



5-20-2011

## John Ficca

John Ficca  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Meg Miner  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Ficca, John and Miner, Meg, "John Ficca" (2011). *All oral histories*. 39.  
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John Ficca interview, The Ames Library  
May 20, 2011

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and today is May 20<sup>th</sup>. We are in the Ames Library with Dr. Ficca. And Dr. Ficca if you could start by saying your full name and affiliation with Illinois Wesleyan and we'll just have a conversation today.

John Ficca: Alright. My full name is John Ficca. I came to Illinois Wesleyan in 1956 as an instructor in the theater. Well it wasn't the Theater School then, it was—well, I guess it was the Theater School. They had started that in 1949 actually. And I came here from the University of Iowa where I was working on a doctorate having finished an M.A. and came to stay for two years until I finished my doctorate and ended up retiring in—I guess officially in 2002 and have hung around in Bloomington-Normal ever since and had some affiliation with the university on an adjunct basis, so that is—those are the end quotes—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: The end posts—

Miner: Of a two-year career that spanned...[laughs].

Ficca: Fifty-five, sixty.

Miner: How many years? Oh my goodness.

Ficca: Yes.

Miner: That's amazing.

Ficca: I don't know how amazing it is—

[Both laugh]

Ficca: But it's nevertheless something you evolve into as you acquire children and different houses and...

Miner: So the area then is what drew you in and kept you here for so long?

Ficca: Yes.

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: I had opportunities in Connecticut and out west, you know. When I was in graduate school—this was after the war of course and after Korea where I spent a year—it wasn't a matter when you got an M.A. even in Theater from the University of Iowa whether you were going to get a job or not. It was, "Where do you want to go?"

Miner: Oh.

Ficca: So those things have changed of course...[laughs].

Miner: So a lot of opportunities.

Ficca: That's right. Well, yes, they were in the throes of transitioning still from the war years to—you know, the academic at least was in that time. There was a lot of building, a lot of returning still of veterans who were getting, as I was, undergraduate and graduate degrees, so there was lots of opportunity.

Miner: So was your military service then post-undergraduate, pre-graduate...when you—?

Ficca: No, I went directly from the army—I mean from high school—

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: Into the army and spent two years in the army. Most of it, well, all of it was domestic and then I got out of the army after two years and that was in the summer and I enrolled at West Liberty State College in West Virginia and went into classes and was there for five and a half weeks and the directive came that I should report to Fort Campbell, Kentucky in two weeks. Out of school and into Fort Campbell, Kentucky and three weeks later in Hawaii, ready to turn around and come back, because we had won the Korean War.

Miner: Oh so you were—

Ficca: Until—yes, go ahead.

Miner: You were actually discharged but then drafted...?

Ficca: Well, they had provisions at that time that you, whether you liked it or not, were in the Ready Reserve.

Miner: Okay, yes, they still have that today.

Ficca: Yes, I know.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: That's—you know.

Miner: So then you were—just had to do paperwork and a short deployment and then they discharged you again?

Ficca: No.

Miner: Oh.

Ficca: No. I went to Hawaii and was ready to come home. Then they put us back on a boat because the Chinese had come down from the Yalu and there was, in about three weeks time, the Pusan Perimeter. You don't know anything about these, do you?

Miner: These are names I recognize. I know—

Ficca: The Pusan Perimeter was there and we landed in Pusan and tried to restructure ourselves and then moved up to Inchon and stayed for a year there and got back to—then was discharged. The war was still going on but they discharged a lot of us that had come in late. So I went back to undergraduate school and finished. I actually finished in three years. I was not—in my high school where we hung out, if you took a book home, you were ostracized...[laughs].

Miner: Mmm, interesting.

Ficca: So there wasn't a real strong incentive to study, etcetera. The incentive after you finished—kind of finished high school or dropped out—was, "What are you going to do? Are you going to go to the service or work as a domestic or go into steel mill?" So I decided on the army as a route for getting an education actually...at that time. So, anyhow, I finished undergraduate school and went to Iowa and spent two years there for a master's and part of a doctorate and then came here and vacillated between Illinois Wesleyan and Iowa. First a couple of three summers and then a full year and then a doctorate at Iowa and then came back here.

Miner: What drew you to theater?

