



An interview with *Bettye Fitzpatrick*

by Penny Jones

Steel Magnolias, 1989

All photos courtesy of the Alley Theatre

Bettye Fitzpatrick is celebrating her 50th season with Houston's Alley Theatre. A protégé of the Alley's famous artistic director and founder, Nina Vance, Ms. Fitzpatrick has played a wide range of roles throughout an impressive career on the Alley's stage. Favorites include Player/Lady in *Hamlet*, Olga in *You Can't Take It With You*, Miss Goodleigh/Mrs. Dilber in *A Christmas Carol*, Izzie Truce in *House and Garden*, Mrs. Dudgeon in *The Devil's Disciple*, Olympe in *A Flea in Her Ear*, The Abbess in *The Comedy of Errors*, and Mrs. Tarleton in *Misalliance*. In addition to performing, Ms. Fitzpatrick has mentored theatre students in the Alley Theatre/University of Houston collaboration of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Her travels have taken her to foreign stages, including Alan Ayckbourn's Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, England as Grandmother in *Close Ties*. Perhaps her most beloved role for Houstonians of all ages is that of Cousin Sook in Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*, which she performed at Christ Church Cathedral for nineteen holiday seasons.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Penny Jones is the editor of *PROPERTIES* magazine, a real estate magazine published by Martha Turner Properties, and is a contributing writer to other Houston feature magazines. She received a B.A. in political science with a concentration in history from Mary Washington College of the University of Virginia. Penny interviewed Bettye Fitzpatrick at the Alley Theatre in Ms. Fitzpatrick's memorabilia-stuffed office. The article was transcribed by Suzanne Mascola.

Penny Jomes: Ms. Fitzpatrick, it is an honor. I have enjoyed your performances over the years and I think the one that always sticks in my mind, probably like a lot of people, is Truman Capote's Christmas Memory.

Betty Fitzpatrick: Oh, I enjoyed doing that for twenty years. When Christmas time rolled around this past year and I realized we weren't going to be doing it, I got very lonesome for it, lonely for it.

PJ: That was sort of your fruitcake season, wasn't it? Like in the play.

BF: Yes, I am so lonely!

PJ: It got to be Thanksgiving time, Sookie, isn't it? Sookie made fruitcake and you got ready to play that role.

BF: Absolutely. Then Charles Sanders, who always played Buddy with me, I got a card from him after Thanksgiving and he said, "When do we go into rehearsals?" He knew we were closing. But he missed it, also. It was a lovely experience. But we figured twenty years was enough.



Charles Sanders and Betty Fitzpatrick in A Christmas Memory, 1986

PJ: Well, never say never because I know people were looking for it.

BF: Well, we didn't say never. If we got missing it too much, why we would go back.

If I had to name three roles that I enjoyed the most in my career, that would be one of them.

PJ: What would the other two be?

BF: Oh, probably Weezer from *Steel Magnolias*. I played that four times and would play it another four times given the opportunity. And also Betty Meeks in *The Foreigner* because that is such an insane script. It is such a pity that we lost the playwright, Larry Shue. Yes, that he had to leave us at such an early age because he was a brilliant writer. A plane crash or something. Auto crash or something.

PJ: Bettye, you are in, will be, your 50th season here?

BF: Yes.

PJ: Well, then, you started when this was kind of a Mom and Mom operation.

BF: It was ten years old. Well no, then they had been making pretty good headway the first 10 years because I came in July and in November; they had the 10th anniversary dinner. And for that dinner, they had a guest speaker by the name of Ilka Chase. Now, older people will remember her. She was a very well-known actress of the time. But oh, we were very honored to have her down here. That is when I first came in. I hadn't really been on stage I don't think. I first got on stage; I believe it was in November in one of the major productions. We had done a production of *Seventeen* that summer and in that cast, we had some wonderful young people including Carlin Glynn. She was an apprentice that summer, also. Larry Hovis wasn't an apprentice but he was around and Ms. [Nina] Vance invited him to join us in *Seventeen*. And we had a choreographer that was 14-years-old but he stood well over six-feet-four. His name was Tommy Tune. He was hard to miss. We had fun doing that. But it wasn't until November that . . .



