a new group should contact me, Henrietta Harris, 1815 Powell." That's when I lived at the other place. Yes, that makes sense.

Wilmot: So what was your mission?

Harris: [reads from newspaper article] "We are joined together not only by the mutual love of the theater," said Norman Hill, "but also by the recognition of the fact that as Negroes, we have not had sufficient opportunity to acquire training or experience in the practice of theater arts." And, of course, this is what I'd been aiming for, wasn't it, all my life! Theater is what I wanted to do.

Wilmot: Who did you know at The Playhouse?

Harris: Oh, well, I lived up the street from The Playhouse, and I knew all the leading actors, some of whom are dead. In fact, the main ones are dead. Jane Steckle, Kermit Sheets. I can't remember the director who was from New York. Of course, that theater is no longer in existence.

Wilmot: Did you ever think of performing on that stage?

Harris: Oh, yes, and I did, in musical things. Yes, I lived just a block away.

Wilmot: For the Aldridge Players, was *The Emperor's New Clothes* your first production?

Harris: [no immediate response]

Wilmot: Or was it an evening of one-acts?

Harris: I think it was an evening of one-acts. It says here something I've forgotten. When Frances Farmer, who was—does that name ring a bell to you?

Wilmot: No.

Harris: She was in San Francisco playing in the Actors Workshop production of *In Defense of Taipei*. We discussed the value of some sort of training for Negro players, some organization which would provide continuous training. That's why we formed our group. That's what I said. And [reads] "Miss Harris explained that it was named after Ira Aldridge." "Our group has caused some confusion because our goals are towards drama, not civil rights." "It may appear presumptuous to start off with an ambitious program, but we decided that was the best way to learn." So we started by doing *The Trojan Women*, by Euripides.

And then it describes—[reading] "It was chosen, according to Miss Harris, because it deals with basics and because its characterizations are not overcomplicated." Greek drama is not overcomplicated. Very simple.

Wilmot: That was *The Trojan Women*.

Harris: Yes, I'd forgotten that.

Wilmot: It looks like in your first season you had four productions, and the last one was *Don't Leave Go My Hand*, by Arthur Roberson.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And then in the middle you did *The Emperor's New Clothes*, I think, also at that time.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And then also you had some one-act plays.

Harris: Yes, and they were by [Anton] Chekhov and various people.

Wilmot: The one-act plays in the very beginning.

Harris: Oh, yes, that's right. [pause] Let's see. [looking over playbills and programs]

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: An evening of one-acts, and they contained—that was Milne's *Ugly Duckling*, [Edward] Albee's *The Sandbox*, [James Broughton?]—he's a local man who is now dead—a play called *The Last Word*. I had heard that down at The Playhouse. Chekhov's *The Brute*.

Wilmot: How did you choose what you put out there that first—this was 1965, perhaps.

Harris: '64

Wilmot: 1964? How did you choose what you wanted to put out?

Harris: Well, for instance, I knew Euripides, of course, *The Trojan Women*. I'd been in it. Milne's *Ugly Duckling*, I hadn't known. Albee's *The Sandbox* had just come out and had been performed locally, maybe down at The Playhouse. Probably I was

influenced—in fact, I know I was influenced by whatever productions The Playhouse—it wasn't called The Playhouse then, either. I can't remember.

Wilmot: Was it very important to the Aldridge Players/West to put on productions that were written by black playwrights?

Harris: Oh, we were dying for black productions. We couldn't find any. Let's see, among that group—so we went to Nigeria and got plays by Wole Soyinka. *The Swamp Dwellers* and *Brother Gerald* were by him. And a new play by a Negro playwright who was local, came from Stockton, called Arthur Roberson.

Wilmot: Was that the one—

Harris: *Don't Leave Go My Hand.*

Wilmot: What was that play about?

Harris: I can't remember. Oh, wait, here's another. May Miller's *Harriet Tubman.* That's historical, of course. Harriet Tubman, you know about her.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: *The Emperor's New Clothes* was a play for children, so someone in our group apparently suggested that.

Wilmot: How much were your group's productions influenced by the politics of that time in terms of black consciousness and black power?

Harris: The fact that we searched and searched and searched until we found a black playwright! We didn't even attempt it, and that was Arthur Roberson. We were happy as anything. What we would have liked, we would have liked to have done all black plays, but we wanted to get on with it. They had to be fairly decent plays. We advertised, and Arthur Roberson heard about us and sent his play.

Wilmot: In 1966 there was a night of one-act plays, which included *The Happy Journey* by Thornton Wilder, *Hello, Out There* by William Saroyan, and *Soul Gone Home* by Langston Hughes.

Harris: Langston Hughes, yes. And when was that?

Wilmot: That was in 1966.

Harris: That was later. And incidentally, this was the group, and these were the plays that we took—'66—we took on our trip south, which was made possible by a member of the faculty.

Wilmot: What was your trip south about?

Harris: That was simply to go south and show—where we knew there were groups, black universities, we went there, so we could perform.

Wilmot: What kind of reception did you receive?

Harris: Very, very warm, I thought.

Wilmot: Yes?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Were there any places in particular that you recall?

Harris: Well, yes—oh, here it tells—Negro college. They heard about us. [reads] "A Berkeley professor named Edward Barankin also was the chairman of a special committee on visiting lecturers to Negro college and universities." So "when he heard about us, he and seven of his colleagues visited six Negro colleges and universities in southern states, as a trial run to establish communication with institutions which are largely on the periphery of America's elite centers of learning."

Wilmot: What year was this?

Harris: This was in 1966. This was published by the University of California *Bulletin*.

Wilmot: Do you remember what productions you took on that tour?

Harris: I don't offhand, but we have them listed. Let's see. Now, we went to Miles [College, Birmingham, Alabama], Spelman [College, Atlanta, Georgia], Morehouse [College, Atlanta, Georgia], Tuskegee [College, Tuskegee, Alabama], and Jackson University in Jackson, Mississippi.

Wilmot: You said that you really enjoyed the trip to Tuskegee.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Why was that?

Harris: I think part of it was the design of the campus. We were placed on campus, and there was a river down at one end of it. I don't know, it just seemed beautiful, and the people seemed very warm and friendly. [long pause]

Wilmot: When I think about the 1960s in the Bay Area, I think about not only the civil rights movement but I also think about black consciousness and black power, and I'm wondering, were members of the group also involved with black—

Harris: We didn't use that term.

Wilmot: What term did you use?

Harris: We didn't say "black power" at that time. That came later. See, we were still using the term "Negroes," and that went out of style. But we were interested in African drama, too. We were keen to present a black point of view, and these newspaper articles seized

upon that. Contemporary African drama was very interesting to us. There are articles, a good deal about the importance of Africa just entering the picture at that time.

Wilmot: I also noticed that you acted and performed in some of the productions, but oftentimes in the playbill it appears that you were taking more of a behind-the-scenes role?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: What did that mean?

Harris: Because people don't like to work! [rueful chuckle] Somebody has to organize. Somebody has to organize the troupe. Someone has to make sure the publicity is taken care of. There are all sorts of things that have to be done. It's hard work and not terribly interesting, some of it. Some of it is.

Wilmot: What was interesting about it?

Harris: Getting it done and getting it before the public, getting our pictures in the paper, which meant that people would come to the plays because they didn't know anything about—black people didn't know about us, on the whole.

Wilmot: Who were your audiences?

Harris: Mainly, in the beginning, they were white. A few blacks, because all of us knew people and they would come. But later on, as we played more and more, we got involved with some of the black organizations which were—well, particularly the black newspaper, which had its office just a few blocks away from us.

Wilmot: Which one was this?

Harris: It looks like the *Post*. The editor died, and they have a plaque.

Wilmot: Tom Berkley?

Harris: No, Tom Berkley was one of them, but this was his boss. The man who published the black—

Wilmot: Daley?

Harris: No, published the black newspaper. Was it the *Post*? Oh. He's dead now, but I think the paper still exists, the important black newspaper. [Carlton Goodlett?]

Wilmot: Okay. I have some questions for you. What were some of the major challenges, being the person who was kind of holding it together?

Harris: What was one of major what?

Wilmot: What were the major challenges for you?

Harris: Challenges. Work. [derisive snort]

Wilmot: What do you mean?

Harris: I mean holding the meetings, being responsible for the meetings, being responsible for the people needed. If there were certain technical—particularly the technical stuff—if there were technical things that needed to be done, we didn't have anybody trained in the technicalities of theater. We had to scrounge around and find them. I fortunately had some connections, through The Playhouse. It was not called The Playhouse at that time. Through this theater group that was just a block away from me, I had connections, and so I could go to them. In the beginning, that's what we did. We called upon the white theater community to help, and they did. Just for that particular—the first production. Not much thereafter.

Wilmot: Was it frustrating for you that you didn't end up spending as much time on the stage, then, but ended up really managing it?

Harris: I would have liked to have done more acting, but, after all, I was in a position to act, if I wanted to. It's a question of, you know, what do you want most? Do you want the things to operate, or do you want to be in it? I wanted both.

Wilmot: Did you get positive feedback? Did the Aldridge Players get positive feedback?

Harris: In the newspaper once in a while. I was continually in the newspaper. Now this [shows document] was the black newspaper. What was it?

Wilmot: Also what I've noticed is that there was a very kind of aggressive pace of work, that in your first season you did four productions, which is just really—

Harris: Crazy!

Wilmot: It's really unheard of for a young theater.

Harris: But I didn't know that. I thought I had to do it. Everything we did, I thought was necessary.

Wilmot: Were people paid?

Harris: Paid??! No, <u>we</u> paid—we operated the group by payments.

Wilmot: What do you mean?

Harris: We were all working people. We were not kids. We contributed. We had meetings, and we put up money.

Wilmot: You paid for it to go forward.

Harris: Yes, but then, as soon as we began operating, we also had money coming in. Not much, but some. And we worked at the YWCA. I think if we paid any rent there, it was very little, like fifteen or sixteen dollars a month, something like that. They wanted to be of help to us. The black community—that is, through this newspaper—[pause as she reads to herself].

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: No, this paper is in Mill Valley. I thought it was our local San Francisco paper. [reads] "Aldridge Players/West encourages and accepts the help of anyone interested in the theater, whatever his race." We didn't care, and we got occasional help that way, not just in the beginning.

Wilmot: How long did Aldridge Players/West last?

Harris: Four years. Very active. From '64 to '68, and in that time, our second year, we made a trip, with the help of this UC Berkeley committee. We made a trip south, where we took all the members that wanted to go. I think there were between eight and ten of us—I can't remember, not more than that—and we had the funds provided by this University of California group to hire a car. We had already, with their help, also set up a route. We landed in Jackson, and then proceeded to these various places that I named before. We ended up in Atlanta, Georgia. There were two black—a women's college that we performed for and—I named them just a little while ago.

Wilmot: You did name them to me. Yes, you did. And you ended up in Atlanta.

Harris: Atlanta. [chuckles] I'm laughing because in the women's school we had a hard time getting started because they were so noisy. I remember standing backstage and really lecturing them about it being necessary for them to be quiet, and they quieted right down. That wouldn't have happened in later years. But obviously, there was no one out front really controlling them. Once they settled down, it was fine.

Wilmot: When you returned to the Bay Area from this tour—you said the Aldridge Players lasted four years?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And seven or eight people went on the tour, but how big a group were you, generally?

Harris: I would say, at the most, twenty.

Wilmot: At the most, twenty. And at the least, seven or eight.

Harris: Yes. Eight, eight or ten, ten to twenty people.

Wilmot: Ten to twenty people. You kind of went back and forth. In your final year, why did you decide to close Aldridge Players?

Harris: I, by this time, very much wanted to go abroad. There was no reason to close it down, but who would take over my job? Who would take responsibility? Nobody would.

Wilmot: And you were doing this in addition to being a full-time instructor at UC Berkeley?

Harris: [no audible reply]

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: It was a lot.

Wilmot: It sounds as though it was very fulfilling.

Harris: Oh, it was. It was the thing I wanted to do all my life, except it didn't have any singing. I had wanted a theater, and I had done a lot of singing, and I still hadn't gotten an opportunity to be in theater. Now, what I really wanted was to be in a theater. I didn't want to form a theater and take a—had I known—well, I don't know. I guess I would have done it anyway.

Wilmot: Had you known how much effort and energy it took?

Harris: Ooh! It was tremendous. It meant I felt responsible and was responsible for all the technical aspects.

What are you looking for, the time?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I have five of three.

I didn't realize, because I hadn't had any theater experience. Absolutely none. Except once in a while to do a small part in something, or I did the Greek Theatre thing, but I had no responsibility for that. I just was backstage. I had no idea of what was involved in theater. And I found out!

It's hard work, if you take the responsibility, and I did. And there were others who helped, but you couldn't count on them. They would help if they happened to be in town. I remember there was one woman who was very good at costumes. One of our members happened to know her, and she came and took care of the costumes for one or two productions; then she had to go to Chicago. So there never was a time when I or any of the people interested in such—Marguerite was very interested. She had been at UC Berkeley, and she was one of the ones I could really call upon. She'd had some experience, and she was very dependable.

And Elton Wolfe, of course. He comes from Jackson, Mississippi, and he was wonderful. I have some pictures of him. We had a reunion, sort of, this past June, and he came up from Jackson. If we had been a little older or if we'd had more experience—but no one had, and there were people who were vaguely interested in theater but had never had the chance to do it.

We had one fellow, named Leslie Perry, who got up and made a speech about it at this reunion, about how he had come up to this area from southern California and was very keen on doing theater, and he heard somehow, through the newspaper, that this was a possibility, and how he sought us. So there were people around like us, but didn't happen to be any people who organized in a particular place. We had San Francisco, and we had access to this cheap YWCA was what it was. And we had a black newspaper, and we had the University of California. So we had certain advantages in this area. And we took advantage of them and formed the Aldridge Players.

Wilmot: When you had formed then, were you in communication with other people who were mounting similar efforts in southern California?

Harris: No, but we would hear vaguely about—we knew that other things were going on.

Wilmot: That there were other black theaters?

Harris: But not here. Marguerite had relatives in that area, and so we did hear about it, yes.

Wilmot: Were there any other people you were in communication with about your work, on the East Coast, about the Aldridge Players?

Harris: [no audible response]

Wilmot: Was there any kind of—you know how there are different actors who will move from ensemble to ensemble? Was there any kind of interaction between people who had been in other performances put on by other black theaters? Or even white theaters.

Harris: There were people who—well, for instance, the fact that I lived a block from The Playhouse, it meant that when push came to shove, I could call upon those people, yes.

Wilmot: What happened to the players after the group dissolved? Were there people who—you did say Joyce went on to be mayor of Richmond.

Harris: Oh, boy, did she ever!

Wilmot: Joyce's last name, again?

Harris: Joyce Jackson.

Wilmot: Where did Marguerite go?

Harris: She went to Europe. Oh, she left! In fact, I'm glad you mentioned that. The fact that Marguerite left us in '68 was the reason '68-'69 was our last year. Oh, boy, did that kill me when she left us. She was absolutely my strong right arm. You could really depend upon Marguerite. There were others you could depend upon, but she had had much more experience than any of us. In fact, she had been in the early cast of A.C.T. when it was first opened. She was that experienced.

Wilmot: And she was committed. Why did she go to Europe?

Harris: Well, I think she just wanted to. After she graduated from Cal, she went to Europe. She was in recreation. That was her field. And so she had gone to Europe, and she just apparently had an opportunity to go back and work on the army bases in Germany.

Wilmot: Recreation?

Harris: I think that's what she called it.

Wilmot: What's that field mean?

Harris: You're in charge of the recreation, for instance, at that time, on the army bases is where she earned a living.

She was there, and I have pictures of her, but that's later. I knew more about her when I, myself, went to Germany later, much later.

We saw each other. We went to Florence together, and she came and visited me, yes, in Munich.

Wilmot: Did she kind of inspire you also in your thinking about going abroad?

Harris: No. Well, I think maybe she did.

Wilmot: I want to bring this back to Berkeley and ask you a question. So in 1969 you resigned from Berkeley.

Harris: Sixty-eight, I resigned. Sixty-nine was the end of the year for me.

Wilmot: Okay. In all those years when you were there, was this a place where you experienced discrimination at all?

Harris: Well, now, I may have missed it, but I did not.

Wilmot: Did you see more students of color appearing on campus in that time period?

Harris: A few more, not many. They weren't in the drama department, but I would see them on campus, yes.

Wilmot: Okay. Well, let's close for today.

Harris: Okay. [laughs]

[end of session]

**Interview 5: January 16, 2003**

Wilmot: January 16th, 2003, interview five, Henrietta Harris.

Just to begin, we were going back a little bit and talking about your trip to Europe in 1955, when you went to England to sing at Wigmore Hall and study with Elena Gerhardt.

Harris: In reverse order.

Wilmot: Yes. But I think what we were just talking about, which is so interesting, is how the atmosphere around discrimination was different. Did you ever feel discriminated against in the United States?

Harris: No. Interesting that you should pick that up, because when I was here in the United States, from childhood on, I must say that I did not feel discriminated against, but I knew blacks were, and I identified with them, of course. But in terms of anything that I wanted to do or anything that I did, which was to start performing as a singer in my fifteens—I think I was around fifteen—publicly, I mean, outside of singing in church. I knew what the tradition was, I knew what the newspapers said, I knew what my friends said. But I personally did not experience much, if any, discrimination. There wasn't anything I wanted to do that I couldn't do.

But I identified with the problem, mainly because I think I was left-wing in my attitudes. The left-wingers were always pro the underdog, so to speak. But it was a little remote for me, except for one thing. That was a question of something I noticed in Berkeley for the first time, really, was that black men, educated black men, particularly the ones on the Berkeley campus, went out with white women.

Wilmot: Exclusively?

Harris: Well, it seemed to me they did. They obviously didn't, but there was an awful lot of—the men that I would be particularly interested in, the educated black men, preferred, seemingly, white women. I suppose that was because they were available, for many of the men, maybe for the first time. I don't know.

Wilmot: This would be in the 1940s, when you moved to Berkeley and the Bay Area from San Jose. You went to the East Bay from San Jose.

Harris: Oh, I was indignant about that. I thought that was terrible, because it might exclude me, of course. [chuckles] Because the men were good-looking, many of them, and they were educated or trying to become educated. But I really didn't have any trouble.

Wilmot: So you felt like the men who were in your kind of milieu were actually more oriented towards white women. That's interesting. And that was different than San Jose.

Harris: Oh, yes. Completely. I don't ever remember thinking that the black men were interested in white women. I never saw that in San Jose. Maybe they were, and just were careful

about it. That could be. But I experienced it for the first time in Berkeley, when I went up in the forties, early forties.

