

**Oral Memoirs
of
Peter Newman**

An Interview Conducted by
Mark Miller
2013

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University of Central Florida Public History Center

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Interview Histories

Interviewer Mark Miller

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the Public History Center, University of Central Florida, Sanford, Florida.

Project Detail

Creative Sanford, Inc. is a non-profit organization created to manage *Celery Soup: Florida's Folk Life Play* community theater productions. The original idea for the *Celery Soup* project came from Jeanine Taylor, the owner of a folk-art gallery on First Street in Sanford, Florida. Their first production was *Touch and Go*, which took several years of planning. The play focused on how the people of Sanford overcame obstacles throughout their history. Some of these stories include the fall of Sanford's celery industry, the Freeze of 1894-1895, and the closing of Naval Air Station (NAS) Sanford in the 1960s. Richard Geer and Jules Corriere, partners from Community Performance International, were in charge of assessing oral histories, converting them into scenes for the play, and writing original songs. Director Geer also used an all-volunteer cast from the local community, many of which were not experienced actors.

During the process of producing the show, Creative Sanford decided to rehabilitate an historic building, the Princess Theater, which was located on 115 West First Street and owned by Stephen Tibstra. The Creative Sanford offices are housed in the Historic Sanford Welcome Center, located at 203 East First Street. As of December 2013, the Executive Board for Creative Sanford included President Brian Casey, Vice President Trish Thompson, Treasurer Linda Hollerbach, Secretary Dr. Annye Refoe, and Founder Jeanine Taylor. The Board of Directors consisted of Cheryl Deming, Juanita Roland, Wendy Wheaton, and Dr. Connie Lester, a professor of history at the University of Central Florida. Honorary Board Members included: Glenda Hood, former Florida Secretary of State and Mayor of Orlando; Valada Flewellyn, a local poet, author, and historian; and Jackie Jones, a local entertainer and arts advocate.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Peter Newman is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 19, 2013.

Abstract

Oral history told by Peter Newman, playwright, director, and board member of Creative Sanford, Inc., a non-profit organization created to manage *Celery Soup* community theater productions. *Celery Soup's* first production was *Touch and Go*, a play about how the people of Sanford overcame obstacles throughout their history. This interview, conducted by Mark Miller, deals with topics such as the history of Creative Sanford, Inc. and *Celery Soup*, Newman's playwriting process, the Florida highwaymen, scripts that Newman wrote, the use of history as inspiration for plays, the importance of authenticity, the story of Dr. George H. Starke, dealing

University of Central Florida Public History Center

A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences and Stories of Central Florida

with sensitive issues and race relations, the interviewing process, and the community's reaction to *Celery Soup's* plays.

Peter Newman

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Mark Miller

2013

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Miller Very nice. You look good. Okay. Well, I'm Mark Miller, with a graduate student with UCF [University of Central Florida]. And I'm here with Peter Newman, uh – director, writer, everything to do with *Celery Soup*[: *Florida's Folk Life Play*], and, uh, and a powerhouse behind Creative Sanford[, Inc].

0:00:21

History of Creative Sanford, Inc. and *Celery Soup*

Miller So we're here for an interview. So have you been, uh, with the project from the beginning – Creative Sanford and, um, *Celery Soup*, or anything?

Newman Creative Sanford actually started, um, probably three years before we actually put on the first, uh, [clears throat] – the first performance. Um, it was based on, um, *Swamp Gravy*[: *Georgia's Official Folk-Life Play*], uh, which started in Colquitt in Georgia. And Jeanine Taylor, who runs the, um, gallery across the way there, was really the, uh – the, uh – the, uh, fountain of it. Um, and she came back from seeing *Swamp Gravy* and decided she wanted to do the same here in. And, uh – I think, um – I mean, she will be able to tell you the story better than I can. But somebody I believe gave her either a check or cash – \$200 – and said, "There you go. Let's start it."