Nina Vance, founder and director of Houston's Alley Theatre

the first time I went on to the stage at the Alley Theater was as a replacement in *Chalk Garden*. One of the ladies had to leave the show early. We didn't have understudies in those days so when Ms. Vance heard that the lady was going to have to leave, she came to me and she said . . . it was only a spit and a whistle of the very first show. She said, "You can do that and still do your backstage work."

PJ: What were you doing backstage?

BF: Oh, I was running the props, making sure that everything was running smoothly because Ms. Vance had come to me and she said . . . you know, I was never an ingénue nor a leading lady because I had a character type personality and voice and so she said, "But if you want to work in the theater, learn another craft." She said, "Would you be interested in learning stage management?" I said, "Yes, I would, but I know nothing about it." And she said, "I will teach you." And so, that is what she did. She taught me everything I knew about it. And it was funny, people said . . . she would nose it about that I was the best stage manager in America today. Well, no. I was the best stage manager for her. I probably could not have gotten a job anywhere else. But for her, I was ideal because she had taught me to do exactly what she wanted done by a stage manager.

PJ: So, for a while, you were wearing at least two hats.



Bettye Fitzpatrick in *Volpone*, 1961

BF: At least two hats – would run sound, would run lights whenever we needed them because, in those days, the stage manager did not call cues as they do in this building.

You sit and you listen to the show and you could tell, by listening to the show run, you could tell if anything was wrong. If somebody missed a line, you would say, "Oops, is the prop there?"

We had a wonderful technical director and he told me once, he said, "Bettye, when you are onstage as an actress, forget about being a technician because you handle props as if you had to watch them," meaning you had to bring them into the theater. You should handle them as if they were a teacup that you handle every day. And so, he said, "Forget that you are a technician when you are an actress. Don't forget it to the point that you would be reckless with anything." We did an original play around here and we had to have a shotgun in it. And we had a very loose-knit young man who was playing the lead. And he broke the shotgun. Well, I went out and borrowed another one, brought it in for him and he broke that one.

He broke the stock off of it. He turned around and whacked a desk or something with it and it snapped the stock right off of it. And so, I handed him the third one and I said, "I'm not taking the first two out of your salary because I don't think your salary would cover them but if anything happens to this one, it will come out of your salary." So he said, "Well, we'll see." He was a little bit hateful. But it made the run. It got through the run.

PJ: *Where are you from originally?*

BF: I am a native Texan. I was born in Henderson, Texas, but I moved to Decatur, Texas, when I was like three or four years old. I went to school there in Decatur and went to the junior college when it had a junior college there. Decatur Baptist

College. It has now become Dallas Baptist University. Then I went to North Texas in Denton. It was a nice school. That is where I became a speech major. Prior to that, I was going to major in math. My last two years in college but prior to that, the junior college, I was majoring in math and history. That was because I liked those. I didn't know anything about speech so, you know, I couldn't major in something I didn't know anything about. On the staff of North Texas, there was a lady by the name of Myrtle Hardy who ran the drama department and she kind of took me under her wing, taught me especially to get rid of that Texas accent. That twang. "Git goin.'" So, she would keep an eye on me. But, bless her heart, she passed away after my first semester there. So, that was a shock and a blow. But I tried to hang on to the values and philosophies that she shared with me even after she was gone.

Yes. When I got out of North Texas, I went to Fort Worth and got a job there to support myself. And just at that time, they were organizing the Greater Fort Worth Community Theater. Now, this was in 1956, I believe it was. Or it may have been 1955. So, I went to an audition that they had for something called *The Solid Gold Cadillac* and a character woman by the name of Josephine Hull had played it when it played on Broadway. And I thought, holy smokes . . . she is a woman of 55 or 60 now – I was in my early 20s, of course, then . . . I said, "I can't even read for this." It was the director but the associate director came to me and said, "Why don't you read for it?" It couldn't hurt anything because at North Texas, I had played the wife to a Scottish person so I had to be careful in the theater. I played some other roles that were interesting. So, sure enough, I wound up playing in *Solid Gold Cadillac*. And after that, why I did a lot of work and played my first production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with that Greater Fort Worth Community Theater.