Wilmot: That brings me to this question, because in my kind of historical memory of the time that I haven't lived, I always imagine that the 1940s was a very unsafe time for any kind of interracial romantic relationships. I imagine it to be extremely dangerous.

Harris: Not in this area. It wouldn't be dangerous, it would be looked down upon.

Wilmot: By whom?

Harris: I know I looked down upon it. I knew and was interested in some white men, both off campus and on campus. I can't remember now whether that was—no, it was on campus, yes. The men that were drawn to me were mainly musical men, because I was a performer and I was in the music department. But there was never any real bonding like you'd see between—no, it really was bonding—these men, the black men on campus, frequently married these women or took up permanent relations with them. And I didn't know any black women who did. It just wasn't done in those days.

Wilmot: What would it mean if one had a permanent relationship with a white man?

Harris: I just didn't know a single black woman. My associates were mainly Delta Sigma Theta people, the people I met.

Wilmot: Your sorority.

Harris: Yes. Now, maybe they did, but I didn't know about it.

Wilmot: What would it mean if one did? What would be the response if one did have a white man who was a husband?

Harris: I think it was okay finally, if you married and had children, but I can't remember a single black woman of whom that was true.

Wilmot: But do you think that was because the black women you knew were not interested in white men or because white men weren't interested in them?

Harris: Could be both. As far as I could see, and I was mainly on the Cal campus, the black educated and not necessarily good-looking men, but many of them were very handsome, I thought, coming from San Jose—

Wilmot: From good families.

Harris: Well, I never got that close. I didn't know. When I finally did, much later, I found that some of them came from poor families, they weren't from good families. But they liked white women. Because, I suppose, it was becoming fashionable for white women. I don't know. The left-wing movement.

Wilmot: These are black men in the left-wing movement?

Harris: I couldn't tell. I just was on campus, and I'd see these black men. And I was told also, by other black women, that the black men chose white women.

Wilmot: As early as 1940?

Harris: In the forties.

Wilmot: That's something I see all around me all the time today.

Harris: It was beginning then, with the educated ones. Later, it was a surprise to me to observe that it wasn't just the educated ones.

Wilmot: I think sometimes, you know, creating a romantic relationship with a white person if you're black is—I mean, there's a lot of different things it's fraught with.

Harris: Was. I don't know.

Wilmot: Or can be fraught with or was fraught with, but it's very interesting, I think, for many black men from that time, I wonder if it meant that they were moving up—

Harris: I think so.

Wilmot: —socially or—

Harris: I think so.

Wilmot: Or the other one, especially in the left movement, is going with, having a white woman as your wife or your partner represented some type of freedom outside of—

Harris: Oh, yes. I think that's it.

Wilmot: But freedom from American racist and racial structures.

Harris: I wasn't aware that black men had it so hard, because in San Jose I didn't see much evidence of it. Black men for the most part didn't go with white women, they went with black women, as far as I know. Maybe they yearned for white women, but I didn't see any evidence of that in San Jose. But, oh, boy. And then later, I got to know such a man. He'd come from the South. Of course, white women were absolutely forbidden. He came from somewhere near Washington, D.C., but it was South; maybe it was Maryland. A white woman was absolutely forbidden, and I think in the West, white women weren't absolutely forbidden by the white folks necessarily, but the black folks looked down upon it. The black women, for sure. I know I did. [snorts]

Wilmot: As someone who was a leftie, part of the Young Communists League and had stayed in touch with leftie circles or had commitments that were politically on the left, did you find that there were other black people who were moving in your political circles in that respect, then?

Harris: Very few. But that was the time when [Paul] Robeson was very popular in his commitments, so there were well-known blacks who were committed to the left-wing

movement and looked down upon by the still, so-called, "respectable" blacks. But I sort of liked that idea. I was charmed with Paul Robeson. I met him at a left-wing function, and I did things for the lefties, too. I don't remember the precise occasion, but—I think I mentioned this to you before—there was an affair in one of the big public places in San Francisco, and I sang "The Star Spangled Banner." I think I mentioned that.

Wilmot: Yes. Did Paul Robeson have words for you after your performance?

Harris: What?

Wilmot: Did Paul Robeson have words for you after your performance?

Harris: He wasn't there. When I saw him, he was the one who was performing. He wasn't at that—he didn't sit in the audience. I happened to meet him just before, at some left-winger's house or something, and he came up to me and seemed pleased to see me, probably because he recognized, of course, that I was black. He came up to me and took my hand, and I remember how thrilled I was, and looked at me directly in the eye, in a way that people didn't usually do. And it was a great experience, for me, because it was such a kindly—not condescending but encompassing me somehow as a human being, I felt. I thought it was a thrilling experience. I loved it. I didn't know him otherwise, but that was wonderful.

But in those days, it was a few famous people that were in the left-wing movement, and they were looked down upon by most blacks, or criticized. Nobody could look down on Paul Robeson, because he was a great performer. Ooh! A singer and an actor. Did you ever see him? He was terrific.

Wilmot: Paul Robeson is someone who really picked up his art and his politics and intertwined them in his life and in his practice and in his performance, and was penalized severely for it.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: What did that mean to you? Not necessarily Paul Robeson, but what did that mean to have politics and art and practice and put them together? Especially as you entered the 1950s and the environment that was here in the United States then, political environment, what with McCarthyism and—.

Harris: It didn't seem to affect the performers, or at least the singers, the serious singers like Marian Anderson, a very popular one at the time. The only thing was that all blacks, including me, put spirituals or black music in at least one-quarter of their program. I resented that a little bit because I thought, 'Golly, suppose instead of black spirituals or black songs, I wanted to sing—' because I was just discovering such things were in the world, this wonderful Spanish folk music. It's just great. From that, I gathered there must be other folk music that would be marvelous. I was a little put off by the fact that I felt I had to include the black music.

There was enough black music so you could choose things that were unfamiliar; you didn't have to sing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" or "Deep River" or—

you didn't have to do very popular ones, there were others that weren't so well known that you could choose, but the fact that you were a black performer—it was an unspoken thing, but it was a thing. You had to have black folk music.

I'm trying to think. I don't ever remember singing non-folk music. Maybe there wasn't any. I don't know. How many black composers—?

Wilmot: I know about three.

Harris: Do you? Who are they?

Wilmot: There's more than this, but these are three that I know, who kind of came of age in a similar time. One is Olly Wilson, who is a composer of music at UC Berkeley. Another one is William Grant Still.

Harris: Oh, yes, William Grant Still—he did mainly, in my days, new accompaniments for the spirituals. I don't remember his doing any independent songs. Who's the third?

Wilmot: The third one is not coming to me. I'm sorry.

Harris: Well, this Olly is in the music department still?

Wilmot: He's retired.

Harris: Oh, he did?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Well, he was not known when I was there.

Wilmot: He's actually about twenty years younger than you, and he didn't get there until 1970, so there's a reason why you don't know him.

Harris: When did I leave? Oh, before then.

Wilmot: In nineteen—

Harris: —sixty-seven.

Wilmot: —sixty-nine.

Harris: Yes. Sixty-eight?

Wilmot: That's so interesting. So for you, that was the expectation of you as a black performer and artist. But for you, when you were operating outside of other people's expectations, was there a place where your art and politics kind of came together? An obvious place would be the Aldridge Players, but—

Harris: Yes. Well, in music, because we have to stay with music, because I had to—that was another thing I resented, of course.

Wilmot: I know!

Harris: God! When did all that change? It began to change. What's the author's name?

Wilmot: James Baldwin?

Harris: Yes. Now, when did he begin, in the sixties?

Wilmot: Nineteen fifty-four.

Harris: Yes. And there were others. There was a development towards this. I don't know what the black singers are doing now, because there aren't many black concert singers. In fact, I can't think of a single one, because they can now get into opera. What was her name, the first one? Oh, that was wonderful.

Wilmot: Jessye Norman?

Harris: No, before. [transcriber's note: Leontyne Price?]

Wilmot: Grace Bumbrey? Different people.

Harris: Oh, she's so well known. Oh, I never thought I would forget her name. She also did the opera that I was in, but later. She was a graduate of Juilliard [School of Music]. The name doesn't spring to mind. She has retired since. But at any rate, there were young singers who were coming up. She was the first one to get into opera, as far as I know. She did a lot of opera. I'm sorry, I can't think of her name. It'll come.

Wilmot: Okay. What was happening with you in the 1960s—you were at Berkeley—vis-à-vis the civil rights movement? What was happening? What was unfolding in the South?

Harris: We were all very—"we" being the Aldridge Players, because the Aldridge Players grew out of that. There was a great desire on my part to go South. Have you ever been South?

Wilmot: Not for very long. What did it mean for you to go South?

Harris: I was <u>curious</u> about what was going on.

Wilmot: What was going on?

Harris: There were great things happening. And there's no question that the Aldridge Players grew out of that.

Wilmot: Out of that consciousness?

Harris: Yes. Oh, yes. Although I have been told that there was a black drama group that preceded Aldridge Players. I never heard about them or knew about them. As far as I knew, they were strictly either in the left-wing black movement or not in the black movement at all. I don't know about them, but I heard about them. The moment we

formed the Aldridge Players, they said, "Oh, yes, there used to be such a group," but one I'd never heard of.

So the sixties were an exciting time. Of course, the university had already begun its contact with Southern schools, and I have an article about that.

Wilmot: This is UC Berkeley?

Harris: Yes. And as a result, when we began the group, I was still teaching there at UC Berkeley, and the man who had done so much—I can't remember his name offhand—about that, about black schools in the South, got the idea that it would be great for us to travel there, so we did.

Wilmot: I wanted to ask you, with the Aldridge Players—actually, first let me ask you this other question. You know the Bay Area also saw the birth of the Black Panthers.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Did that mean anything for you?

Harris: They seemed a little radical.

Wilmot: Yes?

Harris: They seemed a little far out to most of us.

Wilmot: "Most of us?" The Aldridge Players?

Harris: I don't know how they seemed to the men, but to the women—[gestures] hands off. They were just too far out. But sort of attractive, too, because they were so daring. But I never knew personally any of that group. They were much younger, for one thing.

Wilmot: They were very much younger. They were also kind of committed to a Marxist political platform. I was wondering if that had any resonance for you or for your peer group, your folks?

Harris: In the fifties, I moved completely away, or moved farther and farther away from the actual meeting and taking part in any kind of black radicalism, of the kind that had been popular before. There was a new kind coming on, of course, now.

Wilmot: How would you contrast the two different groups?

Harris: In the first one, there were blacks who were joining with whites in becoming left-wingers. Later, the blacks were people who took a radical position in regard to blacks and whites, to the whole society, in fact. It was a different kind of radicalism, of course. The first one was more inclusive; it included everybody. The second one was the blacks finally asserting—particularly the black men. In the South, at least it was an extremely radical thing for them to be openly doing all sorts of things that they simply were not allowed by law to do. You couldn't go out openly with a white woman in the South without being lynched, possibly. I think most of the lynchings—I haven't read a history

of the lynchings, but I'll bet most of them concerned a black man's impudence in relation to the total community by going out with a white woman.

Wilmot: Or perceived impudence, yes.

Harris: Perceived, yes.

Wilmot: I wonder. When you were on campus, then, in the sixties, what was that like for you, watching students articulate and manifest this new kind of radicalism? Or do you recall seeing that happen?

Harris: Not so much, because in the sixties the radicalism was not about white-black; the students were rebelling against the total society, the conventions up through the fifties, which became very staid and conventional. It wasn't a racial thing in the sixties, at least on the Berkeley campus. They were against the main society.

Wilmot: I'm wondering, especially, about the late sixties. My understanding is that there was a push, largely from students of color—black students, Latino students, Chicano, some Asian students as well—towards seeing a curriculum in an institution that more reflected their culture and history. Do you recall that kind of unfolding in the late sixties there?

Harris: Yes, but there wasn't too much happening, but it began to happen. They began to have black studies on campus. They hadn't had that in my day.

Wilmot: When did that happen?

Harris: I don't know precisely, but I suppose it was—certainly in the late sixties it began.

Wilmot: Was that while you were there? Do you remember the kind of activity people had in order to make that happen? Or if students came to talk to you about, "Can we have black plays?"

Harris: No, no, no. You don't understand. When I was on campus, I didn't have, as far as I can remember, a single black drama student. I was in drama. There were no black students. I saw black students on campus, I knew they were in other departments, but they weren't in my department. I don't remember—oh, I had one. Yes, I did. But she was a graduate student. I had, later, while I was still teaching on campus—as graduate students, there were one or two black people—I never had an undergraduate black student. But, as I say, before I left campus, there were graduate black students around, and at least one or two—Margaret—oh, she probably left before you were associated in any way with Cal.

Wilmot: Margaret Wilkerson?

Harris: No. Yes!

Wilmot: She became a professor at Cal.

Harris: She did? In what department?

Wilmot: African American studies, black studies, and theater.

Harris: Do you know when that department began?

Wilmot: Black studies? Nineteen, I think, seventy-four.

Harris: Yes, you see, it was after I left.

Wilmot: There was a whole movement to make it happen, before that.

Harris: Yes, yes.

Wilmot: So it was many years unfolding.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And that started around 1968.

Harris: Yes, yes, when I left.

Wilmot: Do you remember that there was—

Harris: I didn't leave in '68. '68-'69 was my last year. And by then we had already formed the Aldridge Players, you see. I didn't feel I could get any satisfaction out of the campus, so I did it on the outside, while on campus. And it was one of the professors who had had experience in the South and had done things in the South, Barankin, his name was. It was through him that we got our trip to the South, to the black—or Negro colleges, as they were still called. So we were aware, but I didn't feel that I had a basis for building something through my department, which was very aloof from all this, in terms of race, at any rate.

Wilmot: You say your department was very aloof from all this in terms of race?

Harris: There were no black students! A black teacher, but she was teaching white stuff. Interesting.

Wilmot: Yes. Very. And the other faculty?

Harris: I was expected to teach what the white—if I had been white and teaching there, I would be expected to teach exactly what I was teaching.

Wilmot: Yes, I understand. Do you remember also—like, I think in the late sixties there was a large push—did you have any interaction with campuses like San Francisco State?

Harris: To some degree, because one of our students, one of Mary Harris' students and Fred Harris' students, got a job at San Francisco State and was on the San Francisco State faculty. That meant that later I also worked there, when I came back home and tried to come back to Cal and they looked at me as though I'd lost my mind. You know, I left Cal. They weren't having anything to do with me. They were mad at me. I had no idea.

Wilmot: When you came back from Germany?

Harris: Yes. I thought they would accept me because they had written to me when I went abroad, and they seemed pleased that I was gone. But when I came back and suggested that maybe I could take a part-time job or something there, the reaction was very negative.

Wilmot: It was?

Harris: Because I had left! I had left Cal. I mean, I didn't understand the average professorial attitude about getting tenure, and I had reached a point where they had given me tenure. I hadn't gone through the usual methods to get it, but I had been there long enough—I think it was eight years—

Wilmot: When you got tenure.

Harris: Yes, I was given tenure.

Wilmot: Guaranteed employment.

Harris: Yes. And I chose to leave that?? They simply—I can understand their point of view. I never shared their—I wasn't so keen to be a professor or to be somebody important in the university. I was just keen to do theater wherever I could do it, and I was given an opportunity to do it there, and that, to me, was the big thing. But—well, I don't know if all professors felt that way, but the particular professor that I interviewed in the drama department was—

Wilmot: Who was that?

Harris: He's dead now.

Wilmot: That's good. You can tell me.

Harris: I can't remember offhand his name [Professor Oliver], but his wife is one of the heads of the Berkeley Repertory Theater. [Barbara Oliver] Hm, he came from South America, too. He was one of the established faculty. I think he was nearing retirement when I came back.

Wilmot: Was he someone you'd worked with those years?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Had he been in the department the whole time you were there?

Harris: Oh, yes. In fact, when I began, at that time they brought in a number of professors from elsewhere, out of California. He was one of them. Sorry I can't recall his name, but I can get it eventually. They had higher degrees than I had. I came in, benefit of Fred Harris and his wife, and they came in, benefit of their—

Wilmot: PhDs.

Harris: Yes, PhDs. So it was really something for me to be given—I had been favored all along (as the first black woman in the department) without recognizing it. How important that must have seemed to people who were primarily emphasizing the academic. I was not. I never was. Hence my lack of interest in receiving tenure. Okay, if I get tenure, fine. But I was interested in theater, and UC Berkeley offered me the only opportunity to do professional work, so of course I took it. But they were interested, of course, in the whole business of receiving tenure and the whole professional academic attitude, which was never mine. And so they didn't understand my wishing to come back, take a job. For me, it was an opportunity to work in the field. I didn't care. Didn't have to be Cal. But they knew me, so I thought maybe they'd take me back. I had been well regarded by the students and, I thought, by the faculty. [laughs] They wouldn't have anything to do with me! Because I had quit!

Wilmot: What year was this, when you returned?

Harris: It had to be in the early seventies.

Wilmot: Okay. Can you talk to me a little bit about what were dynamics like in the department while you were there? So in the early seventies, the Harrises were no longer there.

Harris: That's right. He resigned, or he retired.

Wilmot: And what were dynamics like among your colleagues, among the department?

Harris: What do you mean by that? What kind of dynamics? You mean towards blacks?

Wilmot: No, just in terms of the dynamics in the department in terms of how did people get resources? What were meetings like? Were there different kind of factions within the department?

Harris: I can't speak too well to that because I held myself aloof from the department.

Wilmot: Did people try and bring you in?

Harris: I never participated in the usual faculty stuff. I just didn't know what was going on, and didn't care, didn't want to be involved. I did not have an academic attitude, thank God. [laughs]

Wilmot: I hear you.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Were there colleagues with whom you were particularly close in the department?

Harris: Just the Harrises, and I say Harrises because Mary Harris very much had wanted to be on the faculty and could not be, because in those days if your husband worked there, you couldn't. A wife could not participate. She resented that. Hmmph.

Wilmot: Were there other women in the department?

Harris: I was the first—that's why you are interviewing me, because I was one of the first women—well, certainly I was the only woman for many years in that department. I didn't have any women associates, no. [chuckles] Very masculine department.

Wilmot: How do you—

Harris: I got in because of the Harrises, and I got in because of [claps hands together for emphasis] Mary Harris putting pressure on her husband, I guess.

Wilmot: If you're the only woman in a department like that, how do you kind of navigate that?