Um, they ran, uh, three to four years with the, um, funding within the community doing things like the Celery Ball primarily, and other things like that, before they actually, uh, pushed the boat out and, um, got a hold a company up North, that actually also helped to create *Swamp Gravy*. And they came down here and they did the first show. They, um – they were, um, helping with the "Tea and Tells," which is where the community stories were obtained. And then, uh, they have, uh, various professional people, like a playwright – and she took the stories, put them together and produced the play. Then they had professional directors, choreographers, lighting, and all the rest of it.

And, um, they came together and they produced, um, the first *Touch and Go*. Um, it's called *Touch and Go*, because, as you probably know, there was an Air Force – no, it was Navy base [Naval Air Station (NAS) Sanford] here. They – they flew aircraft. Anyhow, Um, the – it was Navy, because the "touch and go" was practicing carrier landings, so what they'd come is – they'd come down in their jets, touch the tarmac, and then take off again, so hence the "touch and go."

That's what we used to call it. And, uh, one of the, uh, people who was associated with it very early on, he had a story about watching the planes do that when he was, uh, young in the Second World War – just after.

Um, but we – we felt that, um, after we had done *Touch and Go* – and, I mean, it was a success. There's no doubt about it, but after that, um – that we could, you know, really, uh, kind of run with it ourselves. I mean, you know there were[sic] a nice enough bunch of people used to doing it, But, uh, they charged an arm and a leg, so you know you can only sustain that for so long. Particularly in a place like this. So, you know, Colquitt, Georgia, is an amazing place, uh, and if you go up there to watch *Swamp Gravy*, it is the only show in town. And people come from mile[sic] – I mean, it is unbelievable when you go up there to see that hundreds of people that come to it. They come from all over.

Whereas here, um, on any one night that we're putting on something by *Celery Soup*, you can guarantee that there are between perhaps four to ten other live shows going on in theaters within perhaps a 30 mile radius. And I believe that that is primarily due to the number of people here that are associated with [Walt] Disney [World]. And of course, you know that helps with the whole creative process when it comes around to theater and all its, uh, associated performing arts.

So we've been going now for about four years with *Celery Soup*. And we've went through a number of iterations. We went through, um, *Touch and Go*. And we put it on for – well, it was quite a time actually. We put it on over a period of, um, I think it was 18 months to two years we put it on. And we just repeated it basically, though with different directors. So it's like a different show, but mainly it was, uh – and to be honest with you, we got reasonable audiences.

Um, But I – I – you know, the time came when we had other stories to tell. and the first story that, uh – that I wrote, uh – to be honest with you, I got a little – and a lot of people did – got a little fed up with doing the same thing. I performed, uh, *Touch and Go* for 47 performances. I've never ever done that with any show throughout my entire life before that.

0:05:39

The fireman and Barbara Farrell

Newman

So I then picked up on this, um, story about the haunted fire station. Of course, it was just around the corner from the theater .and it was such a wonderful story and very easy to tell. It almost – you know, I sat in the middle of the theater – I think it was one Saturday afternoon – and I – it just kind of wrote itself, you know. Uh, very easy to do and Barbara [Farrell] had given us, uh, her story – there were various other sources that I could use like local books., and then when I wrote it, uh, I actually sent it to Barbara and said, "Look. You know you were right with this." And she said, "The only thing I want to change in it is that..." Uh, the friend who comes to visit her from Coconut Grove, where Barbara first

came from—she wanted her to be called Sue, because that was the name of the name of her friend.

Miller Right [laughs].

Newman Okay. So we try. It's interesting, you know, that you do these things. And when you first look at them, uh, they're words on a piece of paper, and you don't really necessarily fully appreciate what there is behind that, but, um, when the—when the word is Barbara Farrell, you know—Barbara's alive. I went out and met the lady. Very, very nice lady. Very charming lady. And, um, these people are sitting in the audience, so you know you're actually, um...

0:07:17 **RECORDING CUTS OFF**

0:07:17 **The fireman and Barbara Farrell**

Miller Okay. We're back after the vacuum break.

Newman Okay. So, as I say, you know, um, Barbara was, uh, an excellent source. A very nice person. Um, the story was easy to tell, and it didn't take much research, because it was just really all there. Uh, the only thing that we had to do was really knit together the story of the fireman and the story of Barbara, and then just push them together.

