

Oral History --- Ed Ragozzino

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Interviewer: Planet Glassberg

Lane Community College

PG: Could you tell me what it was like for you to go from South Eugene High School to Lane Community College?

ER: It was a very exciting challenge, the founding president of the college Dale Parnell, called me and asked me to join the staff and start a Performing Arts Department. I had some real close emotional and professional connections with South Eugene High School because I spent twelve really exciting years there. Those students were just absolutely miraculous in terms of what they can do. In fact, I've always in my three professional levels: high school, college administrator, and professional; probably the most creative time were at South Eugene High when those kids would fill the theatre. We would fill the theatre for four nights running with a play like "The Glass Menagerie." Four to five hundred kids would try out for plays and musicals. And here's the irony, the theatre department subsidized the athletic program. So, yes, it was time to move but I left feeling great about South.

PG: When did you begin at Lane Community College and when did you leave?

ER: I started in the fall of 1968 and left in 1986. Retired after eighteen years there. It was the first year the college was at its current campus. It was finished but there were no sidewalks or roads. Literally, you went to school with boots on and then you left your boots outside. It was just mud. Three inches deep all over the campus. They were late on that aspect of the college and they opened it and that was 1968.

PG: How did you go about designing a Performing Arts Program at Lane Community College”? “Can you describe that and what was involved?”

ER: Yes, it was an interesting process because we were successful in conveying to the Board of Education, where we had six or seven pretty impressive architectural firms as candidates from New York, Los Angeles and virtually all over the country. I was convinced we probably didn't want somebody who was very, very experienced in designing theatres because the chances are – my feeling was that they were going to give you what they gave Cincinnati, or Irvine and you basically sit there and they designed your theatre. We didn't want that. We wanted to design our own theatre. I convinced the Board to hire a local architectural firm called Bishop, Sedar and Unthank. I knew this firm and I knew all three partners and they were very creative. They simply never said, “Well, I can do that but, it will cost you more money.” They simply tried to accommodate and they did some very creative things. In fact, we probably wouldn't have gotten into that theatre because through their creativity, they saved the college a lot of money. They were on a budget and could only do it for so much. And here's the important thing...we designed the theatre, the staff designed the theatre. The architects listened, asked questions. They said, “What is an orchestra pit?” We explained what an orchestra pit is. They knew what an orchestra pit is but they wanted to know what we thought an orchestra pit is. Even among the music staff there was a question about, in a band room, should it be carpeted or should it be hard surface? So, we made those decisions and they respected them because we were the professionals. In all honesty, we ended up with one of the finest theatres. The other rooms were a little sparse but we did it. The price tag was \$1,500,000. You can't buy a swimming pool for that today. It's really one of the finest theatres; it's just the right size, 585 with excellent sight lines. The stage, the theatrical machinery was a little dated but that's what we could afford. So we are very proud of that building.

PG: In what ways did you see the performing arts at Lane change in the time you were Chair, from the 1970's to the 1980's. Could you comment on the curriculum, what was taught and how and the students and the community response or involvement.

ER: There was kind of a negative response to the performing arts going into Lane at that time because there was a strong community contingent that felt that Lane Community College was a trade school and they had a heavy passion for maintaining that technical kind of institution. They regarded the performing arts as the antithesis of what the community college should be. You and I know today that that's not what community college is. It's college transfer, it's technical and it's adult education and that mix is important, that not one third should dominate. We were involved with the college transfer program. We developed curriculum.

We started with me and a half time music director that I insisted that he be hired because it was music and theatre and my expertise was theatre. I brought Nathan Cammack with me and they agreed to put him half time for the first year and full time after that. I think the budget was \$26,000. Maybe I'm overstating this but there was a curious phenomenon that happened. Dale Parnell, the president of the college hired me and gave me as a goal to build a Performing Arts department, curriculum and facilities. I agreed. If there weren't facilities I wouldn't be interested in the position. That was in May. The end of summer, Dale Parnell was drafted as the Superintendent of Public Instruction at Lane but neglected to share with the Interim President what our arrangement was. And that was to provide a budget, develop curriculum, develop a program of music and theatre and build a facility. Nobody knew that. There was nothing in the budget. We had to scrounge. There were four or five classes at the time, choir and so forth but we developed it within a manner of ten years that facility. An exciting facility and probably one of the most acknowledged, reputable

performing arts programs in the Northwest community college system. We were the model.

PG: Was that around 1974?