Ficca: I wanted to be a college professor. I mean, that was to me a more glamorous avenue than—and I loved theater—but at that time it was speech, you know. The Iowa department was a department of speech—

Miner: Huh.

Ficca: And theater arts. It was one of the premiere theater education places and speech education places in the country—Carnegie Tech and New York University, University of Iowa, and I forget which one it was. There were about four or five. So with the G.I. Bill I went off to Iowa with my young bride and my first child in the incubator so to speak.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: And that was, you know, that allowed us to—the G.I. Bill allowed us to live sparingly until we got—until I finished my degree. And what drew me to theater was, well, I was actually drawn to speech and journalism, but then when I got to Iowa—I think actually I got in a different line and I ended up—because the drama professors would counsel all speech people as well as speech people and I ended up with a drama counselor for registration, so forth, and we got registered in several theater courses. And I had done undergraduate acting too, and I loved movies. So that drew me to theater and...I guess I've been with it ever since to some degree at least.

Miner: You found what you liked and then it stuck with you.

Ficca: Yes, I think so.

Miner: You changed. Many people change.

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: That's interesting that you always wanted to be a professor then.

Ficca: Yes.

Miner: To teach. So when you were at Wesleyan and starting out as an instructor—

Ficca: Mmm.

Miner: Were you teaching speech or did you—what was the department back then?

Ficca: No, I was teaching theater.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: I was—the department at that time was—there was—there were four people. There were two speech people. Unfortunately you can't interview Marie J. Robinson. Marie...[laughs]...the tiger of the department.

Miner: Is that right?

Ficca: We were all together. There were four of us, two in speech and two in theater. And in theater you did it all.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: I mean, now they have god knows how many people doing the same thing that the School of Theater with—and speech—it was the School of Theater and Speech.

Miner: Hm.

Ficca: And there were four of us, two teaching speech and two teaching—and working theater. So my job was—have you ever worked in theater?

Miner: I have not.

Ficca: Okay. My job was to teach at least nine hours, or three courses, a semester, do all the technical work—build all the sets, etc.—and direct one or two productions a year.

Miner: That's a full—

Ficca: Now they teach one or two courses, do one assignment, and complain like hell.

[Both laugh]

Ficca: But that's how we built the school.

Miner: Everything's relative.

Ficca: Right.

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: And what we did was not only did we do the production, when we first came here we did four productions of plays, you know, big plays and musicals, and we did two in the Memorial Center where we set up bleachers and light towers and settings, and two in Presser Hall. And

there was a scene shop back of Old North, which was the oldest building on campus. In the basement there was an old boiler room that we had as a scene shop.

Miner: Oh wow.

Ficca: And that's where we built all the—well, we did *Solid Gold Cadillac*, *Mr. Roberts*—oh, you don't know *Mr. Roberts* probably.

Miner: I do.

Ficca: Oh, do you?

Miner: Only by the film though, sorry.

Ficca: The what?

Miner: The film.

Ficca: Oh, yeah, right. Well, it was a play before it was a film. But there were big productions and involved students mainly that core of—I can't remember exactly, somewhere around thirty—theater-speech people, or maybe a little more in theater and speech, and then we would bring people in from the campus as a whole, people who had done—there were only, what? Eight hundred students here at that time, something like that—and so that was how we, by increments, built the School of Theater Arts. And that struggle with speech, you know, the diversity of speech and theater should not have been, but in every classic department of speech and theater in the country you had vying interests at war with one another until finally every one of them split so that now you very seldom have a speech department at all... You had theater schools and theater departments but there are only a—relatively few schools, universities that have a speech department. Lots of them, of course, have incorporated speech therapy and that has been sustaining, but rhetoric, you know, and speech-making—I don't even know if they teach a speech course here anymore. They may, I mean—

Miner: It was part of rhetoric, I think, here originally.

Ficca: Yeah. Well they used to have requirements, of course, for—along with English, a speech course. So that's the beginning history of the School of Theater Arts.

Miner: I'm so glad you told that story. What do you think about the changes that happened in the department that you said there was tension with the speech and—or maybe tension isn't the right word, but—

Ficca: Well there—

Miner: The development—

Ficca: Tension is the right word...[laughs].

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: And it was personality tension.

Miner: Okay. Territory kind of thing?