0:07:53 **How Newman got involved with Creative Sanford**

Newman And really, um—you know, I know you want me...

Miller Well...

Newman To talk about how I got involved in this but—but—but, this is it, you see? Uh, I kind of got fed up with doing, uh, *Touch and Go*. I said to myself, *Peter, if you're gonna do anything, you've gotta to write it yourself.*

So I sat down and wrote this story and I passed it to the board of Creative Sanford—said, "Look, I've written a story." We then had a meeting. I think I wrote this—I can't remember the exact dates, but I want to say I perhaps wrote this story in late November—in December. They had a meeting to discuss the next, uh, *Touch and Go*—whatever—whatever it was going to be called—by *Celery Soup*. And I sat there in the audience, and, um, they said, "Oh, the director's going to be X and the choreographer's going to be Y." And—and this and that. And—and then we got two playwrights. One is Laura Donaldson and the other is Peter Newman. And that is the first time I ever realized that I was a— a playwright for Creative Sanford. So it was, you know—they say, you know, "Some people seek greatness. Others have it thrust upon them." Mine was well and truly thrust upon me. So, you know, I—I came away from that realizing that I really had to, um—but it's interesting you, know, because with, with that sort of thing, you know, you've got to start somewhere. And get from A and get to B.

0:09:13

Using history as an inspiration for community theater

Miller Well this brings up, um, uh—why do you do history? I mean, you know, part of this whole process—I guess *Swamp Gravy*, and all—how come you do history for this sort of thing?

Newman Well, uh, because that's what it's about. It's about bringing out the stories that local people have of, uh—of what they've done. And turning that into—into some type of play that you can perform in public.

You know, we have—and I've sat through hours and hours and hours of these tapes and—and read and read, you know, people's reports on, on their lives. And a lot of them are the same. Uh, you know, "I—I was born here. I was raised here. My mom and dad were strict with me when I was young. I went to school. Got a job. I got married, had kids, had grandkids. And now here I am and I'm talking to you about it." And that might be over the course of three hours, you get something like that.

The secret with all of these things, Mark [Miller], is not, um, merely to put a recording device in front of somebody. What you have to do is actually drag out of them almost the interesting stories that they have. and there are very, very few people that come to us that have—that really have interesting stories kind of laid out in front of you.

We have two very notable exceptions there. And one is the family that tells us about Uncle Dieter. And the other is the family that tells us about Elmer Baggs. And the stories about those two individuals—and, uh, individuals they were—are an absolute legion. Uh, you know, we have quite a few of them. But some of the rest you really, really have to, you know, start digging and, uh— and—and—and trying to get at it.

And the history of it, of course, comes from the fact that, you know, history is really, uh, dependent upon how you define it. And for, uh, community theater such as this, we're looking at, uh, contemporary history. So we're not going back 65 million years to dinosaurs. We're not going back 65,000 years. We're going back 65 years. We're looking at people's life spans at what they've actually done. People who can remember going back into the 1910s, the 1920s. And, you know, sometimes...

Miller Collective memory?

Newman It's—it's—it is very much a collective memory.

0:11:49

Fire at the Holy Cross Episcopal Church

Newman Um, the—the—the story that I wrote about the fire station starts with a fireman coming back from a fire in 1923 at the Holy Cross [Episcopal] Church, when it actually burned to the ground. Um, fondly enough we also have the story. Um,

and—I can't remember who for the life of me who it is just off the top of my head. But, um, it's obviously a—a—an older, uh, guy, saying, you know—telling his story and whatever. And somebody says, "Oh yeah. Tell him about how you burnt the Holy Cross Church down." [laughs] And apparently this—this—this person was the knave[?] at the Holy Cross fire. He was baptized. And he always thought that it was a candle that they left after his baptism service that actually was responsible for burning the church down. But it just struck me as being, you know, very fascinating that—that here I've got the Holy Cross Episcopal Church. Over here is the guy who's giving his story that actually—that actually relates to that burning down.