ER: By 1974, we had our facility and pretty well acknowledged in the Performing Arts community as a strong and good model for performing arts. We had FTE crew (?), staff crew. When I left, it was actually the largest payroll of the college, in this sense because though we had nine full time. We had forty part-time instructors who were basically involved with performance studies where they taught one-on-one music, performance studies, with an instrument, piano, trumpet, organ and so forth. You put all those names together and it looked like a pretty impressive staff. The staff was exciting, hard working, talented. To respect them. It was a fine program. It wasn't easy. No one ever tapped me on the shoulder and said here's a building or here's another \$80,000 for a couple of instructors. We literally had to go to the mat on everything, as did most departments. But, for some reason we had to justify ourselves a little more than the so-called traditional programs in business and math and so forth. We had to be exemplary. I left feeling very good about the department and feeling very good about the college. Things have changed.

PG: I was going to ask you if you can recall any difficult situations and how they were resolved? Or major challenges and how you overcame them?

ER: The budget was always a challenge and we went through numerous crises along with every department on campus. The Performing Arts is just an interesting and enigmatic program compared to math and language arts. If you are doing a percussion ensemble, the most you're going to have in that ensemble is eight. Well, if the norm is twenty-five, then suddenly you think, it's like you're saying you can't teach a string quartet, you have to teach ten string quartets, you have to teach forty students. We always had to educate people on the fact that we're not better but different. To counter balance the smaller

classes, we simply had chairs that were sixty in number. History of music had fifty and sixty. When you put it all together the FTE was as good as, not better than normal. But money was always an issue. Maintaining staff and not only that, the building. Most of the fulltime staff came in as part-time music (?) and I was able to justify a full time position. And one-by-one, year-by-year until we had a real complete staff. We had a choral specialist, we had an instrumental specialist, we had a piano specialist, and we had technical theatre people, historians, acting coaches and directors. We finally achieved a full, complete compliment of staff that enabled us to have a fully staffed performing arts program.

It attracted a lot of students from California, from Washington State; the word was out that you could get a pretty fine education in theatre and music. And they did. We had some students that heard about us in New York and moved here. We were basically, almost completely lower division college transfer. Everything being offered was transferable to a four-year school. We tried to start some technical programs; we wanted specifically to create a program in piano tuning and repair. Which was really needed in this area and we just never got funding for it.

PG: So that never happened with the piano tuning?

ER: We had an advisory committee, we had curriculum, we had everything but the money to hire staff and we had a pretty good justification for the employability of that technician. But we're college transfer and ___ that.

PG: Can you describe your relationship with the Adult Education or the Continuing Education classes that are related with the Performing Arts to the credit classes that were taught?

ER: Sometimes they were an enormous pain in the ass and I'll tell you that they would create courses in music and theatre in the Adult Education program, and their standards were behind the time. They hired somebody in make-up that was a student of mine a year or so before that. Now they're teaching make-up and the same for piano students and piano teachers. And it wasn't a matter of jealousy; it was simply that we took the blame for their inadequacy. They assumed that was the music programs in the arts department and it wasn't. We had no control over hiring instructors. It was a constant battle. Say look, we're in the position to hire for you the best piano instructors about education. Now let's do that. We have the ability to determine their capability and qualifications. You know, somebody walks in the door and says I want to teach piano, they say OK, and we got twelve students who got the job. Well, that's ridiculous. I have to say that after awhile we finally reached some kind of compromise.

The other problem was that they would use our facilities, like piano lab and never pay for any of the repairs or wear and tear of that facility. Piano lab was twelve units and has a certain capacity for use. It was just a problem. It was just a lack of coordination from the Adult Education program and our program. Until we reached some kind of an understanding to work together and not apart, things got better.

PG: Did the performances at Lane Community College in the late 1960's and the early 1970's reflect the times. For example, the Vietnam War was happening, did this have any influence with classes or anything else? Another example would be the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Movement?

ER: You know, Lane was not like the University of Oregon in the 1960's. Most of the students were of lower income and they were there to get an education and not sit in on administration buildings. While our sister college across the hill there were numerous demonstrations, but I didn't see a lot of that kind of political

activity in the sixties. It wasn't reflected in the curriculum and it wasn't particularly reflective of the students.

PG: What were the theatre performances at the college?

ER: Do you mean did I do controversial plays? We did a balance of plays. We chose our season based on the literature not on the political climate of the time. We built up an enormous theatre and music audience. It is estimated that theatre and music, concerts and plays and musicals that we would bring 30,000 people to the campus every year. It's a big audience. And for a long time, that connection, that theatre/concert season was the only thing that brought thousands and thousands of community patrons to campus. They never had the opportunity to be here. They've never seen it. They drove by it on 30th or Interstate 5, and we were out in the dynamic part of the cultural life in this community. Basically, sold out performances year after year. Our program itself was self-supporting which was pretty hard to do. It dovetailed why students were there, to learn in the classroom and perform, accept all theory, and learning the practical skills.