Ficca: Yeah, territorial. The person who was in charge of theater controlled our purse strings.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: For both theater and speech—the head of the department. So some of—a lot of it was economic. The other thing was that the person who was the key figure in the speech area had had training in theater and was more or less shut out of that facet—

Miner: Mmm.

Ficca: So that there was...[laughs]...tension.

Miner: Yeah, so—

Ficca: And—

Miner: What do you think it did to the—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Ficca: Go ahead, no.

Miner: I was going to say what do you think it did then—do you—when the two broke apart? Do you think the campus lost something in that or...?

Ficca: No I say because they found some way of adding, eventually, people to both areas—not a lot of people.

Miner: So speech then was independent of any other department?

Ficca: Yes.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: Traditionally, again, speech and theater were part of the English department, and it was that way here until the School of Theater Arts and the School of Art were formed because there was a School of Music—I don't know if you know that history—and then it became the fine arts, the College of Fine Arts, which is kind of a—not a misnomer because they are both now fairly prominent, but at the time it was one or two people in art and theater or speech-theater, and the voluminous people in the largest department on campus, which was music, and that's the—yeah, right. Now you have a fairly good independence and balance in the three as compared with the rest of the, you know, departments and of the university as whole.

Miner: Well what would you say is a fond memory that you have of working here or any of the people that you worked with or...?

Ficca: Well that was it. I mean, you worked with a small group of students but they were really dedicated. Every senior, for example, did their own production in a place we call The Hut. You heard about—

Miner: I've heard of it.

Ficca: Back of—not the—what’s the hall over there?—Kemp Hall. What is now that brick building—

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: Was actually a carriage house.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Ficca: An old carriage house, and that’s where, in addition to the four productions that were done and a summer theater where we—well that’s another story entirely—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Every student in that little theater, which is the Lab Theater, was the old Lab Theater.

Miner: In The Hut?

Ficca: Yes, which was a ninety-seat—the persenium, If you know, the opening was six foot six...[laughs]...and there was a ceiling and we got lights in there and big sets, etc., and every senior had to produce a play.

Miner: Hm.

Ficca: So it kept people constantly, a lot like what is in The Phoenix now. So there was that little theater. Then there were the two venues until the theater was built.

Miner: And you were here then for the building of that building. How much were faculty involved in...?

Ficca: Oh, that’s a whole other story. I mean, it’s—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: There are so many stories. McPherson—Mrs. McPherson wanted to dedicate a building to her husband. McPherson was one of our presidents, you know. And Troxel, a man named Troxel who was—what was his first name?—anyhow, he was Head of Development. Fun guy...[laughs]. I go over there now...it’s a kingdom. I’m not bitter about it, you know, but I mean it’s so different. I’ve been here for the whole evolution. So she wanted to dedicate a building and they talked her into—because they had—art had kind of its own building, music of course had its palace, and—what was—she wanted to have—or help and they tried to talk—they wanted to talk her into a lecture hall theater, okay? So the—how do I get this story straight? I had been here—you know, the building went up in ’62—’60...’62. Doug was born in ’62, ’62, right. I had been here, what, six years by then and they had finally decided that they would build that. And they had the enormous amount of close to \$500,000, which would pay for this room now, I guess.

[Miner laughs]



Ficca: And so I went off to Iowa for my year away and there was a replacement for me and that was the year that they were going to design the building. And what they came up with was a design which was to be totally unique and the drawings are somewhere here, maybe in the archives, I don't know.

Miner: I don't think I have them. Physical Plant has a lot of them.

Ficca: It was called a kind of sombrero theater. They may be in the theater. You really ought to look into these. The—I don't know if the—I mean, they could be there somewhere.

Miner: Mhmm.

Ficca: But it was to be a sombrero surrounded by a larger sombrero. The mechanics and stage area was to be in the middle sombrero scenario—and then the seating was to—this was to be revolutionary.

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: And what happened was that they talked them into having the architects draw those and they came in at like something like \$850,000.

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: My god.

Miner: Mhmm.

Ficca: So they were going to cancel the whole thing. So I came back from Iowa and the Evans architects—we probably will find reference somewhere to Evans—

Miner: I did see that name.