Harris: Well, I didn't have to navigate it! Fred Harris took care of me. And socially or through my performing, I knew—oh, I can't remember his name, but he was the one in the arts and literature department, whatever they called it, English department, actually, who had chosen Fred, you see. He had married a woman who was from the Santa Clara Valley, which was where I was from, and who knew my sponsor, who was also from Santa Clara Valley, so they knew about me. They knew I had been to San Jose State, they knew I was sponsored by one of the leading people in the area, and they were all a very close-type, rich group, so they knew about me, and they knew about Fred. Fred had been chosen by one of the husbands, who was a professor in the English department. It was all very if-you-knew-the-right-people kind of thing.

Wilmot: That was the Berkeley faculty—?

Harris: I think it was true probably of any department, at that time. Maybe it still is. I don't know.

Wilmot: That's very interesting. Were you ever kind of involved with the Academic Senate?

Harris: Academics what?

Wilmot: Senate?

Harris: I wouldn't have touched it with a—!

Wilmot: Do you recall—I think in 1969—it may have happened just after you left, but there was a class featuring Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers, that was taught at Berkeley. Do you remember that at all?

Harris: [no audible response]

Wilmot: No? I think it happened after you left.

Harris: Yes. The whole black movement in the beginning—I don't know if you're aware of this or not—was definitely masculine. In fact, if a woman participated, it was considered so special that it would be mentioned in the newspapers. Women did not take a lead in that sort of movement, in the beginning. I'm sure that changed.

Wilmot: When you say "the movement," what do you mean?

Harris: I meant the whole black thing that was developing.

Wilmot: In the sixties.

Harris: Yes, in the late fifties, sixties.

Wilmot: Well, I remember there was this one picture of you, I think in the late fifties. It's an article—there were two performers headlining a concert. One of them was Odetta.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: And the other one was you. There was a picture of you both, and you had your hair beautifully pressed and coifed, in a coiffeur, and she had her hair natural.

Harris: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, well, that was natural. She was much, much younger, a whole generation removed, I think.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Yes. I belonged in the Marian Anderson school. That's where I grew up. And Paul Robeson, except Paul Robeson was an exception. I don't know if you knew or remember that he left and went to the [speaks dramatically] Soviet Union. I came up in that period. And by the time Odetta came, the black movement had started, and it was the thing for black women to wear naturals. I can't remember her name, but the one at San Francisco State that had a huuuge natural was—you don't recall?

Wilmot: If you give me a few more words, I may know her.

Harris: She was the first black woman there, and she was the first black woman of any prominence, to my knowledge, who wore her hair in an Afro. And I remember just being terribly shocked. [laughs] How different things are!

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: I don't think black women wear Afros very much anymore, do they?

Wilmot: Sometimes. It's all different styles. You're right, it's all different styles. People can do anything.

Harris: You can do what you want now.

Wilmot: You can do many things in one lifetime, and it's a lot less politically charged, or read, even. People don't read it so politically anymore. People can have dreadlocks and it may just be about aesthetics and not about politics.

Harris: Yes, yes. Who are some of the—in your mind, would you just flash through the prominent performers, black women?

Wilmot: From what time?

Harris: In the present time. Say, late eighties, nineties. Can you think offhand?

Wilmot: Gosh, you're asking me to do the thing which I don't do well, which is think offhand. [laughs] But well, Eartha Kitt is someone who is still really active in the nineties, is still active.

Harris: Does she wear an Afro?

Wilmot: No, no, she sure doesn't. Diana Ross.

Harris: Doesn't.

Wilmot: Did at one time, but does not any longer. She processes her hair. Janet Jackson?

Harris: No.

Wilmot: No. Which would be amazing if she did. No. Tracy Chapman?

Harris: There's a movie—oh, is she a movie actress?

Wilmot: Rachelle Farrelle?

Harris: Do you see any Afros?

Wilmot: Yes, but not all the time.

Harris: Hmm.

Wilmot: Anyway. Well, that's interesting. When you—

Harris: I wore my hair in an Afro, too, at one time.

Wilmot: You did. I have this picture of you there.

Harris: How do you know?

Wilmot: It's right there.

Harris: Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. [laughs] Yes! I did, too!

Wilmot: What year was that?

Harris: I think that was in the—what? fifties? Sixties? Isn't that funny? It was a <u>style</u> thing, obviously.

Excuse me. [moves away from microphone.] Just let me take a look at that. Oh, yes. [laughs] Here I am, talking about the Afros! [returns to microphone] And this has no date on it. Well, it really arrived if it got to me, because I was opposed to it before I did this, and obviously I went into a period when it was okay. I don't know how I feel about it now.

Wilmot: Okay. You say you still straighten your hair?

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: Do you get it processed, or do you just flat-iron it?

Harris: There was a period when I'd go to Laney College and have them do it because Laney College—

Wilmot: The beauticians school?

Harris: Yes! [laughs]

Wilmot: You've got to be careful with that, though.

Harris: [laughs]

Wilmot: You can't have people learning on your hair.

Harris: [laughs and looks at picture again] That's interesting. I hadn't even noticed that.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Afros! I don't think I ever taught with an Afro. [laughs] I can't remember my attitude. I must have been influenced by that woman at State. This must have been after I quit my job. I never wore an Afro. As far as I remember, I never wore an Afro when I taught at Cal.

Wilmot: Why not?

Harris: Out of the question.

Wilmot: [laughs] Okay.

Harris: And yet I wasn't—we took that trip to the South, and I formed the Aldridge Players/ West. We didn't call ourselves Afro-Americans, either, yet. Do you know when that came in?

Wilmot: I think eighties.

Harris: In the eighties, yes.

Wilmot: How one wears one's hair doesn't match someone's political commitments, necessarily. Maybe sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't, so it's not that big a deal. I was wondering if we could back up for a little while and I could ask you a little bit about when you went to London in 1955, before you came to Berkeley, I was just wondering—oh, I can hear the parrots. [sound of flock of Telegraph Hill parrots flying past Harris' balcony].

Harris: Yes. There's a great colony of them. Do you know about them? They're up on this hill.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: We could maybe bring them over here and feed them.

Harris: [laughs] That'll be the day.

Wilmot: [laughs]

Harris: I went up there and looked for them, you know, and found them.

Wilmot: You did?

Harris: Oh, yes. There was an article in the *[San Francisco] Chronicle* about where they were, so I knew precisely where to go, and it's a very special spot up there. Isn't that interesting, that they do that?

Wilmot: I think so.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: This whole area is very lovely. I enjoy it.

Harris: Yes, yes.

Wilmot: Did you experience race differently when you went to Europe the first time, the second time? Did you experience race and racism? Was your self-awareness changed?

Harris: It was different because the first time I went was in London, and London was just pulling itself out of the war thing, and the second time I went, I was in Germany, where I expected to meet some prejudice, I think, but it was a more generalized kind. Germany, of course, was where we traveled in the *Porgy and Bess*, mainly. They were very interested. We were exotic to them, so very interesting. "You stay in your place," but if you didn't, it was an exotic thing. We were exotics.

Wilmot: How long were you in Germany?

Harris: Let's see. I went in '69. I think I was there until the show started. In the beginning, I was there about two or three years, and then toured. That includes the touring in Germany. I lived first in Munich and then in Berlin, and I had an apartment which I loved, in Berlin.

Wilmot: What was it like? Why did you love it?

Harris: I was near the downtown area, and I could have a piano there. It was considered all right to make noise on the piano. I felt quite <u>free</u> of what I'd been used to in terms of conventional things, in Berlin. And then, of course, *Porgy and Bess* was a reversion to an older American attitude towards blacks, although you didn't talk about racial things

in *Porgy and Bess*, as I recall, but there was a lot of implication of racial things because it was laid in the South.

Wilmot: Let's take a break right there, and then we'll come back and talk about *Porgy and Bess*.

Harris: Okay. *Porgy and Bess*. What do I remember about it? I was trying to find my score. I can't even find the score. A huge thing. I bet I sold it.

Wilmot: Oh, no!

This, I have to put away because I'm eating all your cookies!

Harris: [laughs] Do you want something to drink? Would you like a cup of—I have herbal tea, several kinds.

Wilmot: I think I would love some water.

Harris: Just plain old water? Is it okay if it's filtered, or would you prefer from the tap? [pause as she moves away to get water, then returns]

[interview interruption]

Wilmot: Can you refresh my memory? What is the story of *Porgy and Bess*? Do you remember?

Harris: That's a good question. The one thing I noticed was that it was laid in the South, I think in Florida, but I'm not sure about that, but it's Deep South. Porgy was a crippled man, who couldn't use either leg, and never stood up, a hard role for an actor. He never stood up during the whole three-act, I think it was, production. I can't even remember what it was about.

Wilmot: You played the role of Maria. [pronouncing it Mah-ree-ah]

Harris: Yes, I know what I played, and I know what people played, but in all drama there is a core problem or a conflict or something that has to be settled, and I remember that there was some problem with whites. But do you know that I cannot remember the core of that story. It was not a very good story. It <u>is</u> not a very good story, except that it was laid in the South. It's among blacks, and whether they're—I can't remember. I'll have to look it up.

Wilmot: Was it a love story? I should know this.

Harris: Yes, you should know it. I wish I had my—it's not a good story. They were opportunities to perform.

Wilmot: What was your role about in that?

Harris: I had a very unimportant role. I had the only mezzo voice, solo voice, Maria [pronounces it muh-RYE-uh], she was called. She was an older woman, and she had a

spot on stage where she leaned out of the window constantly. Once in a while she came out. It was a small role. She came out on stage, and there's this picture of me consoling Porgy. She was very fond of Porgy. But I don't remember where the main conflict was, except in general it was against the white community. But I don't remember. I'm going to have to look that up.

Wilmot: Me, too. I should know this.

Harris: Yes. I should know it. I was in it!

Wilmot: That was with the Swiss touring company?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Were they the first people you hooked up with when you moved to Germany?

Harris: The very first people were the people in Munich, because Munich is where most of the blacks go. It is the center for musical things. The musical company, the name of which I can't remember, was located in Switzerland, Basel, I believe. When it wanted to have a company of blacks, as it had done before—it had done another production, an early production of *Porgy and Bess*—it had come down to Munich, and all the blacks who live in Munich inform their friends, wherever they are—Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Berlin, wherever—"Come to Munich because this company is going to be having tryouts for" whatever, *Porgy and Bess*, and later we did another production. What does it say?

Wilmot: *Carmen Jones*.

Harris: Yes! [laughs] That's right. I'm glad I found that.

Wilmot: Me too.

Harris: So Munich was the place to go. And I had been advised by people who had been there, who were from this area, that that's where I should go, and I did.

Wilmot: Did you go to Germany with these jobs already set up?

Harris: No, no, no, no.

Wilmot: So you went to Germany with just a clean slate and a wish to be there?

Harris: A clean slate**.** Oh, yes. And I worked, because of lieder, the German lieder, I had worked—did I work in the library? I was there a year before I knew about this, before they had a production. And I lived in Munich, and when I got to Munich, everybody said, "Well, you ought to go to Berlin. Munich is so boring. Go to Berlin. That's the place to be." Oh-ho-ho-ho! I can hardly wait. And I went. So I stayed in Munich, oh, several weeks, maybe a couple of months or more, and then I went up to Berlin, which I loved immediately. I don't know why. I hadn't seen any productions, but just the enthusiasm of the people that I did know in Munich for Berlin, and I think I got a job. Yes, not for the Germans but for—does it say anything about it? I worked for University of Maryland. Doesn't it mention the University of Maryland?

Wilmot: [no audible response]

Harris: Oh, gosh, I left that out. Anyway, I went up there and worked. Went from Munich via London and later went to Berlin.

Wilmot: What did you do in the job for the University of Maryland?

Harris: I taught. [claps hands] Forgot it! I taught. Speech. That was it, yes. I was thinking I must have worked in the library, but no, I taught.

Wilmot: Does that mean teaching English, or does it mean teaching speech?

Harris: These were all the children of American soldiers stationed in Germany.

Wilmot: Whoa!

Harris: Yes. They're a lot of them, many more than we have any idea of. Can you imagine? High schools are set up for them, and the University of Maryland takes care of everything beyond high school.

Wilmot: That's fascinating.

Harris: Yes. I think the headquarters are in Frankfurt. I'm not sure. But at any rate, that's the thing to do if you're an American in Europe and you need to work.

Wilmot: Were there any young mixed-race children there, American young black children there?

Harris: That's a good question. I'm sure there were.

Wilmot: Among your students?

Harris: But I don't remember, again. I didn't have any black students.

Wilmot: You said that you loved Berlin immediately. Is it a very beautiful city? What made you say you just loved it immediately?

Harris: It seems international. Munich seems very German. Beautiful, and very friendly, lovely city with lots of interesting cultural things. But the minute you get to Berlin, somehow you just knew that you were in a world city. Munich is a German city, so it seemed to me. And very lovely. But Berlin is—maybe it's because of what I'd been reading all my life. No, it's the city, itself, and the structure of the buildings, the one church that they've left standing there that's been bombed in half, and it just stands there as a monument still.

And it was divided, of course, into East and West at that time. There was the gate that you had to go through in order to get to East Berlin. If you wanted to see good theater, for instance, the famous World Theater, it was on the east side, so you'd have to make a trip over there, and that meant going through the gate and having your passport and all that ready.

I just loved it. But when I heard that they were going to do a production of *Porgy and Bess*, I was sent messages to come and try out, which meant going back to Munich, because that's where the company was started. And I had an apartment in Berlin, and I loved Berlin, but I very much wanted to be a part of this production. So I left Berlin and went back to Munich and tried out for the production, and was cast because—well, I could sing, but the point is that in that whole company there were only two of us who had lower voices, and that's what they wanted for the part of Maria. So I was cast and toured with the company.

Wilmot: What was the audience response to your performances? Do you recall?

Harris: Oh, they loved it. We were exotic. They loved it.

Wilmot: Were people in the cast from all over the United States? Were they mostly from the United States?

Harris: Some from London, which meant they were West Indians. There were a few, but most were from the South or New York. They were people who had been in other productions of *Porgy and Bess*, and there were productions after ours, of course. The people just loved *Porgy and Bess*. They never do it here. Have you ever seen a production of *Porgy and Bess*? No.

Wilmot: I've only heard that Nina Simone song.

Harris: Which is?

Wilmot: [sings] "I love you Porgy"—

Harris: Oh, yes.

Wilmot: [sings] "Don't let them take me."

Harris: Yes. I have to get back and see what the attitudes were towards whites. *Porgy and Bess* is mainly a story about what happens within the group, but I can't remember—that little community of which Porgy is a very important part. But Porgy is definitely a black who is subservient to whites, so that's why I must read it again.

Wilmot: I must read it again, too.

Harris: Yes. *Porgy and Bess*, hmm. They're poor blacks. I remember that. And Bess is someone special. She's supposed to be beautiful. I'll have to read it. I don't recall. Isn't that something?

What is the plot of *Carmen*?

Wilmot: Oh, *Carmen* is a wonderful one.

Harris: And then they made a black production of that.

Wilmot: Well, it's *Carmen Jones*. You're listed here as the chorus and director.

Harris: Oh, yes. [laughs] Because I'd been in at least one production of the *Porgy and Bess*, and they didn't have anyone to handle the actors. Of course, that was my job at Cal, dealing with actors.

Wilmot: So for *Carmen Jones,* do you remember the story? It's the same as *Carmen*, from [George] Bizet's *Carmen*.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: That's that same story, where there's this wild woman and "L'amour est un oiseau—," "Love is a wild bird that goes to wherever it wants to." It's all about Carmen. She's a gypsy, and she's a wild person, and she falls in love with whoever she wants, and men just go crazy for her. And then she falls in love with one man, takes him away from his childhood sweetheart—

Harris: Yes, I'm remembering—

Wilmot: Michaela [mispronouncing it as mik-KYLE-uh] is the childhood sweetheart.

Harris: [corrects her pronunciation] Mik-kye-AY-luh, we called her.

Wilmot: Michaela, and then she falls out of love with him and falls in love with—

Harris: The toreador.

Wilmot: [Sings]: "Toreador, bum buh<u>dum</u> buh<u>dum</u>. Bum bum buh<u>dum</u>, bum bum buh<u>dum</u>."

Harris: Last act, last scene. Yes.

Wilmot: And then that's it. And then he loses his mind because she's no longer in love with him but in love with the toreador.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: He approaches her at the end of the bullfight and kills her, and murders her.

Harris: That's right. Yes, he kills her, on stage. [sucks her teeth]

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: So there wasn't any part, really, for me, a small, minor part, but mainly I was choral, and because of my background and experience, they finally had me direct the company.

Wilmot: That's an incredible job, being director.

Harris: It had been directed first and set up, but then on the road, I was director. I'd forgotten that.

Wilmot: Was that a place where you could bring an artistic vision, or was it already set up?

Harris: It was set up, pretty much.

Wilmot: So where did you travel for that production? Do you recall? Did you travel around Germany?

Harris: We went everywhere in Germany, it seemed to me. Small communities and big communities, of course, and also Vienna, and it was when I was standing on the Vienna stage, and I thought to myself—was it then, or was it in *Porgy and Bess*?—I can't remember, but I couldn't hear myself, and I decided that I needed to go home, or I needed to study, because I couldn't hear myself.

Wilmot: Hmm.

Harris: I knew I wasn't using my voice correctly, that it was wearing out. That's what it sounded like. So I decided to come back to Munich and study, which is what I did. And then I got a job with the University of Maryland.

Wilmot: What about that performance of *Medea*? When did that take place in the whole time abroad, in Germany?

Harris: [no immediate response] Hmm. [looks at document] Here it is. That happened in—Ugh! I left *Porgy and Bess* because I fell in love with Porgy. [chuckles] Porgy wasn't in love with me. I was okay on the road, but he had a permanent relationship with a German woman. He was married to a black woman, and I guess Europe was too fascinating for him and not so fascinating for her. She left and went home, and he took up with this very lovely German woman, who was a German teacher. I mean, she taught in what would be the equivalent of a high school, public school. But, after all, he was on the road a good deal of the time, and so we got to be good friends, friends and lovers, I guess you'd say. George. What is George's name?

Wilmot: Sounds like Freedman?

Harris: No, no, no, no. How could I forget George? Goodman. George Goodman. So I began to see that that was hopeless and not a good thing. It had no ending. I knew it would end. So, I left the company. After being with it a year or so, I left it and came back to the United States. And it was at that time that—that's the summer following when I come home that George, my friend, George Marchi, whom I had been in the *Oresteia* with at Cal, was living in Greece and had been asked to direct this group of American students who go to Europe to train. They're children mainly, I think, of Americans who work in Germany. There are a lot of them, in the army or in some capacity or another, connected with the university. It's a permanent school. There's a school there. They're high school girls, mainly.