So, you know, some of the things that we could tell instead of being snip-its could be much, much, longer. But of course, you know, you have to bear in mind what it is, know who you're dealing with, and, uh, you have to have an eye to the, uh—the consumption of what you're actually producing, rather than just producing for producing's sake. It's not something that is, um—it's not an academic exercise. You know, what you're dealing with. You're dealing with living history, with real people. You're dealing with their lives. It has to stand up to their own scrutiny. So if you tell me your tale, and I turn it into a play, I—I could look you fairly in the squarely in the eye and say, "Look, Mark," you know, "Your story that you were telling in front of all of these people." And you would be happy with that, as opposed to taking kind of mangling it around and producing all sorts of other things there to make it a little more interesting. I'm sure you have lots of interesting stories, but that's nonetheless the way we have to have that in the back of our mind all the time.

0:14:05

Importance of authenticity

Miller

So authenticity—that's something that is very important?

Newman

Authenticity is very important. I mean, you—you can take it, um, to a degree. I mean, what—what you deal with, for example, you—you might—it's I—I—I guess it's like, um—it's like a, um—a pudding. Uh, uh, and, in that pudding, you've got raisins, and those raisins are the bits of authenticity. And then you sort of, uh, really pad other stuff in. You—you can't be authentic 100 percent of the time.

Um, the last story that—that I wrote, um, for the, uh—for, uh, *Remade - Not Bought*, was a story about a lady called Arthurene[sp] Wood[?], who worked in the tax office. And this is just a little story—she had about been almost locked in there one night. And, uh Arthurene actually came and—and said—Arthurene and Mona—that was her friend and that was absolutely authentic. But onto the end of it, I grafted this huge story about somebody writing a, uh, check on the side of a cow, which was, uh—was not authentic at all. It was just a, uh—a story, that's what it was. But it, you know—it made for good theater. So you always have to have, um, an eye to what—what I say what the audience is. The audience will not sit there and listen to somebody going on about their childhood or

anything like that, because it is not interesting. And you're asking these people to pay money to come and listen to what we are producing at Creative Sanford. And you—you've got to have something that they are interested in, because, otherwise there's no point in doing it. Because you're asking them to pay and—and, otherwise, they go away grumbling and say, "Well, it's not worth it," and all the rest of it. You might be alright for that show, but, when it comes around to doing another show, then you find you've shot yourself in the foot, and have a much bigger mountain to climb, when it comes around to producing the audiences for a show like that.

0:16:07

How *Celery Soup* chooses topics

Miller Well, how do you pick your topics then? Uh, uh, apparently, uh, from what we've heard, there are, um, a few key words or something that you might—might choose to sort of build stories around?

Newman To a large extent, it depends on the sort of, um, grist[?] that you have for your mill. Um, and it's not something that you have as a sort of, uh, list of—of topics that you may or may not choose. It's something that just stands up and hits you out of—soft of—like, for example, when I wrote, um, the highway man. That was something that, um, the, uh—the Sanford council or Seminole County, uh, lawyer. Uh, a guy called Doug[las] Stenstrom. And, uh, he gave his story. And, you know, uh, a very long, actually very entertaining, uh, set of reminiscences. And, out of this, there was[sic] a couple of lines about, um, the—uh, was it the paintings or did he actually mention the highway men? The—the, uh, Florida Highwaymen who painted these paintings, in the [19]50s and the '60s and sold them.

And, um, one of the guys that was originally associated with *Celery Soup*—a guy called Perry Eschelberg, who actually lives over in Serenity Towers—Bram Towers, as it was then. So I went and talked to Perry, and he said, "Yeah. We've got them here." And he showed me all the Al Newton paintings that are there in the foyer, and you can still see this old one that was screwed to the wall. And so I thought then, *This is such a*—and fondly[?] enough at that time, um, from something of the public radio that they were talking about that something of the highwaymen. And then I saw something else on the local TV—they were talking about the highway men. So I thought, *Right. I'm gonna get home and do—do my bit first.* So I wrote this story so the only really, um, catch I could find in it. So to make it more interesting was they took all the highwaymen down, when they renovated the building, uh, a number of years ago and then they put them back up. Originally, I—I entitled it *The Mystery of the Missing Highway Men Mystery*. But, I mean, it was a nice story I—I felt, that kind of made it a—a little more interesting. Um, but, you know, the actual history of the highwaymen is—is fascinating. I believe, that over the next three or four years, that you'll perhaps see a lot more people coming out with stories about the highwaymen more than—than what there's been to date.