Our concert performance season was dynamic. There was something going on virtually every week. The theatre was in rehearsal everyday including Saturdays and Sundays. When one show was performing the other was in rehearsal, in the lab theatre. We'd move out for concerts and they'd perform one night and run the sets up for the next week. It was a very busy and active schedule of performing. People liked the theatre; they'd go right to the theatre. I won't compare it with any of the local theatre groups. It was the right size, the right configuration, and excellent sightlines. Most theatres in this area are tunnel-like. With a long area of seats and at the end of that long area of seats is a stage. Any of those with a rake that's got a torn is insufficient. In other words, if it's like this, then you probably have to do a lot of neck clearing. Lane was a steep rake and you saw that you never had to worry about a lady with her Easter hat. It was

almost a three quarter round. Therefore, you were able to put almost 600 seats in an area that wasn't more than 50 to 60 feet from the stage. It's a good theatre.

PG: I know that the Performing Arts included theatre and music, but dance was originally included with Health & Physical Education. Do you know when the dance area became incorporated with the theatre and music departments?

ER: About a year after I left. I think so.

PG: Would that be in 1987?

ER: I believe so. The confusion was that Health, considered dance as a physical activity for breathing, exercise and so forth, and it wasn't a performing arts. We regarded dance as a performing art. They regarded it as a physical education program. Students wanted more than that. Physical Education was not in the position to bring that area of expertise to the students where they could transfer to performance. That's where it belonged.

PG: I'm curious, were you involved with the creation of the Hult Center? Can you describe what that was like and what was involved?

ER: Since 1964 I was deeply involved with an organization called the Lane County Auditorium Association and that organization existed for the purpose of creating a professional performing arts center for Lane County, specifically in Eugene or Springfield. And concurrently as a fundraiser, I would produce and direct summer musicals at South Eugene High School as a source of raising planning monies. We did that for ten years. We raised almost \$300,000 and in those days that was pretty good money. It became the initial effort that became the Hult Center. We missed the bond issue by like two hundred votes, which is unfortunate.

The summer shows did two things; it created the planning monies and you don't create a performing arts center without spending some significant money on acoustical, pre-designed functions but, more importantly, it kept the project in the public eye for ten years and people had a sense that they were participating in the development and eventual program/theatre project. That was probably more valuable than the money and subsequently became the Hult Center.

We were the organization that kept the dream alive. Was a very powerful and dedicated group of men and women from virtually all walks of life, a good representation from civic and professional leaders and just plain art lovers. We created a dream and made it happen. Unfortunately now that it's so expensive that local artists that it was designed to accommodate can't pay for the use of the facility. That was the origin of the performing arts center to create a house, a home for the local artist, music, theatre and dance. It also had a non-performing arts function where it was a forum for debate, education, and for lectures. Unfortunately it has become a roadhouse for third rate touring musicals and one night stands. Each year it's harder and harder for the local arts organizations to pay for using the facility.

PG: Can you tell me what the Eugene Festival of Musical Theatre is about and I understand you were the executive director of that.

ER: Eventually these summer musical theatre productions would eventually be housed in this new performing arts center. So when the Hult Center was a reality, a group of civic leaders, Morrie Jacobs, Les Anderson, Ted Baker, Gene Tate and a few others, created the Eugene Festival of Musical Theatre (EFMT). It was designed to be kind of a musical theatre, Ashland-like summer repertory company. We did that for more than ten years, producing shows in the Soreng and the Silva concurrently. The Silva housed the larger 'King and I,' 'West Side Story' and 'My Fair Lady' kind of shows. The Soreng housing, 'You're A Good Man Charlie Brown', 'The Fantasticks' and the smaller ensemble. We simply got

priced out of existence because the Hult Center is a full union house. The costs for instance for a production of 'Guys and Dolls' in 1985, the bill for the stage manager was \$48,000. The cost of ushers was \$12,000. The Metropolitan Opera, which is the pinnacle of performing arts centers, doesn't pay one cent for ushers or volunteers. For some reason at the Hult Center you pay \$12,000 for an eighteen performance run. It's a lot of money. You put all those things together and it got increasingly difficult to meet our budget.