Wilmot: American Theater.

Harris: American, American Theater in Europe. So they were going to do the *Medea*. George knew me and knew my work as Clytemnestra, of course. He knew I could do it, so he didn't have to have a tryout, he just asked me if I'd come and do *Medea*. So I did. That was wonderful.

Wilmot: The photos of you doing *Medea* are just incredible.

Harris: Yes. That was wonderful.

Wilmot: You are doing some incredible work there.

Harris: Yes. Well, it was big. We played in big, open-air spaces frequently, so it was like working in the Greek Theatre at Cal, where you very seldom get to do a production here. Of course, in Greece and in Italy there are many open-air theaters. So that's what we did. We trained in Italy. The school is in northern Italy, and we trained there. I'm trying to think where we got the big space. But then we began to travel, and we traveled as far south as Sicily, then up the west coast. We didn't do so many places, but we definitely were on the island. Taramino was one of our main places on the island of Sicily, because there's an old Greek theater. We went wherever there were Greek theaters, some of them in ruins, but still in use.

Wilmot: You said that George Mackey was—

Harris: Marchi. [corrects her]

Wilmot: Marchi was a good director.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: What makes a good director?

Harris: [laughs] Someone who has a good grasp of the story line and brings the whole affair into a good climax, of course, is what the actors feel about it. Furthermore, he had trained with Mary Harris, as I had. Not as much as I had. The reason he didn't train as much was because he was so in demand as an actor, had been in Berkeley, at UC Berkeley and also at theater—well, the theater group is still in existence in Berkeley. I can't remember the name of it. He was very handsome, but he was a serious actor, and I think quite a good one. But I hadn't had much experience with others. But among the ones that I knew and had experienced around in Berkeley, he certainly was one of the top actors.

Well, he was now in charge of the drama department of this school, and they toured, for the sake of the girls that were at the school—it was both high school and college, the first two years of college—they hired George because he was a former—well, was a friend of the man who was in charge of the drama at the school. So they hired George in to take this company, which included, of course, people who weren't students. I mean. It's a girls' school, so they had men. The lead—well, I was one of the leads, and the other lead was Jason, and he was from UC Berkeley. So we had a wonderful time training there in northern Italy, and then we toured—did we tour—we stayed in Italy.

Wilmot: Where do you find the emotional content to play Medea?

Harris: [laughs and then pauses] Well, it was based on her being a foreigner. She was a queen in her own country, either a queen or a princess, I can't remember, and she was married by this fellow from Greece who had power, Jason. And, they had children, and he

wanted more power apparently, and took up with this woman in another country, and it just—she wasn't used to that kind of treatment. She'd been the head lady. Always. And then he did this terrible thing to her, by taking up with this woman in another country. She just couldn't take it. So she fixed him.

Wilmot: She lost her mind. She fixed herself, too.

Harris: At the end, she's up on top of a hill, high above the crowd, still alive. They never get her. She is not punished for it, but she doesn't have her husband anymore, of course. Now, who did she kill? The kids. That's how she got even with him. Oh! Dreadful.

Wilmot: That's why I'm saying, where do you find that kind of emotional content to play that role?

Harris: If you've done Clytemnestra, who killed her husband, don't forget—those Greek women were tough! [laughs] You don't fool with 'em. They show you! It wasn't in my nature, so I thought, but I guess it is. That kind of strong revenge this is not anything you get a chance to experience much in the United States. I had a good life, but there is in all people this negative force, and it was a matter of calling upon the negative in myself.

Wilmot: Was it really negative, or was it just strong?

Harris: It was mainly strong, but it was negative, too. In acting, there are these two forces, the negative and the positive.

Wilmot: Oh, I didn't realize that.

Harris: You deal with those. Well, every drama. You can't have drama without that.

Wilmot: I think when you were using that word, that "negative," "positive," I didn't realize that that was an actual—

Harris: Oh, that's in everyone.

Wilmot: A language that is drama. I didn't realize that.

Harris: Oh, yes. Hate, or distrust, or any of the negative emotions are on this side; and love is on the other side, and love is the powerful one, of course, I was taught, the most powerful one. But hate and—

Wilmot: But they're all so connected.

Harris: That's right. In the human nature, it has to do finally with not Greek or American or not any—it has to do with human nature. These are the two strong, powerful forces.

Wilmot: But doesn't that kind of make your palette somewhat, as an artist or an actor who is drawing from these forces—doesn't that make your palette limited?

Harris: Does that make your palette what?

Wilmot: Limited to just—how do you kind of render complex emotions if that's all you've got?

Harris: You depend upon love. There is this basic emotional force that's in all of us that runs from here [demonstrates] down to there [demonstrates]. I mean, that's the nature of being a human, is to have the capacity to go to the depth or to the height, and it's the actor who has occasion to plumb the depths and the heights. So you have to, when you're acting—I had never hated anybody enough to kill him. The idea of destroying—I think of myself as being a person who is loving, but I suppose if someone crossed me—well, I know that if people crossed me, I must have reacted in—we have the positive and the negative, love and hate. Every human being has that.

An actor is the person and actresses are the people who are, just by the nature of their profession, compelled to explore. And to make a good drama, you have to have something that's pretty negative. You can't have an all-positive drama. That becomes a comedy, then, pretty much, and that's a different thing.

And there's nothing more powerful than the Greek drama, or least nothing I've ever seen. Because the Greeks don't fool around. They just deal with the basics: love and hate. And the great drama—well, what's another one? *Oedipus*. But, of course, it's unusual to see a woman play the hate role, and in both cases, in the case of Clytemnestra, she kills her husband; and in the case of Medea, she doesn't kill her husband, but she kills her children, whom she loves.

Wilmot: That's the part that's incredible. She kills the manifestation of their love together.

Harris: Really. And at the end, she is not caught or captured, but the final scene after she's done all this—the most beautiful robe of the entire production is made and given to me, all gold, and I'm taken way up above the theater, and there you see her at the end, dressed—yes, still alive. [laughs] I don't think she's living with other people.

Wilmot: No! She probably isn't. [laughs]

Harris: [laughs] But she's alive. Well, it was interesting for me because I was not raised to be negative. I'm sure I was. I mean, we all have it in us. But it was never called upon.

Wilmot: I know. In fact, it was—

Harris: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You were trained to be nice.

Wilmot: In quotes.

Harris: So it was an interesting experience for me, and very liberating in the sense that I knew that I had it in me. We never think of ourselves as being like that. We think of ourselves as being nice. We're trained to be nice, whereas the Greek drama says you have this capacity for hate and love, and drama says that, too. And we do have it.

Wilmot: That's pretty incredible.

Harris: Ehhhhhhh! [hoots] And it would be boring, otherwise.

Wilmot: And that's mainly in contrast—I'm sorry, *Medea*—was that in 1973 or '74? Do you remember when that was, just to place it? I don't have that here.

Harris: Let's see, I do have it specifically. [reads document to herself] Performed—where did I go?

Wilmot: You're at the bottom.

Harris: Oh. Europe to play *Carmen Jones*. Oh, here, *Medea* in Italy, '72.

Wilmot: That was '72.

Harris: Summer of '72.

Wilmot: That's the year I was born.

Harris: Was it?

Wilmot: Yes. So, my goodness.

Harris: My word!

Wilmot: And I was born in July, in the summertime.

Harris: And that was when we did it, too.

Wilmot: But my question for you is how did playing a role like that, with that kind of intensity and wrath, differ from something like Amanda from [Tennessee Williams'] *The Glass Menagerie* or Mummy from Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, if you recall those roles.

Harris: I think I always had a problem, actually, not to come on too strongly, to keep it light.

Wilmot: Was Amanda and Mummy—both of those were fairly—

Harris: Amanda from *Glass Menagerie*. Do I have that listed?

Wilmot: Yes. Even Mummy from *Sandbox*.

Harris: Oh, yes, Mummy is—well, they're all strong. All the parts I've ever done are strong, whether they're comic or not. And, of course, those were—I don't remember doing Amanda. Does it say where?

Wilmot: Aldridge Players/West.

Harris: I guess we did it, then. What's the name of the production?

Wilmot: *The Glass Menagerie*.

Harris: Yes. Hmm. I always have played strong women, even if they were comic, because I come across that way. All women have it, the capacity for doing it, but I had the stature

and a few other things that meant that when I was in theater, people used me in that way. I was never chosen for any light, comic things. Always the strong one. I was older, also. In any production, they would choose me as the mother or the woman in charge.

Wilmot: Was that to your liking, by the way?

Harris: Well, just to be on stage—after all, remember, I was pretty old by the time I got involved, at least in my thirties. I was happy. I was a little put off by being always the "bad woman." Imagine, killing your husband and killing your children! Ooh! [laughs] But these were strong roles. I had a teacher. Mary Harris was a strong woman. I don't think she would have been able to handle the lighter things, and what opportunity was there for a black woman to do comedy, except in black comedy? And you know what black comedy would have been in those days: demeaning for blacks. So I was limited to one type of role, pretty much.

Wilmot: I wanted to just go back quite a bit, then, to 1953, when you played the Old Maid in *The Old Maid and the Thief*.

Harris: Oh yes!

Wilmot: What kind of role was that? Forgive me, I'm not familiar with that story line.

Harris: I'm don't remember it too much, either, but the whole thing was more comic than anything else. When was it, '51?

Wilmot: '53, I believe.

Harris: '53? [reads to herself] And I didn't have anything in there about formation of the Singers Guild, either, did I?

Wilmot: No.

Harris: I don't remember the story of *The Old Maid and the Thief*, to tell you the truth.

Wilmot: Okay. Do you remember what your role was as the Old Maid?

Harris: It was the leading role. It was one of the leading roles. The Thief was the other leading role, and the nice, the loving role was done by the soprano. We're still friends.

Wilmot: That was with The Playhouse. You're still friends with her?

Harris: Oh, yes. She was a wonderful singer. It's interesting. I notice as I go over this that all these people were from Cal. She had been at Mills [College], but—

Wilmot: What's her name, again?

Harris: Dorothy Renzi, and she's a leading, <u>the</u> voice teacher in Fresno, California. She and her husband, who's a sculptor, traveled all over Europe. They happened to be there around the same time I was. We had gotten acquainted because we'd been in *The Old Maid and the Thief* together, and the director of that had been at—oh, what's the woman's college

that out beyond Oakland? Mills. He had been the director there. He lived in Berkeley, and we had played things for him. No, that was the first thing we had done, so we all three met.

The male lead had been at UC Berkeley, and the female lead had been at Mills, and I had been at UC Berkeley. He was a Berkeleyan, Martin [Ponch?].

Wilmot: That was with The Playhouse?

Harris: That's right, that's right. So he had been at Stanford [University], and he knew about me through the Greek Theatre, because the man who—*The Trojan Women*, I think, way back. He had directed there or had been connected with that production and then went to Stanford, and that's how he knew Martin. Well, it was all a local thing. Stanford, Cal, Mills. People in theater sort of knew each other.

But how did he—we weren't just in theater. This was a musical thing. *Old Maid and the Thief* is a musical, I think, isn't it?

Wilmot: Yes, it's "a new musical." Yes, it is.

Harris: And it interested me to see I had done it so soon. When was it, '52?

Wilmot: I think 1953.

Harris: '53. That was the first time I was really able to combine music and drama.

Wilmot: That was the same year as your debut, I believe.

Harris: Oh, was it?

Wilmot: Maybe 1952.

Harris: Did I—[looks at document]—no. Oh, yes, you're right.

Wilmot: Henrietta, I have a question for you. When you were in Germany, did you have the opportunity to locate Marguerite Ray?

Harris: Marguerite Ray and I found each other. Now, how we did it, I don't recall. She worked—do you know her?

Wilmot: You told me that she used to direct recreation on Army bases.

Harris: Yes, yes. And we did locate each other. She came to the production, the theater thing. Isn't that funny. I don't emphasize that. I don't mention Marguerite. Yes, Marguerite was—when I was in Munich, we had contact. I don't recall. We certainly saw each other, and I have pictures of us together in Florence. Do you know Marguerite? Have you met her?

Wilmot: No. I only remember you talking about her from the Aldridge Players. [Marguerite was one of the founders of Aldridge Players/West. *H.H.*]

Harris: She lives in Oakland. I mean, her family lived in Oakland, 56th Street. She was at Cal, and, although I never saw it, she did act in a production at Cal. I never saw her. Not a black role, of course.

And she located me somehow. I don't know how we got together, but we did, and met. And I can't remember what production she came to. Huh! Oh, this is—I don't remember her coming to—although a lot of people I knew did come to our production for the girls' school, did come to it, when we got near Florence, the community outside Florence. So there were Americans, of course, who came to these productions, because it was an American company, essentially. But I don't remember—

Wilmot: What did you make of Italy?

Harris: I liked it, but I can't remember—was it because of these productions? I guess it was. That's how I knew Italy, mainly, was through having been in theater productions. I also traveled with the *Porgy and Bess* companies, the singing companies, but I don't remember—we didn't travel in Italy very much. We traveled a little bit in France, but not very much. We traveled mainly the Germanic countries: Holland and, as I say, part of France, and all over West Germany. I can't remember. We didn't go to East Germany.

Wilmot: So does 1973, 1972 and the end of your time with the *Medea* production—does that bring you firmly back to the Bay Area?

Harris: Good question. [turns pages] No, I didn't stay, although I was tempted. I could have stayed in Europe and gotten work at these various companies, but I came back because my feet hurt, and there are so many cobblestones in Europe. [chuckles]

Wilmot: You said you couldn't hear your voice.

Harris: I couldn't hear my voice, and my feet hurt, and I knew my body was off, so I came back to the United States. Let's see, when was that? [turns pages] Wait a minute. Oh, here we are. Back to Europe in '73. Oh, right after I did the *Medea*, I came back to California and—huh?? Oh. I began to work at Laney College. I think that was because I was refused work at the University of California. I had a friend who taught at Laney College, in the media department, so I worked there part time, and then I went back to Europe to play several small roles, it says here, in *Carmen Jones*, which was the same company which had produced *Porgy and Bess*.

Wilmot: I understand now.

Harris: It did. In '73, I went back—it must have been the fall of '73. After doing the summer production of *Medea*, I went back to play *Carmen Jones*, and it was then—it was in *Carmen Jones*, not *Porgy and Bess*, that I couldn't hear myself on the stage.

Wilmot: You were in the chorus. Let's close there.

Harris: I had small parts but—.

Wilmot: Let's close there for today. Is that okay?

Harris: Okay, fine. And it was then, ’74, that I went to Munich to teach at the University of Maryland. Yes, that’s a good point.

[end of session]

**Interview 6: January 22, 2003**

Wilmot: January 22nd, 2003, interview six, Henrietta Harris.

Harris: When I wrote this, I never had any idea I'd need it. [rustles document, her vitae, turns pages]

Wilmot: I wanted to start us off back in Europe. I realize that you stayed there off and on until 1977, and I wanted to ask you first—there were a couple of questions that came to my mind about Germany in particular, in Europe. But first, did you make personal friends with Germans and people there? Did you develop friendships with people while you were there?

Harris: Yes, I did, but they were mainly with Americans, because the University of Maryland teaches all over Europe, where there are Americans stationed. Maybe other places, too. I don't know. But in Europe they're there. And so I would always meet people from various parts of the United States. If they were interested in the same things I was interested in, acting and voice, then we became friends. I actually taught for them. Oral interp, I think, oral interpretation.

Wilmot: Oral interpretation. I'm also really intrigued with the question of how people in Germany handled their history with regards to the Holocaust.

Harris: It's interesting that you should raise that question, but it never came up. First of all, I think most of us, except those of us—and there were a few—who became intimately involved, that is to say, they married people or they worked in German jobs, but mainly they were people who stayed close to the University of Maryland or to the American companies which came there to perform, so my contacts and friends were mainly either Americans who were there to work or Germans who had married Americans, and there were a few of those. Our Bess, for instance, married a German, so we picked up on German life a little bit from that sort of thing. But mainly it was Americans who were there to work with the Germans and who made contact with the Germans that way, but it was mainly the Americans that were our friends.

Wilmot: So did you have a perspective, then, on how Germans handled their history?

Harris: Not very much, not very much, because it was quite a sensitive subject still.

Wilmot: Was it?

Harris: Well, it was with us. I don't know how they felt about it. But it was mainly a subject you didn't want to touch, and you didn't have to. The few Germans, like the people who produced *Porgy and Bess*—they were Swiss Germans. We always made a difference in our minds between the Germans that were there when [Adolf] Hitler was in control and the Germans from elsewhere, like the Germans in Vienna or the Germans in Switzerland, and there were a lot of them.

Wilmot: Was there?

Harris: But we didn't talk about the past in Germany, with Hitler.

Wilmot: With the Germans, you mean.

Harris: It was too offensive.

Wilmot: Offensive to the Germans?

Harris: Offensive to us.

Wilmot: It would be offensive to everyone.

Harris: Or at least that's the way I felt about it. We talked to Americans who'd had some experience. We'd say, "How does so-and-so feel about so-and-so?" But we didn't get into that.

Wilmot: How did you become interested in bodywork? I understand it was while you were in Europe that you became interested in bodywork?

Harris: I became interested in bodywork mainly because my feet gave out on me. I think I mentioned that, or if I didn't, I should have done so, because that was why I left, finally. I could have stayed on, working for Americans in the University of Maryland, for instance. But I felt I needed to come back to the United States, find out what was wrong with my feet, and do something about it, and get away from those cobblestones, because they were everywhere, and they were hard to walk on.

Wilmot: You said that you had found a friend in Munich, I think, who then knew someone else in London, and that was how you came to bodywork. How did you actually—

Harris: Actually, I got a letter from my former accompanist, [Olga Scheuermann], who told me that a couple in Palo Alto, which is where she lived, were having great success in teaching the [Frederick Matthias] Alexander technique, and she went on and on about it. She said these two people had been in London and had worked there at the school for Alexander, and they were now teaching in Palo Alto and that their work was very successful, and it had to do with the body.

Well, my body was giving out, and I thought, "Woo! That sounds good." And she suggested that I stop at this place run by a man named Walter Carrington, and find out about the Alexander technique.

Wilmot: Where was this place located?

Harris: In London.

Wilmot: Do you remember what neighborhood?

Harris: Yes, I remember. Let's see. It was—hmm—yes, I remember it, but I can't remember the name of it. Let's see, how can I describe it? It was on the other side of the park, Regents Park. In other words, it was rather far out. And it was near a community whose name I can't recall at the moment, where a lot of foreign students and people in

general lived. But this school was close to the park, so you didn't necessarily run into these various foreigners if you went there. If you went a little further still—you had to make an effort to go to these foreign neighborhoods, I'd say. Call them foreign neighborhoods. At any rate, she suggested that I look them up, so I did, just before I left.