So, you know, how does anything stand up it? It—it—it just does, you know. We got, um—we got—at least I got—I got a story about, uh, somebody who used to have the land lease for the Mayfair Golf Club.¹ And, um, I—kind of researched it and then looked at it, and I didn't—it took me a long time to actually find the angle that I wanted. But, um, I—I wrote what—what I consider to be a funny piece. but it's, uh—we couldn't put it on, because there's this court case going through between the, uh, people who have the lease to the golf course and Seminole County, who actually own the land. And, um, it was about who designed the golf course. So I wrote this story about who designed the Mayfair golf course. So if you come to see next time, hopefully that story might be in there.

Miller [inaudible]

Newman Yup.

0:19:54 **Luticia Lee's rolling pin**

Miller Well, we did see two that that we were interested—that we're sort of focusing on. Um, one of them is about the rolling pin. And the other story is about Dr. [George H.] Starke. And, um, uh, we're interested in how you picked those and how you approached them.

Newman Well, first of all the—the—the rolling pin now—when we did this iteration of, uh—of, uh, *Celery Soup*, there were two—as I said before, there were two of us writing. One was Laura Donaldson, and the other was me. Now Laura actually found the story about the rolling pin. Again, uh, she got it from somebody,² who came in and told the story about the cannon, and—and its wheels, and what have you. And she produced a really nice little story about, you know, the rolling pin, the kids, and the—and the mother, and how they use to roll it out. And, you know, they were using a bit of history with that.

0:20:52 **Dr. George H. Starke**

Newman Um, Dr. Starke, um—that we used to have a lady,³ uh, who was—she—she was in the original *Touch and Go*, and now she moved on to the Board of Creative Sanford. She's, uh, um—she used to be a—a professor at the Seminole, uh, Community College.⁴ And she said, um—talked to me about this—this, uh—Dr. Starke. And, um, she had a lot of, um, uh, information on him, which she gave to me. And, you know, uh, you read all this stuff.

¹ Correction: Mayfair Country Club.

² Luticia Lee.

³ Dr. Annye Refoe.

⁴ Present-day Seminole State College.

And, uh, Starke's interesting, because he was there. If you go down to the Orlando museum⁵ in Downtown [Orlando], you'll see they've got a big display about [George] Henry Starke, and – and the bombing in Mims, and – and in 1951. You know, when they killed the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] local secretary.⁶ Um, so that's all pretty graphically laid out. I went down there to have a look at that. And then [George] Henry Starke's son – I think his name's George [Starke] – he was, um – he became a lawyer and he's a – he's a – he's a very well-known financier. He lives up there in New York, but I've never gotten a hold of him. But, uh, he's still around.

But the – the story about Starke – I mean, it's a really good story. There's a lot of detail there. It affects a lot of people. Um, it was really how do you, you know, tell it – a story like that? And I – I noticed, when I was going through it, there's a little time – a little footnote – that said that, when the original researchers were producing all of this information, you know, it said, uh, "As told to us by his – daughter,"⁷ uh, "in a restaurant in" 1964, or whenever it was. So that – I – I – I kind of took that. That's how I got the idea of the, uh – the restaurant and kind of bringing it in like that, which I felt was a, you know, uh – a good way of telling, and putting it in – in – in some sort of context. But it was interesting that, um, I, uh, you know – I'm not probably, uh, uh, a native of Sanford, but, um...

Miller Live here, work here, play here.

Newman [laughs] But, um, when, uh, we did the original *Touch and Go*, uh, there – there was a guy called Will Saunders, and his brother Tommy [Saunders]. Uh, they're both, uh – black guys. And Will is, uh – really, really nice guys, they were. Will was, um – he used to be on the board of – of Creative Sanford, as well. but he said he preferred to, uh – it was a toss-up between Creative Sanford and watching his football. He preferred to watch his football, so, you know, that – that's fine. But – but Will's a great one for photography, you know. He's taken thousands and thousands of photos of the, uh, *Touch and Go* shows over the years. In fact, I believe they're his photos that they are there down there at the [Princess] Theater. But, um, he came to the, um, uh – the – the Starke – when we first did the – the, uh, Starke play. And he came down and said to me – what was it he said to me? He said, "Dr. Starke." He said, "He actually delivered me and Tommy."