Ficca: Architectural Firm—had done the original sombrero, so I said, “Let me get...”—and I forget what the name of the young architect was who was kind of like an, not an apprentice, but a junior in the firm. I said, “Well let's get together the two of us and come up with something that might satisfy the five hundred—it was quite five hundred—thousand dollar.” So we got together and at Iowa they had this theater which—have you been to the theater productions?

Miner: I have.

Ficca: Continental seating and, you know, the old tradition like in Presser Hall, you know, you sit in those seats and you can't see anything. The continental seating, that's what makes this theater so delightful. So we thought that we would design a theater based on continental seating, modified production—persenium with a protruding forestage, which is what we have here and the persenium really divides the forestage and the backstage. And to do that we—and it's the very building that's there now which is, you know, you try to build that building for \$500,000. Well, of course, everything has changed. Bread, I guess, was not quite ten cents a loaf but—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: So we got together anyhow and devised this plan and I insisted on the two side areas, which were for building and arranging, and we had—and the tracks are still there, two wagon that allowed us to build a set here and roll it in and roll another set here. We didn't have the money to put in a full-scale turntable, which is the big, you know, expansive—you try to—which operas have and so forth. Anyhow, we built—we designed this building and Troxel, the guy who as it was being built they passed—they got the board to accept the drawings, and Troxel kept coming over. It was supposed to be five hundred to six hundred seats for lectures and we kept cutting back on this in order to provide for this, the stage house and those two sides. And he kept coming back and he says, "This seems so small and that seems so big." I said, "Well, that's the way a lecture hall works, etc., etc.," so it was being built. Now if they go to tearing that place down, it'd be solid concrete.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: From the, you know, the whole sweep of the continental seating structure. It's solid concrete.

Miner: Wow.

Ficca: They tried to shell it but they couldn't. If you look at the wall piece there it'll say "Jacobson Construction Company" and the Jacobson Construction Company lasted for one building. That was it.

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Ficca: Because the—he had never—there were people in town who backed him starting a construction business and this was his first bid and he underbid it by probably thirty-five to forty thousand dollars, which is almost ten percent. There wasn't going to be a profit to start with and the bonding company had to finish the theater in terms of—but we got it built, and then his company went out of business. Obviously the backers weren't going to go any further with that. So that's how the building came to be. And for a long time, and still, is the nicest place around to see a theater production because you are in the midst of it and still elevated enough to see it so...okay so that's how the theater came to be in 1962. And there's been in the last ten, twenty, fifteen years squawk about building a new theater...but that's problematic.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: When they designed this building, Ames, the whole design was that that building would go so that there would be this vista to this kind of Taj Mahal of libraries, but, you know, that takes a lot of money. You'd have to tear down that building and you'd have to—you can't say, "You're moving out of this building. We're going to tear it down," without saying, "But we're going to build you another one down here on the corner of Park Street and across from the—kitty-corner from the old gym. There's always a little lag.

Miner: Yeah...[laughs]...Hansen.

Ficca: To—Hansen, right. There always—when you get older, that happens. There's a little lag when you try to remember people that you have always known but it always comes back to you. When it doesn't, then you've got Alzheimer's.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: So far it usually comes back.

Miner: Not there yet, yes. Not there yet.

Ficca: Everybody has that to a certain degree. For example, if I ask you: Who was in *The African Queen*? Who would you say?

Miner: I would say Bogie.

[Ficca laughs]

Miner: Ohhh. I forgot her name.

Ficca: Hepburn.

Miner: Hepburn.

Ficca: Well—

Miner: How could I—

Ficca: But you would think about it—

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: Today.

Miner: I knew it wasn't Bacall.

Ficca: What?

Miner: Do I get points for that?

Ficca: No, it wasn't Bacall.

Miner: I knew it wasn't Bacall.

Ficca: She was in *The Big Sleep*. That's where they met and fell in love. Wonderful actor, they're both good actors.

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: Anyhow, where are we?

Miner: Well let's talk about—I'm sorry, did you want to say more about the building?

Ficca: No, I mean that's—but the building, you know, is a great building and if they can build another building it would be great too because there would be a lot of things that this building doesn't have that—like really an adequate costuming area, an expanded technical area for teaching costumings and lighting, offices and classrooms, you know, in the front because there—

have always had to—the classrooms and those spaces for academic courses and, like history and so forth, have always had to go to someplace else, but it would be great to have studios and offices right in the building. To have this kind of configuration better equipped than maybe different configuration...sight lines...not so bad here. And all those supporting areas right in the same building like the Music School has, right, and the Art School.