Wilmot: So you were on your way back.

Harris: I was on my way back.

Wilmot: Did you end up staying—

Harris: I stayed extra for either one full month or maybe a month and a half, but I worked every day.

Wilmot: When you say "work"?

Harris: I mean I went to the school and I found a teacher, who worked with me every day.

Wilmot: So you stayed in London for an extra month or two?

Harris: At least a month. Probably somewhere between a month and two months.

Wilmot: Just to—

Harris: Just to work on it.

Wilmot: —learn Alexander technique. What was it about that technique that you found so compelling?

Harris: It was about how to use the body, and I'd never been trained in that. Except, as a singer you were trained about the upper part and sometimes about the lower part, and sometimes your legs were included. But for the most part, the body, except as it related to singing or as your teacher understood it to relate to singing, because we discovered you can't separate the body out, it's the whole body that gets involved.

Wilmot: In singing.

Harris: In singing. So I got fascinated with it, and I was willing to go home, because I knew that when I got home—I was going to go home anyway, but I was more interested when I found out that when I got there, I'd be able to work with someone who had worked with the people I knew in London. I was very excited about it.

Wilmot: Can you describe for me that experience of going to do that work every day for a month to two months, in London? Where did you live?

Harris: That's a good question. Oh, I lived in the neighborhood. There is a place for—I can't remember the name of it now, because that's been some thirty years ago—has it? It was the seventies, so it wasn't thirty years, it was twenty-some years. I found a place, just to have a room, and access to a toilet and bathroom, because they didn't have those in your

room in London. And so I stayed there, and I went every day and made sure—I was told that someone was going to be coming from London to the East Bay. That person never did show up, but it wasn't necessary because when I got home, I started to work with the Avaks, they were called.

Wilmot: How do you spell Avaks?

Harris: A-v-a-k.

Wilmot: My understanding about the Alexander technique is that it's a lot about spine? Is that correct?

Harris: Oh, it has a lot to do with the spine. A good body, in other words.

Wilmot: What does that mean, a good body?

Harris: Your head erect [demonstrates], never down, never stuck out like this [demonstrates], which some people got involved in, but the spine, down through the entire leg. In other words, it's good bodywork, involving the feet and so on. Why didn't it work? I don't know. It did to some degree. It helped me, but it was not the answer because I kept doing other bodywork. I'd been in Middendorf, for instance, which is another approach to it, and I'd done [Moshe] Feldenkrais. I did learn in London that Alexander's big rival was a man named Feldenkrais, so I knew there was another approach. I never found out quite what the difference was. Alexander was the first.

Wilmot: What kind of exercises did you do initially?

Harris: I can't remember exercises in the same sense that we use that word now. They didn't seem like the exercises that you find in books and so on. I can't remember. There were two aspects always to it. One was standing up, and the other was lying down on a cot of some kind, where the teacher then worked on you. Front and back. Then had you get up and walk around and try to incorporate the things you learned from both the standing up and the lying down. As I say, the standing up, you were independent, guided by the teacher, who would give you instructions, and then when you lay down on the coach, she or he worked on you, front and back.

Wilmot: Was your teacher at that time Walter Carrington?

Harris: Well, he was the head teacher, and everyone longed to work with him because somehow or other, when Walter put his hands on you, particularly—I'll never forget his putting his hands in some way I can't describe that was absolutely thrilling, and unwound me completely. It was an absolutely marvelous experience. When Walter put his hands on you, you could do anything. But Walter wasn't available for everybody, or all the time. You worked with other people who'd been trained there. They weren't as good as Walter. Walter was fabulous.

Wilmot: Did you ever think of becoming a teacher and staying there?

Harris: No, I knew I had to come back, and I particularly wanted to come back because my friend from Palo Alto, my former accompanist, had written to me about this couple.

Wilmot: The Avaks.

Harris: Yes, that had been teaching, so I thought I could work with them.

Wilmot: So when you came back here and settled again in the Bay Area, did you just take back your apartment that you had sublet?

Harris: Did I tell you that I sublet? That's right, I did. Not right away. I lived with a friend for a while because the person who had my apartment was from Australia and was going to go back, so I just waited. I didn't throw her out or anything like that.

I'm trying to find—[looks through documents]

Wilmot: How did Middendorf and Feldenkrais, as practices, come into your life? When you came back, did you go right to work with the Avaks?

Harris: Oh, I went to work with the Avaks, and I worked with them solid, and them alone, for ten years.

Wilmot: And that was still Alexander?

Harris: And that was still Alexander. Then I quit. I didn't work with anybody. I worked by myself. And then later I did some—let's see, I finally—no, I didn't start to work with Feldenkrais until much later, till nineteen hundred and so on. And Middendorf, I heard about through my dental hygienist. She had done some work in Middendorf. I hadn't heard about it. But by that time, all this bodywork had become "the thing," so to speak. There were lots in—. And when I first started, the Avaks were the only ones I knew anything about, except I heard remotely about this Feldenkrais. There were a few Feldenkrais people, too, mainly in San Francisco, as far as I knew. And I heard about them—I just remembered this—through the person who handled the bodywork at—not Actors Ensemble. What is our big—?

Wilmot: A.C.T.?

Harris: A.C.T. So I knew that was going on. I never came did any work with him, but he was most highly recommended in San Francisco.

Wilmot: What's his name? Do you remember?

Harris: I don't remember his name, and I don't think he works any longer. But they were doing this kind of bodywork. This is something that was not true when I first left. I mean, I had never heard of all this bodywork before.

Wilmot: So bodywork started to become really integrated into acting.

Harris: Oh, it was. Oh, that had happened with Alexander.

Wilmot: In 19—

Harris: In the twenties and the thirties, Alexander was big. Big time. And he had worked with actors. Everybody could see finally that there was a real correlation between how you felt and moved, mainly, on stage. Body work. So it became the thing. I hadn't heard of it, though, until I heard from my friend, who had been my accompanist, that it was becoming a big thing. That was, as I say, the Alexander. Have you heard of the Alexander?

Wilmot: Yes, but I've only heard of it in the context of massage therapy.

Harris: Oh, really?

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Hmm.

Wilmot: With whom, then, did you begin—you said that for ten years you studied with the Avaks.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And then you had some time by yourself.

Harris: Yes. I worked with people.

Wilmot: With whom did you begin to study the Feldenkrais or the Middendorf?

Harris: As I said, I had this dental hygienist I'd known for many years, and she was very excited about—well, she didn't mention Feldenkrais—but she was very excited about Middendorf. Never heard of that, and so I thought I'd give it a try, and that's what I did.

Wilmot: Did you study that for some years?

Harris: Oh, I'm still studying it.

Wilmot: You're still studying Middendorf?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: And Feldenkrais as well?

Harris: A friend of mine—let's see, how shall I—they're both friends of mine. Someone I'd known for some time had become a Feldenkrais teacher, and I thought, "Oh, well, here is an opportunity for me to find out about Feldenkrais," so shortly after I began my Middendorf work, I began to work with her, because I knew her personally. And so I was doing both.

Essentially, the manner of teaching in both cases was the same. There was work that you did in a group, standing up, and instructions were given to the group, and you stood up and you laid down on the ground, on carpets and things, on the floor, I should say. They were alike in that respect.

So out at Golden Gate Park, I remember, was where the Feldenkrais was. I went there. And then I decided it was just too far to go once a week, and I would work with the teacher personally, since I knew her. So I began to do that. Not saying anything to my Middendorf teacher about that. Well, I wanted to pick up what was relevant to me in both of them, and I didn't want to hear a lot of negative response, possibly, to some other technique, which you would expect a teacher to have.

Wilmot: Were they perceived to be in conflict with each other, the two techniques?

Harris: I didn't feel they were in conflict.

Wilmot: What are the useful parts of both that you've taken?

Harris: Middendorf emphasizes the breath, how you breathe and that you should breathe in a certain way. That's Middendorf's emphasis. And the bodywork grows out of that. Of course, that interested me as a singer.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Feldenkrais doesn't speak of the breath very often. It speaks more about the legs and upper torso. But Middendorf, of course, emphasized anything that would interfere with the singing. For instance, if your shoulders were tight. Well, that's something you would have picked up in work with vocal teachers. So they placed a lot of emphasis upon releasing. And I was amazed to discover how tight I had been, because none of my singing teachers had said much about it, if anything. And I worked in Munich, on my way back, so I'm talking about not just teachers from here in the Bay Area but teachers in other places as well, New York and Europe.

But Middendorf places great emphasis upon the body and breathing. And Middendorf and Feldenkrais knew each other. They were both in London at the same time.

Wilmot: As you internalized these two practices—

Harris: Well, you struggle to find out what it all means to you, because your body is not like Feldenkrais's body or not like Middendorf's. Middendorf was a woman, by the way.

Wilmot: I did not know that.

Harris: And she's still alive. She's in Berlin. And Middendorf students here, all over the country, still go, or try to go, at least once a year. The teachers, I think, do go. I think they're required to go. I'm not sure about that.

Wilmot: So as you internalized these practices, you're saying your body has to find its own way?

Harris: Oh, absolutely, because if you've spent most of your life hunched [demonstrates] or bent, even though you might be able to straighten up [demonstrates] for a while in the class when asked to, that is something you don't drop like that. [snaps fingers] It's because other parts of the body are involved. Then, if you've done this [demonstrates], you're probably holding the body somewhere else and you have to learn how to stop holding the body. Although you can do it in class, maybe, in front of the teacher, when

you get home, you forget about it. You go about your business in the old way. It takes a long time.

Wilmot: Is the idea that your body kind of holds the different experiences that you've had?

Harris: Oh, the business of the body holding, of course it does! And particularly in the shoulders, and then it affects the breathing, too. You find that you're holding [intakes breath] instead of [does something silent], allowing the breath to come and go on its own. If you're a tense or tight person, you find that you are holding your breath a lot, and then that affects what happens. With different people, it's different. Some people hold here [demonstrates] also. Some people curl their toes. People do a lot of different things. And you have to find out what you do that's different, and how much does your teacher know about this? Well. The teacher comes along and feels your body, so she or he can tell, with most everybody—most everybody has trouble with the shoulders.

Wilmot: Over the years, where have you experienced the most change?

Harris: I wish I could say I've experienced much change. [laughs] But I guess I have.

Wilmot: Yes. I mean, you wouldn't be so committed to it if you hadn't.

Harris: I think the breathing, because it's very relevant to everything you do. I was amazed to find how much I was holding, how much I wasn't breathing, and how that changes. When you're getting ready for a concert, well then, you're constantly—when you come to the point or the time of day when you're practicing, you're experiencing breathing. But what are you doing the rest of the day?

Wilmot: Hmm.

Harris: You're not thinking about breathing.

Wilmot: Yes. You've got me thinking about breathing right now.

Harris: [laughs]

Wilmot: I'm over here breathing. [audibly breathes in and out]

Harris: And how do you breathe? You have to be aware of it, but you can't do it yourself.

Wilmot: You can't push it.

Harris: You can't pump it. [forcefully breathes in and out once] You can't do that. That's wrong. So what is right, then, you think? You let it go on its own. What does that mean? Well, one thing it means, I'm sure of. That is that you cannot hold. If you find that you're the kind of person that clenches frequently in any part of your body, you have to learn to let go. And a lot of people clench all sorts of places. They clench their buttocks, they clench down here [gestures towards abdomen], they clench higher up. Certainly, the place many people clench is in the neck, and the jaw. Oh, my! Let the jaw go! Well, most people, if they've been holding here [demonstrates], they've been holding here [demonstrates] as well. It's fascinating, I think.

Wilmot: You decided against becoming a teacher of any of these methods?

Harris: Yes, I did. They need people. Middendorf is one of the youngest of the groups here. So they really, if they think you're a reliable kind of person, they would like to have as many good teachers as possible. I thought it would be a good thing to become a teacher, but then I decided I'm too old. It would take, say, three years' teacher training, and I'd already worked a couple of years, that's five years—and it just seemed to me it would push my life in one direction particularly, and I just didn't know that I wanted to do that, spend the rest of it—because I'd started so late, it would mean concentrating all my energy into body work, and I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. Not just taking it to help me but to help others? I would feel constantly—not just wanting to help myself but wanting to be sure that I helped other people and sure that I didn't give them the wrong instructions and sure that I was a good example. It seemed to me that I just wouldn't have time for anything else. So I decided not to put that kind of pressure on myself. But I'm still at it.

Wilmot: And you study now? Where do you study now?

Harris: I had studied here at the Middendorf Institute. There was one here. And also privately. But the landlord sold the property. It was a home, it was a studio, and—I don't know. I think they had been teaching since the early nineties in that area, and then about two years ago they had to move. So now they're located down the peninsula, as far as, well, as far as Palo Alto. Up north, in Marin, there are people. But the focus, the central place was here in San Francisco. When the property was sold, they had to find somewhere else, so now they're in Berkeley, at Sixth and Bancroft.

Wilmot: Okay.

Harris: The school has moved there, which made it hard for the people who lived in Marin and down the peninsula, to some degree. But the format is still the same, that is, group work together. Not only do they do it there, there are some of the people who have become teachers who have places in San Francisco also. But as far as I know, the school for training other teachers is in Berkeley now.

Wilmot: After you finish your bodywork, do you feel good? Do you feel better? Is there a reward in the physical?

Harris: Oh, yes. And at least as I'm thinking, as far as Middendorf is concerned, it's because your breathing has improved. Even if you still aren't doing the right thing with your feet or with your hips and so on, if the breathing becomes more regular, everything becomes more regular. And so they put their emphasis upon the breathing, and then the other work eventually, if done with breathing, becomes easier.

Wilmot: It sounds like Middendorf almost has emerged as the most important.

Harris: Well, in my life it has. Now, there are many people that have stuck with the [pause]—

Wilmot: Alexander or—

Harris: Alexander, and there are many, many disciplines now. I just heard of a new one, Pilates.

Wilmot: Yes.

Harris: Do you know about that?

Wilmot: Not very much. I just had some wish that I could somehow become taller.

Harris: It stretches you. I don't know anything about it, but I have a book on it, I think right in back of you.

Wilmot: How does yoga fit into these practices?

Harris: I've taken work in yoga also, but I never could stay long with yoga. But it's a discipline I would like to know more about. I wish that I had maybe started out in all this with yoga, it seems to me, because it has to do with the inner as well as the outer. A friend of mine from—where is she from? I knew her from I think San Jose, from my hometown—studied yoga here in San Francisco and became one of the chief leaders and teachers. Because of her, they used to have a school here in San Francisco, out in the Haight-Ashbury District, not quite all the way, but this side of Divisadero, on Haight, I think. But they've moved to Santa Cruz.

Although I was very interested in that and wished, in a way, I could have really embraced it, so to speak, I never did quite, the way I have with either Middendorf or Alexander. But I've known people who did and who seemed to profit from it very much. It just never appealed to me in quite the same way.

Wilmot: You said that when you came back from Europe, at the same time that you were kind of initiating and embarking on your—

Harris: Alexander.

Wilmot: —Alexander technique and embarking on your explorations of these different types of body work, you also, while you were living the life as a student, you also were continuing this life as a teacher as well, at Laney College and at San Francisco State [University].

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Can you tell me a little bit about your work there?

Harris: I was very interested in the work at Laney because it approached things a little differently. They talked about communication. How was that different? Well, I think they were interested in helping people who wanted to go into public communication, like video. Mainly, the emphasis there was on video, not upon stage acting. It's different when you have to work before a camera. I was interested in that because I didn't know anything about it.

Wilmot: What did you teach at Laney?

Harris: I taught speech, not public speaking, although that was part of it. I taught, I guess voice and diction would be…

Wilmot: And at San Francisco State?

Harris: Same thing.

Wilmot: And you were at San Francisco State for five years?

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: Before you retired?

Harris: Yes. [chuckle] And then I went back to State. I taught during summer sessions until 1990. I retired in ’82. As soon as I could.

Wilmot: Yes? Why so soon? You were ready to have your life?

Harris: I thought the idea of getting a pension was just marvelous! And I’d been teaching for many years, forty years or so.

Wilmot: Here we are, sitting in your apartment, your kind of top-floor apartment at the foot of Kearny, right under Telegraph Hill, with the parrots flying by every—

Harris: Once a day, at least.

Wilmot: Once a day, at least. And I wanted to ask you how you came to find this apartment. How did you come here? When did you come here?

Harris: This is called the Wharf Plaza, and it’s a home for—well, the aged and the disabled. If you’re crippled in some way—I don’t know if you’ve noticed, in the hallway we have several people living here who are in wheelchairs, and they are not anywhere near, say, sixties or seventies, they’re younger people. So we have a few younger people who are disabled for one reason or another, and then we have older people.

There was an artist who live—I used to live up on Powell, close to Columbus, right across from St. Peter and Paul’s, across from the playground there. This friend, I used to see a good deal. There were a couple of friends, and they were artists. One was someone who posed for artists, and the other was an artist, herself. I got to talking to them. I met them at Safeway, which we all used, on Bay Street. I found out that they had moved to this place. One had been at the School of Arts and Crafts, or—the art school off Columbus. I can’t remember the name of it.

Wilmot: [San Francisco] Art Institute.

Harris: Art Institute. She had posed there for years, and I had known in her in San Jose, because she had come there to pose for San Jose State [Teachers College]. She had stayed at our house, so she was someone I trusted, and she knew about this. She was living here.

And this other artist was just someone I met in the street. No, I hadn’t met her quite so informally, but I knew about her. Anyhow, she had a place, and she invited me to come and look at her place. She lived in the other building, the older building that’s across the courtyard. Because she was an artist, she could use a lot of space, and she had an

enormous room, just one big room, with one part of it that she could use for a kitchen. The rest of it she could use for her paintings and so on.

So they said to me, "Why don't you come and see about Wharf Plaza"? So I did. And I'm glad I did. I always dreamed, as a young woman, that somehow I was going to end up in a place like this, and I'd never heard of such a place. They didn't have them. They had old folks' homes. But this is not quite that.

Wilmot: No, it's more for independent living, and there's community.

Harris: It just has been ideal for me.

Wilmot: I just love the view out of your balcony and the fact that the parrots come by all the time.

Harris: And if you go up on the roof, you can see the ocean.

Wilmot: You're welcome to take me up on the roof.

Harris: [laughs] They keep the door locked.

Wilmot: Okay! Would you hold on one second? I need to check something.

I have a couple of more questions for you. You traveled all over the world—

Harris: No, not all over the world, just to Europe.