So I, you know – it – it's little things like that – that, you know, just make you realize that you're not dealing with just words on a piece of paper. This is actually community. there are people that – even the lady, uh – Nancy [Harris] Ford, who's in the show – I think, uh, uh – she was delivered by Dr. Starke, as well. So, you know, there, uh – obviously a very, very well-known guy, uh, and

⁵ Orange County Regional History Center.

⁶ Harry T. Moore.

⁷ Helen Starke.

you know, uh, such a – such a, you know, uh – he – he – his attitude towards people was unbelievable. it really was. You know, uh, this – this string of humanity kind of pours out of the fellow, you know. And to appear twice in *Time* magazine is – is – is – shows he's no slouch either. So, interesting guy.

0:25:13

Dealing with sensitive issues and race relations

Miller Well, how do you deal with, uh, counter-narrative or, say, gaps in your story, or maybe sensitive areas? Um...

Newman Well, um, sensitive areas – uh, of course, you know, it's Sanford. Um, there was, uh, uh – there was segregation here obviously, uh, um, until obviously the mid-70s. and I was actually, um, going to write, um, a story about the segregation of the schools, which you could, um – between Crooms [High School]⁸ and, uh, uh, uh, Sanford, and – and, uh, the [Seminole] High School, uh, which was in 1972- [19]73. There's, uh, uh, a friend of mine was there. Nancy Ford was there at that time, as well. And they both had their particular stories to tell.

But then, of course, we had the – the whole Trayvon [Benjamin] Martin and George [Michael] Zimmerman thing. And, uh, the board really felt that, you know, you could wade around in this 'til the cows come home, but they didn't really feel that it was something that we really necessarily wanted to – to overplay. Uh, and, in fact, you know, there is obviously, um – there's a black element to this and there's a white element to this.

Um, and really – I mean, personally, I'd like to see the – the things be a little close together, you know. It – it's very difficult to, uh, write the stories that we've got, um, if you've – if you're not confident that you've got the people – you know, the – the – the black people – to come and play the parts. I mean, luck – you know, luckily, we had some really good people., but it's, you know – it's – it's particularly men, um, in the sort of 30 to 50 age range – whether they're black, white, or whatever color. You know, you just can't just go tell them that this is not the sort of thing that, you know, really does very much for them. So you – you've got to always bear that in the back of your mind. But certainly, you know, we are conscious of the fact that Sanford has, uh, perhaps – I don't know whether it's an unenviable reputation, because of what's happened in the past. Um, and you – you don't have to look very far to find it either.

0:27:43

Uncle Dieter

Newman In terms of other things, um, if you look at something like Uncle Dieter, uh – I mean, when I first saw that, they actually asked me to play Uncle Dieter in *Touch and Go*, which I did. Um, I – I was a little cherry about it, because, of course, you know, he was, uh – wasn't quite an idiot savant, but very much this sort of, um, like, um, the play⁹ *Rain Man*. you know, It's – it's – and it's true that, you know,

⁸ Present-day Crooms Academy of Information Technology.

⁹ Correction: film.

you could give him your birthdate and he would [*snaps*] tell you just like that what day of the week it was. You know, he – he – he kind of, you know, lived life to his own beat of the drum. You know, he – he would do things in his own particular way that – that nobody else would think of doing.

Um, he had this, uh – perhaps you didn't see *Touch and Go* – but he had this, uh, rooster that he use to carry around with him that had no legs. And, uh, the – the – the joke was, of course, well, uh, "Where do you find a rooster with no legs?" Where do you find a rooster with no legs? Exactly where you left it. But apparently that – what we – we found out the reason why this rooster had no legs is because, uh, the rooster caught, um – I think it was some sort of parasite – something like that. And, uh, they advised Dieter to bathe the rooster's legs in gasoline. I mean, and this would be like sort of, you know, like putting, um, gas – gasoline on a cloth and just rubbing it down – something like that. But he stuck this bird in the gasoline for hours. And, of course, eventually it lost its legs. Because of the effect of the gasoline. So he used to carry the rooster around, you know.