Let me explain something about earned and unearned income. Earned income is what you make from ticket sales. Unearned income is what you get from corporate sponsorships, community support, and patrons. In a symphony world it's probably a 70/30, maybe even an 80/20 ratio. Eighty percent non-earned and twenty percent earned income. In other words, they only have to make twenty percent of the budget from box office. In our case, it was more like 60/40, which puts real pressure on the production company to make it in the box office, and we did! One of our highest grossing shows for EFMT was 'West Side Story'. Ticket gross was \$590,000. That's for one summer run. Eventually we just simply got priced out of existence and corporate sponsorships change. Corporate sponsors tend to look for a cause celeb, a bank for the buck.

What happened in the tenure of EFMT was that there were more people on the street looking for corporate dollars. When we started, the school districts simply ran their own show. Now, the school districts parent association and the kid's sports are out there getting the same corporate sponsors we are. It's called providing after-school activities for kids versus sponsoring a ballet company or a theatre company. So little by little you saw a shift of emphasis you might call 'sexier' projects. I am not blaming it on corporate sponsorship. That's pretty typical of how it works but the demise of the EFMT was based on the fact that it simply got too costly to use the facility and I have to put most of that blame on the fact that Eugene should not have engaged in a stagehand contract that was so severe. It wasn't necessary. Most cities of this size have a union contract but

basically they'll have four union department heads in electrical, stagehands and sound. Then you hire casual labor to do the work. That's the way it works in Redding and Tacoma. For some reason ___ into a union contract that was as severe as New York and Los Angeles. There are only about four or five areas that have that kind of contract; Chicago, parts of Los Angeles and New York. Eventually I had to deal with four unions; the musicians union, stagehands union, the personnel at the Hult Center who ran the AFSME and that's a lot of union personnel.

PG: Would you like to tell me about your family background and where you grew up and what lead you to Eugene?

ER: We are a family of ten. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930. I am the youngest male and my sister is the youngest of all of us. We lived in Brooklyn, New York and my father was a costume designer. Prior to that he had a bridal factory in what's now called 'Roseland.' It was a sweatshop but it wasn't called a sweatshop then. The people that were employed didn't regard it as a sweatshop but, it was Cuban and Hispanic labor ladies doing one rhinestone at a time and using these finger-pinching machines.

My parents were born in Naples, Italy and moved here when my dad was about eleven years old and my mom was about twenty. She subsequently came after him. His father, my grandfather, had a repertory theatre company in the Lower Village in New York City. He produced Shakespearian productions in Italian and other productions. Subsequently formed a small opera company. My dad was not allowed to be a part of this because his father thought that theatre was decadent and he became a costume designer. He designed for many shows such as the Ziegfeld Follies and one of his most famous clients was Sally Rand, the fan dancer. He designed those gorgeous fan gossamer-like fans and I have some great letters and pictures of her. The family moved to San Francisco, my dad was ___ in the height of the Depression and he simply didn't want his family growing up in New York City, in Brooklyn, and had an opportunity to design for

some knitting company in California. He came out and checked it out, ended up in San Francisco. He moved the family in three stages by train across country. He established a design studio and designed for Brunswick Knitting Mills and then, had two retail stores. Nobody in the family was interested in that aspect of the business.

I had no interest in theatre. In high school I was a jock. The extent of theatre in high school were the nerds doing a play in the library that nobody ever came to. I came to the University of Oregon because two of my friends were on football scholarships and they said, "You got to come up," since the term was about to start. They were here earlier in the summer and I said, "Where's Oregon"? I reluctantly came to Oregon. I was going to UCLA and I lacked one credit in math so I needed to stay on at the Junior College for two years. I went up to Oregon and majored in broadcasting. The speech department at that time had three doubles; rhetoric, broadcasting and theatre. I kind of got shanghaied into the theatre program and started doing theatre. I did less and less broadcasting. I graduated and then I was with military service during the Korean War but I fortunately, it's a rarity to get what's called your MOS.

PG: What is that?

ER: It's your occupation, in other words, it's rare that a chef becomes a chef, or a canal digger. But I worked eventually in New York City in the old Paramount studios in Long Island City. That was owned by the Army and that is where they made training films. That's what I did for two years. I made training films with a small core of about one hundred military and nine hundred civilians, Ira Levin was in my unit and about eight or nine other pretty impressive people who subsequently became pretty well known in communications. I made rounds as an actor in New York, off-Broadway and in those days they had about seven theatres. Now there are about seventy off-Broadway theatres. I did three off-Broadway shows. Got reviewed a couple of times in the New York Times and

received pretty good reviews. Started making rounds on a daily basis. It's hard to be an actor because you have to sell yourself every day and you work a little while and then you don't work for a long while. So I decided to come back to the University of Oregon and get a Master's degree and teach. I did that. I started at South. I have a great family where we stick together.