Tony Russell and Bettye Fitzpatrick in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1975

PJ: *Who did you play?*

BF: Blanche. Livin' on the Delta-h. But after I had been there working to support myself and I was out of college, a friend of mine met Ms. Vance at a cocktail party and he asked her, he said, "Do you accept apprentices at the Alley?" She said, "Oh, yes. Some are apprentices. We do." And so, I wrote a letter and she said, "Come on down for an audition." This story has been told so many times but it has been told because it has been true. She came in to watch my auditions and I got a letter back three or four days later that I had been accepted as an apprentice. And, I don't know, three or four years later, I was helping her clean up her library and I saw some cards that obviously she had been taking notes on from auditions. I saw my name on one of the cards. Now, that is an awful lot to ask a person not to read. If you are all alone putting up books and all of a sudden, you are confronted with a card that has your name on it, you stop long enough because there weren't a whole lot of notes on there, to read what it said. And on that card, it just said, "has a car." So, she figured that if she brought me in as an apprentice, I could go get props, and I did. So, who knows – if I hadn't had a car, I might have never come to the Alley Theater.

PJ: *And then, when you met Ms. Vance, what was your impression? I mean, did she frighten you?*

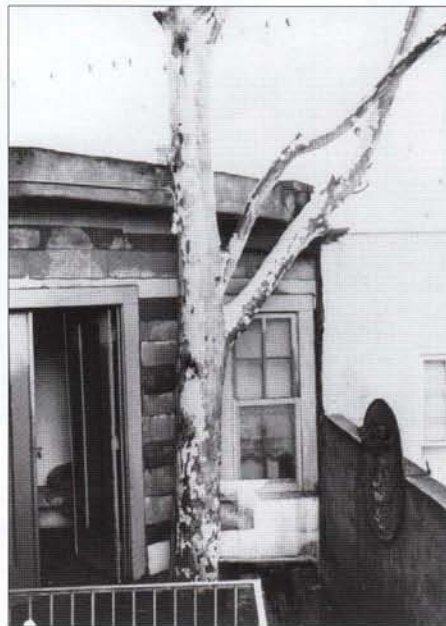
BF: No, she was a wonderfully warm and personable being. I didn't learn fear and fright until I had been in a few rehearsals with her. As a person, she was very old South. She was raised in Yoakum, Texas. And so, she was very charming to people, especially meeting a person, a stranger. But she had eyes . . . the only other person I think on the earth that has eyes that color is Elizabeth Taylor; they are kind of violet. And they were piercing in auditions. I didn't have to audition for her after that for many years. And thankfully. But when you were in rehearsals with her, she was very specific and you had to listen very carefully to make sure that you understood what she was talking about because she had something very specific in her mind and if you were missing a point in a scene, it was up to you to understand what she was talking about to correct it. And so, yes I learned to fear, respect, and had all kinds of admiration for her as a director. But that came from having been in rehearsals with her and from that time on, from 1957 through to the time that she passed away February 18, 1980, I either was in every play she directed or I stage managed it, except no, when I was performing upstairs and she directed *The Purification* downstairs. In those days, if I was playing the show, Beth Sanford would stage manage. Or if Beth was playing in a show, then I would stage manage.

PJ: *Another jack of two trades.*

BF: Oh, yes. Beth Sanford, who was on the staff, came in around 1963. She had never directed in the theater. She had directed for film, children's theaters, children's films. But Ms. Vance recognized an ability in directing. And so, she was bringing Beth along as a director, not grooming her to be an artistic director because as far as Ms. Vance was concerned, she was going to live forever. So, she didn't need somebody to take her place – she was going to be here forever. That was fine with Beth. Beth just wanted to learn to direct and be the best so she

could stay in the rehearsals and watch her work. But directing was never my bag. I didn't want any part of it.

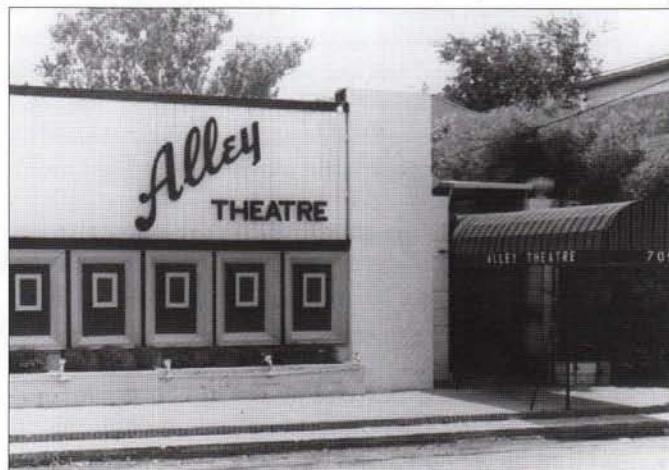
Ms. Vance came to me and she said, "Now everybody else on the staff is directing a scene with the apprentices." I had been there about five years, and she said, "You have to do it." So, I said, "All right, if I have to, I have to." And I directed the scene for our apprentice night and it was all right. I lived through it. Ms. Vance came to me later and she said, "Well,