Just – just a man very much following his own light. And, you know, with people like that, it's very easy to – to write stories about them. With people like that, you know, you're not demeaning them or doing anything like that. And I think really, when it comes around to looking and – and, I mean, it's not just here. It's anywhere, you know. Uh, we've got a mix of cultures. You've got a mix of people. You know some are old. Some are young. So long as you don't demean them, or run them down, which is totally unnecessary. Not what were about at all. Then I think you can legitimately tell their story to any audience that you care to invite through the door.

0:30:25

The interviewing process

Miller Very good. Alright. Um, so you're telling stories about ourselves to ourselves?

Newman Exactly.

Miller Alright. [*inaudible*].

Newman I mean, let's be honest. I mean, you know, you have a story. You might think, *Well*, I mean, *Okay. Fine*. But, I mean, you have a story. You've got more than one. You've got a lot of stories. And, uh, it's really up to the person who's doing the interviewing just to kind of drag that story out of the person who is the interviewee. I mean, you know, not everybody sits down and goes on and on and on and on, like I do. You know, sometimes it's very, very difficult to just bring the person back and say, "Well, you said about this and what about that?" But that is the only way that you can do it to get hold of information from them that you can't get from a thousand other people. Because you're not talking about their lives per se. you're talking about their lives in Sanford and how they interacted within the environment and the community. And, of course, that's not

what everybody does around here, because some people live in Longwood. Some people live in Tallahassee. Some people live in Nigeria. You know, they're – they're all born and raised in a family, and perhaps go to school, and have kids, and da de da de da de da. But it's the environment that – that really makes the person and the way that they interact with the environment of the people. That's what makes the interesting story.

0:31:51

Community feedback

Miller

How does the community react to your play and to your writing?

Newman

Well, generally speaking, we – we haven't – well, we've had, um – it's true to say that, as soon as you put anything on, and hold it up as being – here is a spectacle for somebody to look at and you're asking them to pay money to come and see it. Um, it holds its self up to ridicule, criticism – call it whatever you will. And we've had our fair share of criticism. People criticize that it's, uh – there's[sic] too many stories about black people, or there's[sic] not enough stories about white people, or, you know, this or that or – or whatever. But, to me, that is just healthy criticism.

If somebody came along and said, you know, "My name is Mrs. X. and my mother gave you this story. And that you've just done with my mother's story, I think is just awful." I would be very, very, upset about that. And I would want to know why this had happened, but, you know, touch wood. We've never had anything like that. Nobody has ever said, um, you know, that – that – that what you've done is terrible to the story.

That, in fact, um – when I played, uh, Elmer Baggs in the first show, Marlene Baggs came up and said, um, you know, that "I – I really enjoyed it." I got the same thing from, um, Uncle Dieter and, uh, one of his nieces. She said that she enjoyed it as well, because, you know, we – we didn't demean the person. You know, we told the story. And, if we added a twist of humor to it, as well, or a twist of mystery, you know, it doesn't take a thing beyond the realms of – of probability. Then that's – that's really what you have to do, you know, when you're telling all of these things.

You know, if the people have die – uh, died, and – and you tell the story about the founding of Sanford, or something like that, you go back to Colonel¹⁰ [Henry Shelton] Sanford, you know – there were two of them. Him and a general. And they kind of tossed up to see what it was gonna be called and all the rest. They weren't really proper Army generals, and you can do that. But – and it is history. But if – if you're trying to be sort of faithful to the idea of a community – a historical performance – then it's – as much as you possibly – if can, use live testimony opposed to something you get out of a history book, then I believe that that's what you should be aiming to do.

¹⁰ Correction: General.

0:34:35

Collecting history

Miller Well, how do you go about collecting these histories?