Wilmot: You've traveled to Europe, and you've been a teacher and a student and performer and a singer and an artist. I remember you telling me about how important it was for you to live a serious life, that people who took themselves seriously—I don't know if this rings familiar.

Harris: Serious? It's not the word I used, but I guess, okay.

Wilmot: Well, anyway—

Harris: Sincere.

Wilmot: Sincere, true. And I just wanted to ask you how have you found the strength to do that, basically?

Harris: What do you mean, physical strength or moral strength?

Wilmot: Moral strength, kind of, too.

Harris: I don't know. I mean, I think that's in you, and although you're tempted maybe to vary from that, I don't think you can get away with it. I don't know. What would be the alternative?

Wilmot: I don't know.

Harris: Doing what, for instance?

Wilmot: Doing things in more conventional ways.

Harris: Oh! Yes. I think a lot of people I know—my parents and other people—would have wished that I had been more conventional. I had no desire to be unconventional. I wanted to be conventional. If I could have found the right person, I would have married and had children. No, I had no desire to be unconventional, but I did want to explore the arts. And the more I wanted to do that, the more peculiar I think I became to my friends, because you make certain sacrifices for that.

Wilmot: I think it's the sacrifices that I'm speaking to.

Harris: And as you get older—when you are young, that seems okay. You're experimenting. You're finding out certain things. But then you reach a certain point, say, for me it was, I guess, in my thirties, where you settle down and become serious. Okay, you can explore these things, but unless you can make a lot of money or unless you're conventional, attend church and do the things in the community that you should do, why, you give up those things and settle down and become an ordinary, or a usual kind of community person. And I never quite did that, although I believed in it and I wanted to do it. But by the time I had felt that, "Well, now I think I really want to get married" and so on, well, things just didn't work out. My timing was off, you see, I think.

Wilmot: I think this is in part a question about marriage, but it's also a question about what propels you to seek out these experiences and to explore these artistic—

Harris: I really don't know. All I know is that I've all my life wanted to do two things. Singing because I had to—I didn't particularly want to, but I had to. I was in church, and I sang there, and I was supposed to go out and sing. And I wanted to act. I think I said this at the beginning.

Wilmot: You've said this, yes.

Harris: And I wasn't able to. Once in a while, there'd be one thing that I could do, but I couldn't explore acting. I thought that was very exciting. I'd go to operas and things when I was younger, and it didn't seem to me that the people who sang were necessarily very interested in the truth of what they were doing. They just did it mechanically, so to speak, or physically. It didn't come from the inside. I think it was taking those acting lessons and reading Stanislavsky's book that got me into the idea which began to appeal to and become popular with acting groups particularly.

Not everybody was for it, by any means, but I remember when A.C.T. first came to this city, that people that I knew who had been exposed to the same approach were somewhat critical. People began to weigh things in two ways: the external things you could do that were effective—the way you moved, the way you grimaced, the way you used your body was one thing. And then the way you experienced things on the inside was something else. And the combination was the ideal.

I belonged to that group. Having been trained by Mary Harris back in the early days, before I was associated with the university, made me realize that perhaps I wasn't very

gifted at it, but I was very interested in it, in finding out how your heart felt or how you felt inside about things. The truth, I guess would be the thing, and how you could express the truth in whatever you did, in any form of performing: singing, acting—well, those would be the two main ones.

So I was caught up in that. That became "the thing" in my youth. I think it began to be a discipline which could be taught in the United States in the early part of the century. It began then. Well, it began with Stanislavsky.

Wilmot: Yes, the Moscow school.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: For you as a teacher, how do you convey this kind of commitment to truth in acting, or conveying your inner truth? How do you teach that? You talked to me a little bit about the texts you've used, but—

Harris: Yes. You talk about Stanislavsky, and, rather disparagingly, you talk about the people who haven't sought for the truth but who were very good—and I'm trying to think of the famous actors. It doesn't matter because you probably wouldn't know them, but they were very skillful on stage. You talk about them and say, "Well, that's all very well and good to do that, and that's wonderful to do that if you can. But if that person hasn't gotten to the inner part of his or her life, then that's not for you."

I think some people—this is what we all discovered, finally—some people are naturally external, so to speak. They just can do things, you know. They've maybe have been trained to or they have a natural gift for doing things externally. Well, then, those people should, according to this other point of view, should try to incorporate the inner. And then there are other people who are just born with the natural inclination to operate from the way they feel and think inside.

Let's see, Stanislavsky. He was the big influence. And, of course, Sigmund Freud had come along, and there had been movements from other disciplines in this direction in the late nineteenth and particularly the early twentieth century. So—

Wilmot: So these movements came and found this young woman from San Jose.

Harris: [laughs] Well, I never felt I was very good at it, but I wanted it. That was it. In my heart, I wanted to be good at it, but—I don't think I ever was, but I certainly believed in it.

Wilmot: That goes a long stretch.

Harris: Yes.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. What were you like as a child?

Harris: That's a good question. I enjoyed playing by myself very much, and I enjoyed—the key word is "enjoyed"—I enjoyed my friends, too. But it didn't matter very much, apparently, from the stories they tell me, the adults have told me about myself. I had a

way of entertaining myself, making believe, as a very small child. It seemed to me I had an awfully good time, just in general, until I was about six or seven, and then I began to discover the realities of life.

I would say, in general, I enjoyed myself until maybe I was in my teens, old enough to fall in love, or think I'd fallen in love, and then I would sometimes suffer some disappointments from that point of view. But as a kid, I think I had fun. I'm wondering about how my parents felt. I think they thought I was a little peculiar. [laughs] And my friends certainly did. They thought I was all right to a point, but then when I got in my teens, then I was interested in going to college, and nobody went to college. That was peculiar. Nobody in the community had tried to go to college. When I say "the community," I mean the black community.

So I think I was considered a little offbeat.

Wilmot: I just wanted to ask that question at the close of our interview. Are there any kind of major turning points that you want to speak to? Were there any kind of moments that you identify as major, transformative, change-your-life-direction moments?

Harris: [slowly] I think going to Europe was very important. I'm just trying to think. I think working with Mary Harris was probably the important thing because she offered me a way to arrive at this other part of my nature. I mean, not just the technical things, but how you get to your inner nature in order to use it to help you express someone else's inner nature.

Wilmot: Ah.

Harris: Because, of course, they weren't people like me, the characters that I would play, but every character has an inner self. And some characters more than others. Of course, in comedy you don't have much of that, but in serious drama—and, of course, I was interested in serious drama—there's always that inner self that has to be explored. And she was an ardent devotee and disciple of this new approach to the arts that came in in the early twentieth century.

There were people before that who were excellent artists, who naturally were expressive in ways that they couldn't control, even, great actors, not so many singers. But there were some, apparently, who just couldn't help themselves, they were naturally this way. The idea was to explore that whole approach to things and then train people, because the early Stanislavskyites, of course, believed everyone should be trained that way.

By the time I came along, the feeling was that maybe that's true, but not necessarily everyone. Some people—if you were born to be a clown, for instance, or a performer of that kind, that's the way you should go. It was considered more ideal to explore the inner person. I don't know what the ideal now is. I think it still is considered more artistic, more real to express the inner person, I think.

Wilmot: Well, should we close our interview, or is there more to say? Are there any questions you want to be asked?

Harris: No, I can't think of any. I think we've covered everything. I've certainly been given an opportunity to say anything I thought. So we've finished, then.

Wilmot: I think so.

Harris: Good. It's only one-twenty. Good.

[end of interview]

Appended is an interview with Henrietta Harris conducted long distance while Harris was living in Berlin by Margaret Wilkerson, Professor Emerita of African American Studies and Drama Practice and former Director of the Center for the Study, Education and Advancement of Women at UC Berkeley. The interview was conducted in 1970 while Wilkerson was a graduate student in the drama department at UC Berkeley and incorporated into the appendix of Wilkerson's dissertation, *Black Theatres in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Los Angeles Area: A Report and Analysis.* This document, also part of The Bancroft Library's collection, conveys a key moment in the intersection of African American political and cultural life in the 1960s and 1970s, the Blacks Arts Movement, as it contains profiles of the major black theaters on the West Coast in addition to interviews with key personnel. Both Wilkerson and Harris agreed to the reprint of the 1970 interview here as an appendix.

Thanks to Kirtas Technologies, Inc. for digitizing the interview.

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# A REPORT FROM MISS HENRIETTA HARRIS

## FOUNDER OF ALDRIDGE PLAYERS/WEST

Taped and Sent to
Margaret B. Wilkerson

Berlin

July, 1970

A REPORT FROM MISS HENRIETTA HARRIS

FOUNDER OF ALDRIDGE PLAYERS/WEST

[July, 1970]

Harris: Margaret, you said in your letter that one of your major questions regarding the Aldridge Players was why it ceased functioning. And I'm going to try to answer that question first because it will make answers to other questions later on more meaningful if I do. And also because it's a question which interests me very much, mainly I think, because I have never satisfactorily answered the question to myself, and I doubt very much if any of us have ever thought it through very clearly. So I welcome the chance to try to come up with some sort of answer to that question. Why did we stop when we were very solid financially? We were incorporated and therefore in a position to get money from foundations or even from the community at large, if we had so wished. We still had a good reputation for putting on quality productions. And we were becoming increasingly well known in the black community which had been one of our major goals. Well, I'll try to be just as honest as I can about this. The truth of the matter is that the initial spurt of energy with which we had started so well in 1964 had definitely run out. There was no one either able to or who wished to take the kind of responsibility which was absolutely needed at this particular time. Because we had lost a number of our most active people, it would mean recruiting new, younger people, and it would mean coming to terms with all the various changes that were taking place at that time--which was 1968. And there just wasn't anyone who wanted to do that.

I think I should speak now about the leadership of the Aldridge Players because it was undoubtedly central to both our success and our failure. And I think ... the smart thing to do is to talk about the Board.. . . I'm going to discuss first the three older members of the Board. There were six of us in all and three of us, that is Marguerite Ray, Adam Miller and myself, were the older members, that is, we were all over thirty in 1964. And I think since we were older we took the most responsibility with one exception which I'll discuss later. And I think perhaps we hold the key to the problem ....

First of all, we were all, Marguerite, Adam and myself, were all either U.C. graduates or, in my case, I did post graduate work at U.C. We were all three in contact in one way or another with the Drama Department at the University. Either directly as Marguerite was--she was actually graduated from the Department--or on the fringes as I was, or with people who had been very active in the department as Adam was. We were therefore imbued with the idealistic attitude that theatre was important and worthy of the utmost that one could give it in dedication. At least, we had been influenced by this attitude which was current in the department at that time. We had all had contact with community groups in Berkeley and San Francisco that had either grown out of the University group, such as the Golden Hind and later the Actors Ensemble in Berkeley. And in San Francisco all of us had either worked with the Mission Players or the Playhouse. The Playhouse was the group that broke away from the Interplayers which was the first of the prominent little theatre groups in San Francisco. And all of these groups were like the college groups because they were made up of college graduates, of course, who'd gone out with their ideals and so there we were--over thirty and black and crazy about theatre. And what that meant of course was that we were all very frustrated --because we had not had the opportunity to learn about acting or about theatre that most of our white contemporaries had had, for the simple reason that there were very few plays with good parts for blacks. Marguerite had had the most experience. She had been most talented perhaps or at least she'd been most aggressive in the pursuit of her dream which was to become a professional. But even she was extremely frustrated by the lack of opportunity.

What else did we have in common? We ... were all working and had responsible jobs, and we all had commitments already, because of being older, to things outside of this particular kind of community theatre. Marguerite, for example, wanted very much to become a professional actress. She did not want to be an amateur which is what membership in the Aldridge Players meant--being an amateur par excellence. Adam really wanted to become a writer although he was fascinated just as the rest of us were with theatre. And my being older than all of the others was perhaps more frustrating because I'd been frustrated for a longer time, I guess. But I ... was also involved or had been involved

elsewhere in music and, although earlier I had been fascinated by drama, that is in college ... that had been my first love, I nevertheless had become since that time, very fascinated, because of my singing and so on, with the whole question of music and drama combined. In other words with music theatre. And although that dream was apparently shelved by me it had never died, and I felt then and of course, still feel that this is my particular thing.

So we all had commitments, major commitments elsewhere. That is, we were not committed to ... the long term building of an amateur theatre. Although we didn't think it through at the time, nevertheless that was the case. As for the younger members of the Board, Joyce Jackson, whom you should contact, by the way, and who, at that time, in 1964 was in her middle 20's had come pretty much under the same influences, the University influences that we three older ones had. And she was primarily committed to establishing a family (she was married) ... incidentally Joyce, had a full time job. Also she was working as manager of a department in San Francisco's J. Magnin's. Wyna Brown, another Board member who was in her late 20's at the time was also married, also committed to being a good wife and to establishing a family ... in both cases, these women were newly married. And she was also working as a teacher in a primary school in San Francisco and had in mind and later actually followed through on training herself for some sort of supervisorial job in education. And then the final member of the Board, Elton Wolfe, was at that time in his late 20's. He was a graduate of Jackson State College in Mississippi. And he was interested in all phases of theatre. He was then working on a volunteer basis for the Actors' Workshop which was the first of the little theatre groups in San Francisco to go professional. He, however, was really interested in becoming a big-time success as an actor in TV or in the movies. He was working for money for IBM at the time. I should make clear that the work that Elton did for Actors' Workshop was only backstage and this later turned out to be quite an advantage to us. That is the experience and knowledge that he acquired while working for them later served us very well because he was the person with the most technical knowhow on the Board and eventually took the chief responsibility for the technical side of our productions.

So then let me just sum up what I feel were our strong points as a Board, the things which made it possible for us to be as successful as we were for as long as we were. First of all, there was

this tremendous enthusiasm that grew out of frustration really. It was a kind of enthusiasm that gave the group a really powerful thrust in the beginning and the thrust was so powerful that it lasted, it kept the group afloat, I should say, for a good solid three years, perhaps even three years and a half. Our second strong point was that all of us on the Board had had some kind of theatre experience, some more than others, of course. But most everyone had done some work backstage in a few productions at least. And everyone had done some acting. And thirdly, we were all disciplined people. We'd gone to college and had that kind of discipline, and we were all working and had been for some time which meant that we had ... acquired the kind of discipline one gets from responsible job holding. And I think this fact made it easier for us to work together because not only was everyone able to help in the many ways needed to make a theatre group function but everyone had quite a responsible attitude to all the work that had to be done. And this became very clear indeed when we made our trip South and when we later toured. That is to say when we toured in the Bay Area. Fourth, the fact that we had jobs meant that we could advance money in a pinch. And that gave the group a certain independence as long as the organization was able to pay us back, which it always was except for a very brief period which I'll mention later.

I think now, Margaret, I'll ... just leave that whole problem and hope to wind up the tape with a more conclusive answer about why we didn't go on. I think I'll move now to how we got started. I was on sabbatical 1963-1964 and came to the decision .. early in '64 that it would be a good idea to start a Negro theatre group. And I began talking with people about it. I'm going to mention the people I talked with about it; I sort of feel this might be of interest to you. I talked, first of all, with a fellow named Charles Smith who was co-founder with a Dutch fellow whose name I can't remember at the moment, but you can get that, if you feel it's of interest, from our programs, or from Adam perhaps. Anyhow, Charles Smith had been a part of the Fellowship Church's, that was ... the first interracial church, I guess, in San Francisco. He was part of that theatre group and a number of the people that were connected with it followed him and this Dutch fellow into the Mission Players. It was also an interracial group and it had, perhaps still has, for all I know, a long and very successful career. At the time that I was interested in the group they had developed a number of Negro actors, and they had two or three directors and some technical people. So I talked

with Charles and he was very encouraging. He had since dropped away from the Mission Players and was more or less independent. He had his doubts about a group which was going to be primarily for Negroes. He felt that we would encourage nationalistic feeling among the actors and in the community. And he thought this was a real weakness in our group. But he did adopt a kind of wait-and-see attitude and was very helpful to us in terms of, well, in every way--in finding a place to rehearse and getting cooperation from the Mission Players, and in finding actors and in offering us various kinds of advice--technical advice and general advice--well, the problems any new group would have. So Charles was very important to us.

Then I talked with Cleodel and Chet Rusell. I'd known Cleodel for many years. She was a graduate of Cal in Social Welfare and she'd just recently married a singer, and they were both active in the Mission Players, but not completely happy there. And they were very interested in the group and said they would participate which, indeed, they did, later.

Then I talked with a girl named Mary Berry who is now in New York working, I believe, as a professional actress. She was primarily a dancer and had done a good deal of acting besides. She'd been at San Francisco State. And she was interested not only in acting with the group, but also in helping me develop a training program. That is to say she was very interested in handling the movement side of that. Then I spoke, of course, with Joyce Jackson who later became a Board member, and Adam Miller with whom I was closely associated at the time. Marguerite Ray, of course ... had been recently active with the Mission Players and had done some summer stock work, and was very interested, of course. And [she] later became a Board member. Elton Wolfe, I also contacted. I met him through ... an accident really, through going to an Actors' Workshop production which I believe was Trouble over Taipei or something like that. At any rate, it had two Negro actors from the East in it and was the reason that Adam and I went. And there we met Elton. He later joined the Board, of course, and became one of our most valuable members. Then there was a very successful Troupe called the Afro-American Folkloric Troupe which did stage performances of Negro poetry. And they were interested, at least three members of the group were interested, and they came and later made very valuable contributions to our productions. Unfortunately they, for us that is, went on to New York where they presently are, as I last knew of them, successful. Then I guess one of the most important contacts that I made during this period was with

the Playhouse, a group I mentioned earlier, a breakaway group from the Interplayers. . . .They were friends, many of them, of mine. I had known them for many years. And they offered a great deal of advice and technical help which they certainly followed through with, particularly on our first production. So those were the chief people I contacted and made sure of their support before I actually did anything.

As soon as I was sure of their support, I chose four one-act plays, I chose three directors, two from the University of California or two people I had known at the University of California and one from among the Playhouse directors of the time, and I chose--I found a place, the YWCA at 1815 Sutter Street in San Francisco. I arranged for a training program, and I arranged for the try-outs. And I arranged for the training program, (did I say that?), I arranged for the training program, I arranged for technical help, and I arranged for a meeting of all the interested people.

Now you may wonder how it is that I went ahead and made all these decisions on my own. Well, it seemed to me extremely important that we not get bogged down in talk about what we wanted to do. It seemed to me very important that we have definite things to do, a definite place to do them, and that the whole thing be geared towards a quick start, and with ... a definite immediate goal in mind. It just seemed that this would work better, and I don't know if another way would have been better or not. Anyhow, this certainly worked.