what did you think of it?" and I said, "I hated it! I don't want any part of it. Directing is not my niche in life."

PJ: *Where was the Alley at this time?*

BF: It was on Berry Avenue. The first year of its life in 1947 was on Main Street down the Alley Way. I think those buildings have been torn down since then. But it was kind of an



The little fan factory turned into the Alley Theatre at 709 Berry Avenue.

outdoors patio with a tree in the middle of it. And the fire marshal came and said, "No, you can't do this because you only have one entrance, one exit. Not an entrance and an

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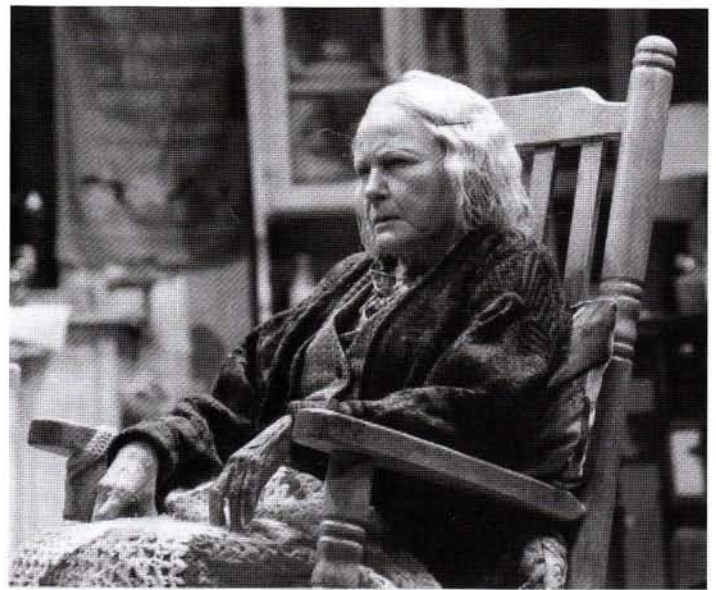
exit but one egress and exit." He said, "You can't stay here." So fortunately, Ms. Vance had encountered some wonderful people like Vivian and Bob Alford and Joe Marks and just a lot of people in the early days, and they found the little fan factory – 709 Berry Avenue. And they renovated it completely and built an arena theater there that seated 214 people. Ms. Vance had studied with Margot Jones. Margot was very interested in theater in the round. And so, when Ms. Vance built her theater, she, of course, built a theater in the round. And that is why we have a theater downstairs.

PJ: When did the Alley move from Berry Avenue?

BF: We were scheduled to close in 1965 but I think we did one more season, maybe until 1966. We actually had an eight month rehearsal period, if you can believe that, for *Galileo*, which was the opening show here in this building. And we opened in November of 1968 here. And ever since. The rest is history. But I'll tell you, I've always said, in a person's lifetime, you should only open one theater. Don't make a practice of it. It is just horrendous. I have moved my personal belongings enough that that doesn't . . . well, it would terrify me now because I have lived in that same house since 1965. That is 41 years. You could collect a lot of stuff in that length of time. So, I would hate to move now. But to move into a new theater, that was rough.