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: Of course the Art School doesn't have—well it has its studio but—and its—so its exhibition hall, but it's not the same as a production place. So it would be great to have a new place but right now we know that we're getting money for—or the President is very—and he rightly so wants to bolster professorships and classroom buildings—

Miner: Scholarships.

Ficca: And scholarships, right because if you don't have scholarships, you're going to price yourself out of the market somewhere along the line. So those are extremely important aspects of—in a well-respected liberal arts university, but money ultimately will—so the theater could be built but it's going to take a kind of turning around of an economy and all sorts of—And we wish the best for them. I play the lottery every once in a while.

[Miner laughs]

Miner: We can count on you.

Ficca: What?

Miner: We can count on you.

Ficca: Well, it would have to be the big lottery.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: But, you know, the hundred million dollar one—

Miner: Well—

Ficca: After taxes it would be sixty-two million. My kids would want at least five each.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Might be able to swing it.

Miner: You can throw us something...[laughs].

Ficca: Maybe, maybe.

Miner: That's great. Well a little bit ago you mentioned something about the summer theater. Did you want to expand on that?

Ficca: Yes, when I came here there was a thriving summer theater. It was the only one around really.

Miner: I've read about that. Perhaps you could tell us. That'd be great.

Ficca: And, right, and we got people coming into it all the time. First in the little theater there, do five or six productions, one a week, fully staged. Then when we moved here it was a six-week program where we produced five plays, *Pajama Game*, any number, two musicals, a mystery, and two straight plays, and had a company of students who would actually pay for tuition. I mean, now that's unheard of.

Miner: Right.

[Ficca laughs]

Ficca: You know? Would actually pay tuition, some scholarships in order to come, which is the way you could make it work. So it was a summer theater that went until it dwindled in the late nineties and was a prominent area, but then, of course, you didn't have the expanded fine arts that you have at Illinois State when it became Illinois State University instead of Normal. And when we came here—when I came here there were—there was a reflection in terms of theater. There was Mable Clare Allen and Bickley who taught, in recent years, film. Bickley, he was the technical person, and Mable Clare was the—what's the?—comparable to Lawrence Tucker. You've run across Lawrence Tucker, of course. His affiliation with the—consistory and also did some productions down there, bigger ones.

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: *West Side Story* was down there and *My Fair Lady* we did down there. So the track has gone from my mind. What were we talking about?

Miner: We were talking about summer theater and I actually—

Ficca: Summer theater, right, so—

Miner: Found out that was for credit, so—

Ficca: Oh yes, it was for credit. You earned six hours of credit and you paid for tuition and there were, like I say, there were some scholarships.

Miner: But there were community people involved in it as well, right?

Ficca: No.

Miner: No? Okay.

Ficca: No.

Miner: I thought I read—

Ficca: Well, earlier—

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: When Melba Johnson Kirkpatrick—did you interview her?

Miner: I did not.

Ficca: Oh you missed it.

Miner: I tried.

Ficca: Oh she couldn't be reached?

Miner: It just didn't work out.

Ficca: Honestly? Before she died, right?

Miner: Oh I tried for years.

Ficca: Oh you tried for—

Miner: It just didn't work out.

Ficca: And it never worked out before she died, huh? You know she gave the first—she's left now, you know.

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: Not left, gone.

Miner: Right.

Ficca: She's left money...[laughs]....

Miner: Ohh, okay, okay.

Ficca: To the Theater Department.

Miner: No I didn't. I mean, I would assume but—

Ficca: Yes, but she called me in one day when I became Director of the School and she said, "Charlie, is given me a gift." Charlie was Charlie Kirkpatrick.

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: He owned a furniture store in town, a big furniture store where all those little stores are on—in the middle block of—across from Fat Jack's—

Miner: Mhmm.

Ficca: Downtown...[laughs]...He had a grocery store—I mean a furniture store there and in the block beyond that. Anyhow, he owned it—

Miner: Hm.