PG: How many children do you have?

ER: I have six children. Four by a previous marriage. The youngest are twenty, he's an intern for Congressman Walden in Washington, D.C., now and my daughter graduated from the University of Oregon. She works as an events coordinator for Essig Entertainment. My wife is an actress and I do an enormous amount of voice-over work now. Mostly narrations for documentaries that appear on the Learning channel, National Geographic, History Channel and radio and television commercials. I retired since 1986 and left at a good time. I felt great about the college, great about the department and I guess things have changed.

PG: Can you tell me about some of the instructors who taught in the Performing Arts Department?

ER: I have to mention Nathan Cammack because as I told you earlier, the understanding that I had in taking the position was that I would have at least one music staff and I was a colleague of Nathan's at South Eugene High School and the president agreed to hiring him. He really was the leader in developing a music program that was first rate and very versatile, very talented, creative person and an excellent teacher. His forte was orchestral music, his instrument was violin but he taught piano and choir. That was the basis for bringing together and creating an excellent staff.

I have to mention Ed McManus who has developed an Electronic Music program that is first rate and was a passion that he had that I tried to develop when I was

there. It subsequently happened, I think two years ago where they finally got a lab. Barbara Myrick, Dan Sacks, one of the best local jazz leaders in the Northwest. A pretty impressive staff.

In theatre, George Lauris, Stan Albertson, David Sherman; we were quite a team. We made it happen because we never bunched a clock, they never said that's not in my job performance, we simply were task oriented. We did whatever it took to create the concert we would play. We simply did it, we didn't worry about the fact that some people in another department were half ____ but that's the nature of the performing arts. It takes a very, very dedicated committed staff and we had that for a long time. I can't speak for the present staff, I don't know many of them. Most of them are ready to retire too.

PG: Barbara Myrick is still there.

ER: A great lady. I'm sure I left people out. I think it's appropriate to mention Jim Greenwood who always taught that if you tallied up the individual students; 15,000 students in the piano lab, which takes a lot of patience. Pretty good people.

PG: Do you have any memory of any students that stand out that have gone on to become famous? Can you talk about that.

ER: We developed some real talent. I guess the most notable is Craig Lawson, a well-known motion picture actor. In fact, I worked with Craig recently on a movie that I was involved with in "Puerto Vallarta Squeeze" with Robert Waller. Craig has been in "Body Double," "Poor Friends," "Boys of Company C," and "Ghost Story." He started at Lane in 1968. Wayne Valentine did a lot of work for the Oregon Shakespearian Festival. A lot of teachers. The man that was with "The Bold and the Beautiful," Brent Jasmine. We had a sufficient number of

people that studied music and theatre that actually went into the business and are practioners and are doing very well.

Those that didn't use their music and theatre training are better lawyers by virtual of fact that they had theatre experience; better doctors, better teachers and I know this because I have those letters and emails, they still come from people that I had in class, not so notable but say thank you for that class and that it really helped me. Thank you for the role, it really helped me. I have a former student, from South Eugene High who is an attorney in Portland who represents victims of airline crashes. He is a 'big time' lawyer. He recently gave up the practice and did what he always wanted to do and he is writing and singing folk songs in small clubs and making CD's. A multi-million dollar business. That's fun.

I've had a lot of students and a lot of gratification that I was a part of their life book professionally and in person. We stay in contact. They have given me a lot of satisfaction. That's why I teach, that's why I taught. My brothers and sisters were all in the business community and are significantly wealthier than I am, in a financial way but I have my own world. I just explained what that world was; touching the lives of thousands of students regardless of whether they went into theatre or music. That makes it all worthwhile. For music and theatre students their education is a little more costly, it goes beyond paying tuition and buying books. In the case of a music student, they own their own instrument(s), they have to be engaged in personal or private lessons every term and they pay extra for that. Then from a time point of view for theatre students, they work in the classroom and get their 15 credits a term but, they work 18 hours a day in rehearsal and performance because that's their nature of their craft. So it takes a real commitment to be a good music, theatre, dance student today. I don't think a lot of administrators understand that.

I remember Eldon Schafer was one of the most dynamic presidents of the college saying, "This theatre stuff costs a lot of money, doesn't it." I said, "Yes, it does Eldon. It's damn well worth it."