Newman Same way as you do with, uh— we’ve— we’ve done “Tea and Tells.” And these little recorders here are a godsend, because you just put them on the, uh, table and people talk into them. And, uh, you know, sometimes you go to sit and listen to them. Sometimes they’re transposed onto, uh, paper or something like that, so you can sit there and read them. But, you know, it— it’s, um— it’s an art, I think. Interviewing people and getting what you need to get out of them is an art. But generally speaking, um, there are very, very few people who don’t want to come in and talk about themselves, you know, not everybody, but, you know generally speaking, people aren’t resistant to talk about their lives, once you kind of start the ball rolling. It’s, you know— it’s a fascinating subject. You can sit and talk about yourself all night long if you really think about it.

0:35:43

Background in theater

Miller Do you have writing background? Plays?

Newman Um...

Miller Plays?

Newman Personally, no. The only writing that I— I mean, I was, um, associated with a theatrical group in the UK [United Kingdom] for a long, long time. And I did all sorts of stuff there, including writing. Um, but I’ve never actually sat down and, um, and written a book, or written a play, or anything like that. It’s just— it’s just kind of dabbling here and there.

And this one is as— is as good a place to dabble as any other, because you’re— you’re just looking at, um, little bites that you— that you’re performing. You know, nothing is more than five or six minutes long. Um, it’s, uh— you— you— you try to build the characters to make them interesting. And I— I know how these things should work, because I’ve had so much experience of doing it in the past. But, uh, you can’t afford— I— I— I mean, you can’t afford of subtle nuances.

You know, we’re not talking Broadway Theater. And, uh, and people who are going to the theater every, you know— every week or something like that. What you’re doing is you are producing mass entertainment. And that’s such— it has to be pitched at a certain level. So, you know, it’s— it’s not a question of using complicated plot lines that go on for half an hour, or spending 20 minutes trying to work, uh, you know— work out how a person’s psyche is actually affecting everybody within the— the play. No. You’ve got to have something that’s quick, that’s lively, that keeps people’s attention. And people have a very short attention span for things like this, generally speaking. So it’s gotta be that— it’s got to be— it’s gotta have a certain amount of “razzmatazz” that has to go with it.

At the end of the day, you've got to produce a commercial article, because that's what you're going to – to go out and sell. So yeah. You know, I mean, when – when I first wrote the – the fireman, you know, it had all sorts of stuff in it and, uh – but it was severely cut down, because, of course, it was just, uh – it was just not required. So you've got to be careful of these things.

0:38:04 **Future Celery Soup plays**

Miller Well, what do we have to look forward to in the future?

Newman Well, it's more of the same. Um, you know, we have got some, uh, uh, more stories here. I've got, um, three that I've written. Uh, there's – there's the one about the golf course. There's the one about, uh, a policeman's dog that used to go and, uh, and test door handles by itself. And then I also wrote one about, um, uh, a fight. It – it was when, uh – again, this was going back to the schools' integration – and it was a story that a, uh, lady gave us. And I wrote, uh, uh, about that. So, you know, that's a bit of a kernel there, and then we've got other things. And I believe that, um, UCF also has a library of things, because it – it might well be that we've tried to kind of keep it to Sanford. Um, but, you know, perhaps we'll extend it to Seminole County, or something like that.

But there is still a lot of people here. I mean, even during the last show, one of the guys who plays, um – he played one of the firemen, and – and he was also the, um, uh, the president of the – of the Sanford, uh, local business society, right at the end there. His name's Mike. *[clears throat]* He said that he knew a guy. Uh, I think this guy rented him a house, or sold him a house. He said that this guy's father, uh – he used to brew moonshine, over there at the other side of Lake Monroe there. And, you know, the stories that he could tell. So, you know, you – you've gotta kinda keep your ears open for something like this. You know, just – just follow up on them. Like, if it's something interesting like that. so, you know, we'll look, uh – look and see if we can't get something that's light and entertaining next time.

0:40:09 **Closing remarks**

Miller Alright. Well, thank you very much.

Newman I hope I've been light and entertaining

Miller Yes. You have. Dramatically so.

Newman Thank you.

Miller *[laughs]* Thank you.

Newman Alright.

Miller I do appreciate it.

End of Interview