About the second year that we were in this building, Ms. Vance came to me and she said, "I need one voice that I can talk to. I need a production manager." I said, "Ms. Vance, there are so many things I do not know about technical theater." She said, "It doesn't matter. You can learn and I've got to have somebody I can trust," because she knew that I was not intimidated. We had a wonderful technical director – he stood over six-feet-two in his stocking feet and he always wore cowboy boots. So, here he was, six-feet-four, and I would come down there and I was supposed to be giving him a lecture on why did you build something, so and so, and I am talking to his belly button because he is towering up over there and looking down on me. But I wasn't afraid of them. I didn't mind. And most of the time, they were patient with the "little corporal," because they knew that if I was down there, I was there in place of Ms. Vance. And she was wonderful because I knew she was behind me. In fact, she told me that, she said, "Whatever decision you make, I will back you on that decision, but I may have to talk to you in private about it later on if I don't agree with it. But in front of the cast and everybody else, I will back you on it." And it is a wonderful thing to be that young thrown into . . . and to have that kind of support. It made me feel secure. But it always made you stop and think what would Nina do if she were standing here? It is like when we first moved into this building in 1968, the Stage Hands Union wanted to get a foot in the door, and they came to several of the technicians here and said, 'If you will go out on strike, we will force the Alley Theater to become a union house.' So, they did. This was during the production of *Galileo*.

That is the first year, the first production. So, I was having



Bettye Fitzpatrick as Mag Folan in *The Beauty Queen in Leenane*.

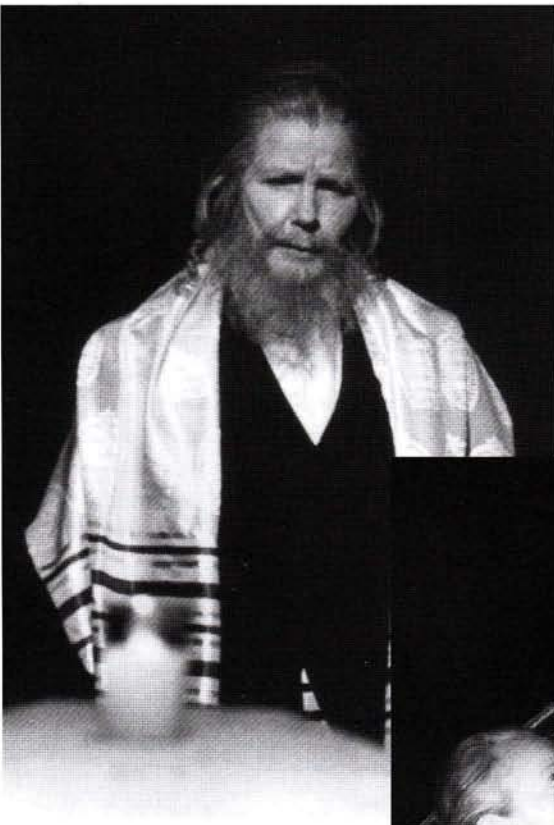
Photo by Bruce Bennett

dinner across the way, fixing to come back and run the show and one of the kids came in from the prop department and said, "Bettye, you'd better get to the theater because they are going out on strike." I said, "What on earth are you talking about?" They said, "The union has lured some of our technicians out and they're going to picket the building." Now, number one, can actors cross their picket line? If we can't cross the picket line, there will be no show tonight. And so, I got back over here and I called our business manager and said, "I am going to call our union representative and find out if the actors can cross that picket line because we are going to be picketed," but the people on that picket line were not members yet. So, they were only promised membership if they would walk off the job. Well, so, I called Ms. Vance and I said, "Ms. Vance, you've got to come down here and explain to the audience that we are going to be playing *Galileo* in work lights because none of us know how to run that light board. There wasn't a soul around here that could do anything with it." And she said, "Does it have to be me?" And I said, "Yes, you are the only one in the whole city of Houston that has earned the privilege to stand there on that stage and say forgive us but we cannot turn the light board on." So, she came down, and oh, they were so delighted to have her there on stage. They would have watched it in total blackout! They were just thrilled to death. And by the next night, well, we had a little bit more than work lights but it took us some time to overcome that.

We didn't negotiate. The show went down at 11 o'clock that night and we had a lawyer in who was up on rules and regulations. He told us, he said, "The only thing that you can do is to replace everyone that went out, replacing them by the next work day. Then you say to the powers that be that we had to replace them in order for the theater to keep running, to function. We cannot close down. We have tickets sold." So, we did. We stayed up all night calling people, finding them. And by 10 o'clock the next morning, we had them all replaced.

PJ: Did it ever unionize?