What followed thereafter, Margaret, has been very well documented. And certainly the minutes of that time are more reliable than my memory, but I just will say that the group of people that I mentioned earlier gathered together and made certain decisions. First of all, what the goals, in a very general way, of the organization were to be. Secondly, we decided on a name, the Aldridge Players West. Charles Smith had a lot to do with that decision. He knew of an Aldridge Players in Rochester, New York, he said. And because we were not sure if they were still in existence or not, we thought we'd just play it safe and call ourselves the Aldridge Players West. And thirdly we decided on how we would raise money for the first production. And everyone who was interested agreed to donate ten dollars. And if we made money we would get it back, we decided. And this larger group also decided that it would be wise to have a smaller group, a Board which would call membership meetings of the larger group, and publish a newsletter which would determine the policy of the group and,

subject to the larger group's agreement, and which would define the goals of the organization more closely, and see that these goals became known to the community at large. In 1966, I think it was, we were incorporated and this structure of larger membership with a smaller board which determined policy was formalized. On paper that has remained our structure to the present. However, practically speaking or in actuality what happened was that after our trip to the South in the summer of 1966, we found it more practical to operate things somewhat differently. That is to say, it was the Board which still determined policy, and the membership ... had become by this time larger but purely nominal.

Now, Margaret, I think I'll just take up your outline and try to follow it faithfully to the end. You ask under "The Company: How did you recruit your actors? Was there much turnover in personnel?" We recruited our actors by inserting ads in all the large dailies in the Bay Area, that is, in San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley (I think we included Berkeley), in the Negro press on both sides of the Bay, and, let's see, we also sent notices to other theatre groups and to college drama departments, that is to San Francisco State. Now I really don't think we ever ... no I think we did send them to the University of California at Berkeley, too. We also sent notices to the high schools that we learned about which had good drama departments. In some cases we called the instructor in charge and talked with him or her about recruiting people for us. Then finally, of course, we used the old tried and true method of word-of-mouth. That is, we talked with people and got them to talk to other people and so on.

"Was there much turnover in personnel?" Yes, each production brought a new group of people in. Let me put it this way. Personnel was determined largely by whether or not people were cast in plays. With the exception of a small core of people, this is beside the board which remained constant, of course, there was a very small core group of say, at the most ten people, besides the Board who came back for each try-out and helped in some way in each production. Sometimes there were fewer than ten. But generally speaking, I'm just taking a guess now, I would say it was around ten people.

"What were your guidelines for casting?" Well, this was one of our problems. We had no directors within the group itself. Later, Elton Wolfe developed into a director, but that wasn't until the very end. Our directors were always recruited from the outside.

And since the director hadn't chosen the play usually, (we chose the play), we allowed him to choose his cast. We provided him with people, but he was free to bring in anyone he wanted to bring in or to cast from outsiders or to do anything he wished about casting. This meant that we really couldn't have any guidelines. Well, that isn't true, come to think of it. One guideline was that Negroes should be cast. You'll excuse me, Margaret, if I keep falling back into the old way of speaking about people of color as Negroes. I know it's currently fashionable to say blacks, but I was raised in another time and you're in a hurry to get this tape. So I think I'll just say what comes out first, and Negroes is apt to come out first. We decided that we would cast whites only when we couldn't get Negroes; unless it was appropriate to the role, unless the role definitely called for a white person, a Negro should be cast. If we couldn't get Negroes, then we were willing to take anybody who happened to show up. And this did happen on two occasions. Once for the chorus of women in The Trojan Women, we couldn't get a Negro actress to fill the spot, so we very reluctantly, but gratefully accepted the services of a white actress. And once in the children's play The Emperor's New Clothes, we couldn't get a Negro to fill the role, one of the roles, Chief Executioner, I think, I've forgotten, but anyway, we cast a white person in that role. But aside from those two instances, this was one guideline at any rate that we stuck very closely to. But in other ways, as far as being able to determine the development of our own actors, by having them cast in a succession of roles that would be good for their development which I personally think would have been ideal for our company, we just were not in a position to do that because of this business of changing directors all of the time.

Now, let's see, "What were the goals of your actors?" Well, it's hard to say about some of them. We had a few who definitely regarded appearing with the Aldridge Players as a steppingstone to bigger and better things. And as I indicated earlier when I was talking about the various people who were interested in the ... beginnings of the group, a certain number of these people were able to make use of the Aldridge Players in this way. Perhaps not directly, I mean they weren't chosen, for example, because they had been seen in an Aldridge Players production, but at least three people have gone to Hollywood, and at least three other, or four others have gone to New York after being in Aldridge Player productions. Some people simply wanted to act for the fun of it or with the idea of finding out if they really wanted to

become serious about acting. Some wanted more public exposure to develop themselves as personalities for whatever might come their way. And I think that pre much exhausts the reasons that I know of at any rate.

"Did ... many have professional aspirations for commercial theatre?" Well, I think I've answered that.

"If you can, provide a list of the actors who worked with the Aldridge Players and brief biographical information about them." Well, you say I should state where you can get this information. You can get it from Adam Miller and I'll give you his address and telephone number on paper. I believe you probably already have contacted him .... I gathered this from a letter I received from him. But at any rate, I'll put all the information down on paper for you.

"Financing and production means: How were the productions financed? Did you ever give free performances?" Well, I think I've explained at least partly how the first production was financed. We raised money from among the membership itself. And actually with the help of loans from, I think, two other outsiders. Loans which ... were paid as soon as the first production receipts were in. That was the financing for the first production. That is to say, donations from the membership and loans from two outsiders who believed in what we were trying to do. Thereafter our financial base was memberships which we sold for five dollars; that was five dollars for a year's membership. In the beginning this meant the membership was divided as I indicated on the other side of the tape into active and we had a few non-active. Later the membership was almost entirely non-active. We, of course, got money from people who made outright gifts after we became incorporated. And we didn't get many gifts like this, but we did get a few of fifty dollars and some of twenty-five dollars, and our largest gift was from one person. It was two hundred fifty dollars. And our third source of money was the ticket sales from ... our productions.

"Did we ever give free performances?" We gave several benefit performances over the three years of our existence. They weren't entirely free. We always got our expenses out of it--whatever the royalties were and whatever our transportation expenses were. And if we had any other expenses, we always saw to it that they were covered. But yes, we gave free performances, and we gave one benefit for SNCC in our first year of existence.

"How did you acquire sets, costumes, make-up, lighting and so forth?" Well, our sets and costumes we made. We were fortunate in that we had, for the first two years of our existence, a very fine costume-maker, a friend of Marguerite Ray's who simply volunteered her services. The sets were made by ... whoever we could get to help us make them. We financed the sets and made them. Later on we bought sets and costumes from theatre companies that were going out of business. Well, just from one company actually, from the Opera Ring. And we were given sets and costumes by the Playhouse when they went out of business. Our make-up--we bought a make-up kit which was for people who didn't have their own make-up. But we encouraged people to buy their own make-up. We all, that is all the Board members and all the people who were in several of our productions, people like Leslie Perry, for instance, we all provided our own make-up. But for people who just were in for one production and for people who never acted before and so on, of course, we had to have a make-up kit. And we usually got assistance on make-up, that we had--the regular make-up person from the Mission Players used to come over .... We always paid her for helping us on make-up. In fact we had her instruct us in make-up so that some of us at any rate became independent of her. As far as lighting is concerned, we had to buy lights. In our very first production, I don't think we had spots. Can't remember. At any rate, we acquired over the period of years a fairly decent lighting system. As a matter of fact, a friend of the organization built us a traveling light board. So we not only had spot lights for our home theatre, which remained at 1815 ... Sutter Street. We had fairly adequate lighting there, and we had this traveling light board.

"Did the Aldridge Players have a permanent location?" Yes we did. It was 1815 Sutter.

"Were the actors paid? If not, was volunteering a part of the group's philosophy or enforced by economic necessity?" No, the actors were never paid. We always thought this would be a nice thing, however. We thought it would be marvelous if some day we arrived at the point where we could pay actors. Even when we later toured in Northern California and were paid. Now, as I recall, what we did was accept only the cost of transportation. . . . I'm positive we didn't split that money up into fees for the actors. We simply plowed it back into the organization. So I suppose you could say that volunteering was--well, no question about it--

volunteering was part of the group's philosophy certainly in the beginning and, of course, it was enforced by economic necessity. We couldn't have paid anybody, even if we had wanted to. That really didn't make any difference, because later when we could have if we wanted to have split up the money, we didn't. So I suppose that answers that. . . . We would have taken money, of course, if there had been enough money, but it would have meant changing the nature of the organization and I think we realized that, and we weren't really very interested in that end of it at that time.

In your next section, you ask about repertory. You ask for a list of dates and productions and any additional, specific information and so on. Of course, you can get this very specifically from the information you get from Adam. However, I will make comments. I will give you approximate dates and make some comments about productions.

First of all, the series of one-acts we did in the beginning .... There were four of them. One was by Albee, 'The Sand Box;' a play by James Broughton, ... a Bay Area author who just recently got a Guggenheim I saw, called ... 'The Last Word;' a very short play; Chekhov's 'The Brute;' and a play by A. A. Milne, whose title I can not remember. Time has drawn a merciful curtain no doubt. But at any rate, you can get that information through our programs.

Let's see now, you want to know "Who chose the plays and what factors influenced this choice." Well, I chose all those first plays as I indicated earlier. And the reason I chose those particular plays was because it seemed to me that they would use the greatest number of people. They would use, in fact, all of the people that I had contacted to see if they would be interested in such a group. So that was the first consideration. Second consideration was to involve and please as wide an audience as possible. Something for everyone--a comedy, something that made a comment about the world as it is at the present time, and something that would have a little fantasy in it and so on.

Let's see. "It's reception." Well, this first program was very well received indeed. I think people were mainly grateful that we were as good as we were. I don't know what they'd expected, but apparently we were better than most people expected. We could have run the plays for an indefinite time or so it seemed from the amount of requests we got to prolong our

run, but we had arranged I think it was only two weekends with the "Y" so there wasn't anything we could do about it unless we were willing to move to another place. And I didn't feel that we were in a position to do at that time. You will notice that none of the plays have anything specifically to say about blacks in this country. And we were aware of that at the time, of course, although it was not as serious a matter then as it would be today, certainly.

Now to go on. The second that we did was the The Trojan Women by Euripides. And I chose that also. I was very much, well, I might as well be honest about it, I was very much in control of things, mainly because it was my idea and, because I, frankly, was doing most of the work in the beginning or taking most of the responsibility, at any rate. I chose The Trojan Women because I simply adored the play, still do. I think it's a wonderful play, even though static in many ways. I thought it offered wonderful opportunities for women, and I could see as well as everyone that we had a number of strong women in the group. And I thought also because of the large amount of choral work in it that it offered excellent opportunities for speech training. So that was the reason. I thought it would help, in other words, the development of the group. And, I don't know, I think I was also intrigued with the idea of a group of Negro actors doing Greek drama. That seemed to me very appropriate somehow. It's a very basic play about a very basic matter which was beginning to trouble the whole nation--peace, or the horrors of war, I suppose one might say. And it seemed to me it was peculiarly suitable, both for Negro actors and for Negro audiences. Not everyone agreed with me.

We were attacked by LeRoi Jones in the San Francisco Chronicle who found it slightly ridiculous that a group of Negroes at that particular time, which was the fall of 1964, that a group of Negro actors would choose to do a Greek play. It seemed to him at that time, or so he said in the paper, it seemed to him completely irrelevant and completely out of place for us to do it. I think LeRoi Jones had other reasons for saying what he did. However, the nature of his comments leads me to think that he simply didn't know what The Trojan Women was about or I really don't see how he could say that it was a poor thing for us to do. It sounds on the surface, perhaps, ridiculous to some people for a Negro group to do The Trojan Women but I mean once you look into the play and see what its theme is it didn't seem ridiculous at all. At any rate, I thought we gave quite a good production of it and I think it did help develop the actors. I think it did do for us what we hoped it would do.

It had one additional result which was a surprise for me. And which I think had quite an effect upon the later development of the group. And that is--it was through The Trojan Women or at the end of The Trojan Women that I realized that I definitely did not want to continue in the leadership of the group. I just felt that the whole project was perhaps a bigger one than I had realized. And though I wanted to see the group continue I knew at that time that I definitely did not want to continue in the leadership. And from that time on I was always on the alert for new leadership and tried everything in my power to see to it that we got new leadership.

Our third production was the two short plays by Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, "Brother Jero" and "The Swamp Dwellers." We were the first company in America to perform Wole Soyinka we later discovered. ... We were approached about the play by a former Peace Corps member who had spent his time in Nigeria and had become acquainted with the plays. We didn't have anything in mind at the time, were looking for plays, or a play. And although we had doubts about this chap who said he definitely wanted to direct the plays, we, simply out of having nothing else to do and always out of having decided that--well they might go--we decided to let him go ahead and direct the plays. And it was a good decision because although he was difficult as a director just as we had thought he would be, nevertheless the plays themselves or at least one of the plays, "Brother Jero" was a huge success and did a lot to develop a number of our people. One man and ... two women, I guess, in particular ... really got us very excellent reviews and so on. You can, of course, read all this in our scrapbook.

All in all I think I can say that this bill of two African one-acts was the highpoint of our first season. All our arrangements were, if not perfected, at least brought to a very high point of efficiency with this production. Our props and ... sets, our costumes, the lighting, all of these things were in very good shape for ... these shows. The publicity was very well handled this time. Publicity, incidentally, was always a great problem for us. We never felt we had done enough. But this time we had very well designed posters, and announcements were gotten to the papers in plenty of time, and we had good interviews with particularly the Chronicle ahead of time with pictures and so on and I think ... we had two articles. But you can check that with Adam. By this time we had also arranged things quite well as

far as the front of house was concerned--always a problem, of course, in a situation where you are not in your own theatre. The programs were nicely designed. We had for the first time, an exhibit in the lobby. A local, a black citizen of wealth had loaned us his--a good portion of his collection of black sculpture. We had that on exhibit. We were by now quite expert in the handling of our refreshments which was our custom--to serve the audience during the intermission. Incidentally about the audience comfort--the seats, of course in the "Y" were just plain folding chairs, and they were not comfortable. And the floor was flat, so that it was a kind of strain to attend a play there and we felt that the refreshments certainly helped to keep the audience in a good mood. Another thing about this bill of one acts was that it involved a very large cast and brought in many new people, which was very good for us. These were people who were so impressed, some of them, by their experience in"Brother Jero"that they remained faithful adherents to the Aldridge Player cause right to the end. It, of course, brought in new audience. Mainly, it brought us to the attention of the black nationalists.

And we frankly were glad to see any new black faces because our audiences up to this point had been pretty much white liberals, I'd say. We'd always had a few blacks in the audience, but by and large the audiences were white. I'd say about, at the best, about sixty-forty. And of course, the plays themselves created a stir in the community. And they, plus all our arrangements, I would say, brought us to the attention of a much wider section of the whole community, for the first time, both black and white.

Our final play of the season was an original play by a black author. You can get all the details from our notebook. I don't remember, unfortunately, his name. He was a graduate, though, of the ... College of the Pacific in Stockton--a California boy. And he had produced this play, I think it was just the preceding year, at the College of the Pacific, and he submitted it to us. And we thought it was excellent in spots. We thought it had certain great weaknesses, particularly in the kind of language he used in certain places. And we were so worried about it that we asked him if there was any chance that he could eliminate some of it. And if he were willing to do so that we would be very happy to produce it. Well, he,naturally, wasn't willing to and we finally decided to go ahead and produce it anyway and just take our chances. We knew that it was not a strong play because of this, really, (what can I call it), this overripe handling

of the language, but we did want to present a black playwright, and so we just decided we'd risk it. And we did. And as we had foreseen, it got bad reviews. I was very sorry about that. But I still think it was an important thing for us to do.

That ended our first season and we had I'm positive but you'd have to check this to be sure, we had another training program this summer. And I've forgotten the details of it but I'm pretty sure we did have one. Towards the end of the summer after the training program, we did or ... perhaps this grew out of the training program in some way, I think it did. Anyway, we did for ... "Y" program, we did a one-act about Harriet Tubman, and it seems to me that the people who were involved in the training program were all in that play. It was important because it allowed Elton his first opportunity with us, at any rate, to direct a play, and we were eager, of course, to develop, if we could, some black directors. And it gave a young Negro actress, who'd been in the training program, a chance to do the main role, and she later for two or three years at any rate, had quite an acting career in the Bay Area as a result of this. So, here was somebody we really had discovered and whose development we at least began.

Then we were at a loss about what to do. We wanted very much to do Ossie Davis' Purlie Victorious. We had met, that is some of us who had attended--about half the Board had attended our very first summer of existence--a black writers' conference at Asilomar and there we had met Ossie Davis and had been very impressed with him and had gotten from him the name of another black playwright, a friend of his, and we were at that time, I think we had already started negotiations with this friend of his for a play, but we weren't ready to produce that yet. In fact we thought we would try to produce it around Negro History time in February. But we needed something for the fall and wanted to do Purlie Victorious, as I say, but we simply couldn't find a director. So, in desperation, we--well, one of the reasons we couldn't find a director was because we felt it was very important that it be a black director. And what I mean is that we couldn't find a black director. So we finally decided upon doing a children's play. That was, to a large extent, my fault. I say my fault because it was my idea that it would be a good thing to do something for young people and I sort of pushed it. In some ways it was very unfortunate. In others not so. Anyway we needed to have a director for that, and so we called upon an inexperienced, totally inexperienced young woman who had been connected with the Playhouse and who had helped us tremendously with our first production in a technical way. She was

very imaginative, and she was interested in directing this production, so--that is if we'd give her a free hand about all the details. And we thought that might be interesting to have the director design the set and the costumes and so forth as well as direct. So she took that job on. It proved to be too much for her, and she dropped out very suddenly just two weeks before production. So I had to take it on and bring it into production. It was an absolutely enchanting production, mostly because as I say ... the first director was very artistic and very imaginative about the sets and costumes in particular, and also about the choice of music and so on. It was a delightful production in every way and this young woman that I spoke of, just before ... when I was talking about the Harriet Tubman play, she played one of the leads and Elton played the other. Unfortunately we lost our shirt on this production because we didn't understand that for children's plays you have to have a special kind of publicity and make special arrangements. For one thing, you can't have the plays at night, and you have to go out and bring the children in or see to it that they're brought in. Of course, they don't come on their own. Well, in view of the fact that I was involved at the last minute totally in the direction and all the details of production, this wasn't taken care of. I'm not sure it would've been anyway because I didn't realize, being inexperienced, of course, about such matters. I didn't realize that it was important that we do this kind of pre-performance work. So we lost money. Not very many people came to see it. I was very sorry about that. But, in a way, I thought, perhaps, we had come to a point where we ought to consider changing our format. Well, it was a low point in general. And, in view of the fact that as I said earlier, I was looking for new leadership, I had decided ... sort of decided, perhaps this would be a good time to either suspend operations for a time or definitely find someone new to lead the group. However, fate stepped in in the form of a committee of professors at the University of California which was interested in our making a tour, with our plays, of the South. So that injected new life-blood into the organization. I thought it would be a very interesting thing to do. I also thought it would be a lot of hard work but the--for me in particular, but the rest of the people in the organization were really thrilled with the opportunity. So I realized that this was something we simply couldn't turn down. So we chose a bill of--I have always thought it was six one-acts, but I can only think of five--one-act plays which would require no set or very little set--each one of which would require very little in the way of set, and very little in the way of costumes. In other words we tried to choose things

that would travel easily. The plays were, let me see now,"The Brute","The Stronger", 'Hello Out There", a play by a Trinidadian called"The Professor", Thorton Wilder's "Happy Journey", and I think that's five. As I say I'm sure there were six. But anyway, that whole trip has been very well documented so if you check you'll see what we actually did. We prepared these for production in the spring, and toured them--first to Berkeley and I think we went somewhere else during the spring. But at any rate this was to get us ... pre-Southern tour publicity and prepare us, of course, for the trip South which we took in June, and I won't say anything more about that because it has been very well documented. We had a marvelous time and we were very successful, and as I said earlier in the very beginning of the tape, we got excellent cooperation from all the members. There were eight of us who went, four men and four women. And the only bad thing about it was that it meant we had to eliminate, of course, for a long period of time, any consideration of all the other members in the Aldridge Players. We just weren't set up so that we could take care of their needs at this time. And as a result, they, of course, felt left out and dropped away from us. So that when we came back from the tour, we had just the people who'd been on the tour who were really solidly Aldridge Player members.