BF: Never. We have union members from Actors Equity, from



Bettye Fitzpatrick as Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz (above) and as Hannah Pitt (right) with Shelley Williams as an angel in *Angels in America*.



Stage Directors and Choreographers, and we have designers that are union members. In New York, you would have all of your seamstresses, your carpenters, your box office people – there is a union for everybody. I was at a cocktail party in Washington, D.C. and this old boy was over there holding court and he is laughing, he said, “Ha, ha, ha, we have made it to where a theater can’t rehearse in New York anymore, we’ve made it so expensive.” And I said, “What are you doing?” He said, “I’m a union member. I’m a stage hand.” I said, “Did you ever think that you might be killing the goose that laid the golden egg? If they can’t rehearse in New York, who says they are going to come into New York after they rehearse in Philadelphia?” He said, “Oh, they’ll come in. New York is where it is at. If they want any recognition, they’ll come in eventually and we’ll be there waiting for them.” Well, I didn’t appreciate him.

The union has been wonderful. I worked with union people here in the city of Houston and other theaters. They are wonderful people. Hard-working and dedicated to their craft. In fact, we got many telegrams back when the vice-presidential debates [1976] were held in Houston and they contacted the Alley Theater and they wanted to use our stage.

We had to tear down the set for *Stye of the Blind Pig* – now, I can remember that – and put it back up. I know when we got those telegrams from people saying to the politi-

cians, especially to the Women’s League of Voters, ‘how dare you take the vice-presidential debates into a notorious anti-union house.’ And we very carefully sent telegrams back to all of the people concerned saying, ‘we are not anti-union, we are simply nonunion.’ We didn’t fight the union except by filling the positions of the people that went out on strike. So that we could continue. But it cost a lot of money to join the union. And since we are a repertory, we have a company of actors. We hire people to come down here and stay – that is where we want the money to go instead of hiring technicians to run our shows. But anyway, it has worked out very nicely for the Alley Theater. And if we need to go over to Theater Under The Stars and borrow some expertise or some technician, they would

come over and we would be more than happy to pay their salary to help us out if we needed their knowledge.

PJ: Are there still repertory members who help out with the stage production or has it become much more . . .

BF: Well, sometimes when you are doing a show, I think there was a little bit of this going on during *Pillow Man*; that if the production is so heavy that you don’t have enough technicians on the staff, or enough production assistants to move the set, you might have to ask an actor to move a chair, move a prop or do something like that.

PJ: It is not the way it was in the old days when you were . . .

BF: No. You wear one hat, one-and-a-half at most! It has to be. People ask, could I come down and volunteer, maybe to work in the costume. Well, that is all very well but the trouble of it is we are working with deadlines. And so, if you have somebody that is volunteering, you have got to volunteer for 40 hours a week and do that for five weeks while they build a show. You can’t say, ‘Oh, well, I’ve got to go to my daughter’s graduation,’ or ‘I’m going to my sister’s wedding.’ No, you’ve got to be here, just like the people that are paid.

PJ: I am jumping here because I do want you to be able to get out on time . . . If you were naming your mentors . . .

BF: They are there. [Points to wall of framed pictures.] The one on top is Ms. Vance, and this is Myrtle Hardy standing to her right up there. And that is Ed Begley. Ed Begley, he was down here to do a show called *Middle of the Night*, and he was so wonderful. He reminded me, in person, probably what Spencer Tracy would have been in person because he was so easy. You never were aware that he was saying a line that wasn’t something he had thought of. I went to him and I said, “How do you make it so yours?” And he said, “Listen and answer.”

PJ: Listen and answer?

BF: It is that simple. He said, “If you are in a scene, first, you know who you are, you are aware of your character, you are

aware of what they are in the scene, what are the facts of the scene, but be sure and listen to whoever is speaking and answer them as the playwright has written it for you." He said, "That is all there is to it." I said, "Oh, yeah." I was working with a wonderful character man and he was fussing around out back in the dressing room one night. I said, "Bob, how come you are so happy?" And he was happy. Even when he was fussy, he was happy.

I said, "What is the secret to staying happy and dedicated to your work?" He said, "Life is so simple. The only thing you have to do is find something that you really love and like to do in life. And then you find somebody to pay you to do it. And that is all there is to it." And so, I think about that every once in a while and I thought I was lucky that I found something that I really love to do and that is theater. And fortunately, I found somebody to pay me to do it. I just never saw any reason to leave.

PJ: *You have grown with the theater.*

BF: I hope so.

PJ: *Tell me a little bit about when you first came here and you mentioned some of the people . . . I think you said the Alford, the Marks.*

BF: Yes, well, see, they had a night that you paid, I think it was Two Bits Night, and you paid entrance to come in to the theater and you voted because the Alford and some of the other people, they wanted to keep it a community theater but Ms. Vance said, "I cannot continue as a community theater with a committee deciding what plays we do." She said, "Either in this theater or somewhere else, I have got to take sole responsibility." So, they said take it, it's yours.

PJ: *And that is how it became a repertory company?*

BF: That is how it became the Alley Theater.

PJ: *You have seen the art scene in Houston grow from being a handful of people to such a flourishing community.*

BF: Yes, and I was a very good friend of Tatiana Semenova who founded the Houston Ballet – a very long story and I won't tell it but anyway, when she split with the Houston Ballet, then she opened her own studio and stayed with it until she passed away in Houston.

PJ: *Opened her own after she parted?*

BF: Opened her own. She had had no desire to build something like the Houston Ballet after that happened to her. She didn't want to do that. She was a ballerina. Very famous. Worked with the Ballet Russe for many years. There is a picture right up there of Venice. I was over visiting her one day. I was very good friends with her. I went over to visit her one day and she said, "Will you take me to my last apartment?" I said, "Well, yes. Where is it?" And she said, "Well, it's Venice. You know where it is." And sure enough, we had been to visit her in Venice visiting her and friends and there is a graveyard where all of the dead people from Venice are taken. And she showed me this little square up there and she said, "Now, this is where I will go," because her mother was on one side and her friend, Bianca Cavalleri, was on the other side. And

she said, "When I am gone and I am ashes, bring my ashes here and put them in there." And so, we left our hotel room, went out down that canal there and out into the sea and then across to San Michelle and that is where we left Tatiana. And it was a wonderful experience. I know she is there and you know, when I go back to Venice, I always take flowers over to her grave. I miss her; that's what is painful. You miss so many of the friends, of the women especially that ran the theaters. Ms. Vance. Iris, the lady that was killed here in this building. That was heartbreaking. And also Chris Wilson, who later ran Actor's Studio here in town. She used to be on the staff here. Marietta Marich. She is still with us though, thank goodness. And Joyce Randall who was associate director and on the staff here. All of these women that have come and gone. Marie Lemaistre used to be our costumier. She never called herself a designer. She said, "My talent is rebuilding old costumes," and she did. Saved us a lot of money.

PJ: *Isn't it interesting that such a male-dominated town as Houston would have all these strong women characters? Not only in the arts but in other things.*

BF: In other things, too, yes. But the transition to and from either a matriarchy to a patriarchy or the reverse. But Greg is so understanding. The current artistic director, Greg Boyd, is so aware of the city of Houston. Now, he has been here 12 years, from 1988 . . . no, it has been about 18 years, close to 20 years. But he is so aware of the city of Houston and where it is now, because the city has changed. There was a time when they wanted to see *Life With Father* and they wanted to see all of the little comedies.

But they need more than that. They need a fuller meal. And so, yes, we do things like *The Greeks* that ran seven hours. We do things like *Angels In America* and *Fantastic*.

I liked *Angels in America*. That is another one of my favorite roles. I guess I could still manage to play that Mormon mother. I have enjoyed that very much because Ms. Vance would push us to the limit. I mean she did *The Knack* which opened in London to very strange reviews and people saying, "Well, it's too risqué. You shouldn't go see that." Ms. Vance had a copy of it and was reading it and she said, "We can do that." And she opened *The Knack* and really offended some of our clientele, our patrons, but they came back.

I got this letter in the box office and we had just done the first production of *Glen Garry, Glen Ross*, which is a four letter word every other breath. And the patron had just written this scathing letter about how dare you put on the Alley stage something that is that foul of language and blah, blah blah, blah, and just really laid us to filth. And down at the bottom it said, "P.S., enclosed please find my check for four tickets for next season." See, that's what the Alley has meant. We have an endorsement. They want us here. "They," being the city of Houston, want us to be here. And we are lucky. [C]