By this time it was time for us to do our Negro History play, and we had worked out an arrangement with the black playwright friend of Ossie Davis that I mentioned earlier and we did his play about Frederick Douglass. This was in ... February of 1967. And for this play we had our first black director; Charles Smith consented to direct it and it was a very interesting experience. The cast was, of course, interracial. That was one of the reasons of course that Charles consented to do it, since his philosophy was not to be involved in all black productions. But since he'd had a good deal of experience we thought that he would do a good job of this play and as a matter of fact, he did. There are certain vaguenesses about Charles but I do think that by and large he did a very good job with the play. The play also had certain weaknesses, but for the most part we were quite happy with it. Then to end the season we did, I guess, our most successful--as far as attracting audience was concerned--production of that or any season. It was the John [sic] Turner Ward bill of two one-acts,"Happy Ending"and "Day of Absence." I think we probably were the first group outside of New York to do that production and, of course, this production really brought in the black community. We had a good pre-performance publicity on it, and we had excellent word-of-mouth reportage on it and the result was that we really did very well with this production. Fortunately they were the kinds of things that we could tour. And by now we had

decided that touring probably was the best thing for us to do, since as I say we'd had a falling away of membership and the Frederick Douglass play being interracial had not helped us very much in terms of attracting new people. So we were hurting a little bit as far as actors to draw upon and it seemed to us that it was simpler, and in view of our waning actor pool that it was just better all around for us to tour. So we did that.

Then came the summer and I really cannot remember whether or not we had a training program this summer or not. It seems to me that we had one every summer but I simply can't remember that. At any rate we opened the 1967-68 season with a production by the Trinidadian author that I mentioned before. I'm not sure it was the same man, but anyway it was a Trinidadian author who wrote "Dance Bongo!" And we did that along with "Brother Jerd"--two one-acts--and Elton directed the whole production. So I'm sure we had had a summer session, a summer training program because we'd had a class on directing and this was Elton's ... first try after that. We toured these two productions also. We presented them first at the "Y" and then we took them out on the road. And you can get the details from the notebook. They were pretty good productions although we simply didn't have the kind of help and the kind of spirit that we'd had in the previous year or years and I thought it was an excellent opportunity for Elton and well, I wasn't very happy with the way things were going personally. And at this time we could definitely feel the ebb of interest, both on the part of the Board and on the part of the faithful few who surrounded the Board. However, we were doing very well as far as touring was concerned. We were making money all right. But the organization, I felt, definitely had stopped growing.

Then I think after that in the spring we did nothing but this production and the tours. And I think, now I'm a little vague here, but somewhere towards summer we did, a group of us did a reading of Tennessee Williams' Glass Menagerie. That was more or less a closed thing; it was not open to the general public, but for those of us who participated in it, it was one of the best things we had ever done. The best prepared, I think, in terms of the acting at any rate. Mary Harris directed that. It was a staged reading and there were some very good performances in that. We had, I think, a third, no--I guess we'd had our third anniversary celebration earlier. I'm getting a little confused now without ... the evidence before my eyes. It's hard for me to be exact. But

after this I think we decided that the smart thing to do--well, I'd better stop and think about this for just a minute.

Yes, well, I think the problem was that it was about this time that Marguerite Ray who had actually taken over the chairmanship of the organization in the fall of '67 and then had had to give it up because she went to work for ACT, but she had remained on the Board. It was at this time that Marguerite decided to go to Hollywood. And with her departure, the heart went out of the group, or at least to be very accurate and very specific, the heart went out of me because it meant that the only person in the group who had been willing to assume leadership and to really help me in taking this particular kind of responsibility, it meant that this person was gone and it just seemed to me that the group was really dwindling to an inevitable end. But no one was ready to say this openly.

So we cast around for something that we might do to keep us alive. Part of the reason we were anxious to stay alive was that we were incorporated and that incorporation had been a very difficult thing for us to get and we weren't ready to give it up so readily.

So we began what we hoped would develop into a full-fledged program of playreading unperformed, hitherto unperformed and certainly unpublished young Negro playwrights and we did, I think, two or three such readings. I think you, Margaret, attended one of them. That is, in terms of expense and effort as far as arrangements for the readings was concerned. We tried to make a go of them. However, we weren't very successful in the choice of our material. Not that there wasn't by this time beginning to be a lot of new material around, but we just weren't ready for people like Ed Bullins and LeRoi Jones, the chief new playwrights on the scene. That is most of us weren't ready. I think perhaps Adam was ready and Elton, but most of us were not. And we really didn't have either the material or really the heart to make a go of this program, although it was a pretty good idea. Still reading plays doesn't compare with doing productions in terms of keeping a group alive as was perfectly evident to us.

As far as leadership of the group is concerned, by this time, Adam Miller had taken over the group and it became more or less his group, I would say, because most of us had nothing more to do with it. It just sounds terrible to say that, but that's exactly what happened. In '68 and '69, the old Board had ceased to function. Adam had new contacts through his teaching at Laney and he can tell you more about that. The young people that he worked with, under his direction,

put on an Ed Bullins' play and I saw rehearsals and performances of that, and I thought they did very well. This is a direction that could be followed up, and I frankly don't know what Adam is doing about it at the time. He's very involved as a writer, and I seriously wonder whether he has the energy or the will. I know he has the interest and would like to do it, but whether or not he can really revitalize the Aldridge Players remains to be seen. You will have to talk to him about that.

Now, Margaret, since I've gone on so long about all this, so much longer than I meant to, I wonder just how much of the rest I should go into. Let's see. "Audience Reaction: How were your efforts received by audiences?" I think I've pretty much answered that. "What segments of the community seemed most responsive?" Well, that changed as I've indicated. It was first mainly the white liberal community and by the end, it was definitely the black community. It all depended, of course, upon the plays we did. "What was the ratio of black to white in your audience? Any statistics you have in this area--" Well, we may have statistics, I'm not sure. But in general it was as I've just indicated.

"Was the press response favorable?" Well, it certainly was when we did a good job. And or when the plays were particularly interesting. When the plays were bad, well, we didn't get good press response.

"Did you consider your productions to be relevant to the black community?" Well, I think that has been answered by my long rambling. Some were and some weren't. " ... Were you concerned about reaching the black community?" Yes we certainly were, right from the beginning, even though we didn't in the beginning design productions for the black community as such, we were always interested in getting them. "If so, which segments?" Well, obviously since we were all middle-class, although we didn't know it or even think about it when we began, we were concerned mainly in the beginning with reaching the people that were our friends. In other words, the middle-class segment. And we were very annoyed because we never did, except for a very few particularly conscious. We later learned that the reason for this was that we were located in the Fillmore and in a YWCA and most middle-class black audiences at that time were interested only in the shows that were presented downtown. I mean they figured if they were presented in the Fillmore in the YWCA, they naturally couldn't be very good, I guess. But at any rate we never got support from

the middle-class black community. But, as time went on, we certainly began to attract other segments. I don't know what you'd call them. I'm really not used to making these rigid divisions. Certainly people who lived in the Fillmore came, but whether they were lower middle-class or middle-class or what I really couldn't say. Just the people, were they just the people? Were they ghetto residents? I really don't --no they weren't ... what we considered the middle-class audience, that is to say, professional blacks, people who belong to the sororities and fraternities. They weren't those people. But there were some doctors, and some dentists, and lawyers and so on who did come. But so did a lot of other people who weren't professionals. So I really can't answer that very well, I guess. "What efforts were made to attract audiences?" Well, newspaper publicity, I think I've answered that already.

"Theatre Building." Well, I've spoken about that. And all the points that you raise in connection with that, I think could best be answered by Elton Wolfe whose address I will give you.

Then to go down to the "Director's Evaluation: What were your most severe problems in the Aldridge Players? Did any of these problems lead to its demise?" Well I think our most severe problem was that there weren't enough people interested in taking leadership responsibilities. I, for one, who was the leader to begin with was not committed to a long-term program which would take up as much or take up my total time and energy--which the kind of organization we were at the time certainly required. And I had hoped in the beginning to find someone else to take over that kind of responsibility and never did. And I think perhaps that was our most severe problem. Our second one was that we didn't have enough people trained in all the technical phases of the work ... to take care of that. We just didn't have enough people to do the necessary work. As we grew, the work grew, of course. We didn't have people who have the time and energy and the know-how and the responsibility to take care of publicity, a very important element in the success of any community-based group like ours. "Did any of these problems lead to its demise?" Oh, one other problem, I guess, would be that of not having directors within the group so that they could take care of the development of the people who consider themselves members. Yes I'd say that, of course, all of these problems helped to hasten the demise of the Aldridge Players.

"Were there any political repercussions from the group's theatrical efforts?" I really can't answer

that very well. The only one that I know of was the criticism that I mentioned earlier ... on the part of LeRoi Jones, but I'm sure that as time went on we were considered out of it by the more advanced, more racially conscious members of the community. And I began to feel that we were out of it also and that ... we would have to change in this regard or just forget about it. It seemed to me the times were moving in a direction that we were not very well equipped to participate in.

"What were the goals of the Aldridge Players?" I think that can be answered from our printed material. "To what extent was the group successful in attaining these goals?" And I think ... all the things I've said so far will answer that. I think we did have a certain success in all areas. We were moving towards success and we just, for reasons that I've already indicated, were not able to follow through on the beginnings of success.

"What is your candid assessment of the quality of the Aldridge Players' productions? How or where should the group have improved?" I think I've answered that as we've gone along.

"What part of the Players' total program was most important in your opinion?" Well, I think the development program was the most important. The development of actors, the development of technical people to the extent that it occurred at all, and the development of our one director. Certainly Elton was developed in our program. I think he would agree to that. He got opportunities to act, to do technical work, and to direct ... and to do some playwriting. And if we ... through our activities have given to the community one such well-rounded theatre person, why I think we--maybe that proves the worth of our program, inadequate though it was. And I think the second most important thing was the education of the audience. That is a very vague and amorphous thing, but I'm sure we were important to particularly the wider audience that we reached by touring, because that audience was largely black. And I'm sure we helped educate the whites, too. But I do think we reached a large number of blacks in the Bay Area and in Northern California. And that was important. So I guess that's it.

Your ... last point--"Did anyone keep a scrapbook?" Yes we did and I'll give you that information.

Margaret, I've listened to the tape and I see that it's very long and drawn out and badly in need of editing. There isn't much time and I'm not going to be able to do the kind of job on it that I'd like to do. However, there are a few things that I would like to change somewhat or add some comment about.

First of all, on the first side I spoke about the idealism current in the ... Drama Department at Berkeley at the time that Marguerite Ray and Adam Miller and I were around it. I think that this was an unfortunate choice of words, implying as it perhaps might seem to that there isn't any idealism in the Department at present. And I certainly didn't mean that. I meant something else that isn't really important for your purposes. So I won't go into it. But I do want to state that I'm perfectly aware of the fact that idealism is a thing that is characteristic of the young always. And I did not mean to imply that there is no idealism in the Department at the present....

Oh yes, another thing is that in discussing what happened to the broader membership of the Aldridge Players, it seems that I became confusing as time went on. About the third time I spoke about it it seemed to me that I contradicted some things I said earlier. Particularly at the end when I said that most of the membership was non-active. What I really meant was that the Board really completely ran things and made decisions without consulting the membership. The membership had become mostly people who were willing to support us by buying a membership. We simply didn't call meetings and that sort of thing. We did occasionally gather people together and talk with them about a particular thing that we wanted done--a money drive or something like that. But the original relationship of the membership to the Board was gone after the trip South.

When I spoke about recruiting actors, I noticed I mentioned the high schools, and the state colleges and the University of California. I did not mention the junior colleges and I must say that we did go out to San Francisco City College, I remember. And ... I don't remember our going to Oakland City College at the time, but it seems incredible that we didn't. We recruited wherever we thought ... we might find some people--wherever we heard about there being some Negro actors we went after them and that included junior colleges and high schools.

Let's see. Oh yes, when I spoke about benefit performances, I really meant free performances. That is, you asked if we ever gave any free performances, and I answered that we gave several benefit performances. What I really meant was we gave several free performances for organizations who were doing benefits. I didn't make that clear.

Then another point is when I spoke about Elton's first try as director being as director of"Dance

Bongo"I realized that I had already mentioned him as directing the Harriet Tubman play. What I really meant is that"Dance Bongo' was his first try as a director of a production that was being presented to the public for money. The other was really a workshop thing.

Oh yes ... I said at one point that I chose the first bill of one-acts with the idea of using all the people that I had contacted. Well, it so happened that all the people I contacted were not used, but almost all were. Practically all of the ones that I approached myself were used, but some of the people who came to the first meetings and who were very enthusiastic we simply, well, the directors didn't cast them, and so all, everyone was not used. But that was the aim--to use everyone.

I notice I haven't said much about our training programs. I'm not sure why not because they were very ambitious and fairly well attended. I think I perhaps feel that they never accomplished what we hoped they might accomplish. We hoped that they would train our own people ... and bring in some new people. What happened was that a number of people would attend and then never participated in our program after that or perhaps in one production in some small way. But the training program never seemed to feed into the organization's needs very much. I think the last time we had a training program we concerned ourselves more with our specific needs and we had a directing class and we had a make-up class and these were things that all of us who were already active in the group could use. And I think that's what we needed right in the beginning. I think we should not have bothered trying to train new people because we simply were not in the position, we didn't have the personnel to follow through with these people. And so most of them were very inexperienced and needed a lot of encouragement and really needed a kind of workshop program to go along with the major productions much as they have at the University. And we had this in mind but we didn't have the personnel for it.

You asked what we did about trying to recruit people. And I forgot to mention that we did make a special effort to recruit the black middle-class, which I said was very reluctant to come to our productions. We got in a young woman who was a sorority member and interested in our group, had helped us many times. And we thought through her perhaps, we could reach the sororities and fraternities, and it didn't work. So we did make that particular effort.

To go on about the audiences a little more bit. We never made any particular effort, any particularly conscious effort to reach out to the rest of the black community. But, oh I just happened to remember, we did make an effort to reach the Negro History Society, but that's, I suppose, a middle-class group of a kind, a little more intellectual than the kind we worked so hard to get. Well, to go back to what I was saying before, we never tried very consciously to reach this wider group, but we did want to reach them, and we did eventually play for almost entirely black audiences as I said when we began our touring. And I think without our knowing it very clearly that's one of the things we enjoyed about touring around the Bay Area, and in one case down as far as Monterey. We were reaching a number of black people that we couldn't reach when we stayed in the Fillmore, although we reached eventually a number of the people who lived in the Fillmore, too. But in San Francisco, our audiences remained or became finally about half and half white and black.

When at the end I speak about our development program being the most important aspect of the Aldridge Players, I must make clear that we didn't have a clear-cut development program. It sounds at the end there as though we did have. But it's just as I said in the beginning because of the changing of directors and because of the lack of personnel able to follow through with beginners. We really had no conscious development program. Development came about because we existed. Just the fact of our existence made it possible for people, if they were in successive productions, to develop. . . . That's what I really meant.

Also at the end when I was speaking about educating blacks, we didn't consciously set out to educate anybody. We just performed, and the very fact of our performing was an educational experience. I'm pretty certain. And I think those are all of the things I want to clear up. I realize in listening to the tape how very biased and one-sided the tape necessarily is. The whole thing has been seen through my eyes and I recommend very strongly that you ask some of these same questions of the Board members whose names, addresses and telephone numbers I'm including with these tapes. Okay?

Oh, it seems as if I never can get off this tape. Margaret, I did say at the very beginning that I would try to wind up the tape with some conclusion about why the Aldridge Players didn't go on into the present period. But I really think that perhaps the answers or the answer to that is clear to you, maybe clearer to you than it is to me by all the

things I've said. And if it isn't, I think perhaps conversations with the other people on the Board will help you. I feel that I, perhaps, am not the one to give that answer. I don't know quite why unless it's because I feel so personally involved. I feel that perhaps if I had made other choices it would have made the difference, and, you know, I'm not at all sure that this is true. I'm not at all sure ... that we would have been right or I would have been right for the way things are developing in the present time. I just think that perhaps there is a time for all things and that our time had run out. And I'm not sure if that's a cop-out or not. And so I can't give you an answer, but perhaps you can deduce one yourself. Now this is really goodbye.

**Nadine Erika Wilmot**

Nadine Wilmot has worked in oral history for the past seven years and has been with the Regional Oral History for three years. She began to use orality to explore race, place, and power while directing the Oakland Oral History Project as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. Since then, she has worked in documentary film and with community based arts organizations. Nadine holds a Master's in City and Regional Planning from UC Berkeley and a BA in African American Studies from Wesleyan University. She is from Oakland.