Ficca: And, “He has given me this gift of \$10,000, the income from which we are to bring well-known artists to campus.” And now she has in her will, I think, expanded that to do the same thing. Now, of course, it costs a lot more than the income from \$10,000. We would allow for it to accumulate at five or six percent. Right now we could never do anything because you can’t even get one percent. And in two years you would get a thousand dollars. You would offer that to someone like Helen Hayes, which we brought in and Uta Hagen—well-known in the theater as an actress and great teacher, but—Berghoff—but anyhow, any number of people and that was really an augmentation of the program, which—we would bring people in usually in the January short term before it became the May Term, so that was another aspect of the Theater Department that really enhanced the program—

Miner: So these would be—

Ficca: And allowed it to build.

Miner: These would be guest lecturers. Would they also be involved in productions?

Ficca: Well, they would critique a production.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: Like when Helen Hayes came we did *The Tempest*—we did a production of *The Tempest* and she came and, you know, Helen Hayes is not a critic but she—there are all sorts of interesting stories about when she came. She was here for four or five days but that—

Miner: We have a recording of her speaking to, I would assume, the class.

Ficca: Yes, over at the main theater and she talked after the production.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: She stayed three or four days. I mean...she was going from here to Milwaukee. She was a devout Catholic and the monsignor at—what’s in Milwaukee? Loyola? No, Loyola’s in Chicago.

Miner: Marquette?

Ficca: Marquette. And the theater person, the monsignor there got her—she had some affiliation with—got her roped into coming there periodically and doing a production where she would act and they would charge big bucks for it to augment the funds. And she was going from here to there to do *Long Days Journey into Night*. And I have a note from her in my copy that I have kept because—I don’t know if you know that play or not—Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Days*—

Miner: Yeah, I’ve—

Ficca: Yeah, it’s long. It’s three and a half, four hours long and I had cut it because of undergraduates to two and a half hours. She says, “I have—Monsignor has talked me into coming up and doing Mary Tyrone in *Long Days Journey into Night*. Such a laboriously long—it’s wonderful but it’s long.” I say, “Take a look at my script that I cut,” and she did and they

used that one. And I've—yeah, sometime—I still have that note tucked into my copy of that at home, I think.

Miner: Huh.

Ficca: Where—which was my claim to fame in the professional theater to have—too bad we didn't—but if they had known about it, they would've sued us because you're not supposed to cut those plays.

[Both laugh]

Ficca: Especially O'Neill. Anyhow, that's how Melba Kirkpatrick—to get back to your original—the townspeople worked in the productions. If you see those—do you have to go to the lab theater productions and you see the case there with the pictures of—well, you're in charge of that of that or somebody is.

[Miner laughs]

Miner: No, not me.

Ficca: The Theater Department is, right? Yes, they got people from town to do the plays, yes.

Miner: I just always assumed it was part of summer theater.

Ficca: No, no it wasn't. The summer theater was independent, was all student. Where are we in this?

Miner: Well, we could talk about anything that you want to talk—we can add whatever you want to add.

Ficca: Well, I don't know. We're progressing here...[laughs].

Miner: I really don't really have an agenda. I mean, I think the stories are great. We've talked a little bit about the development of the department.

Ficca: Yes.

Miner: Are there other things that you want to say about that or the people or—

Ficca: Well, the department developed a curriculum and now, of course—at the time it was always a utilitarian curriculum. I taught theater history and theory and also some tech courses and acting. Eventually I went strictly to acting and directing, but the utilitarian courses and work gave way to a balance now of academic, which is what it should be in a university. And that was a gradual process as you added more people and specialties to where now there is a good balance in the department and in the school of those two aspects. I have—and then, of course, the introduction of the music theater program, which happened roughly—oh god...thirty years ago, twenty five, thirty years ago—probably thirty years ago.

Miner: Hm.



Ficca: Which, you know, has really now become fifty percent of the theater's offerings and that evolved from fairly humble beginnings of three or four students to now I'm not sure what the ratio is but the music theater program was another development in the progression of the School of Theater Arts.

Miner: Do you want to talk a little bit more broadly about changes to the campus, some faculty governments and...

Ficca: Well, the campus, of course—when we came to this area—was houses, faculty housing.

Miner: Right.

Ficca: And there was a street, of course, that ran right straight through that way and a street that ran this way out in front of Presser Hall. You still have—that walkway was a street connecting to where the circle is. And a tremendous evolution of building because when we came here there was one dorm over here, the one that's on the—across from the Memorial Center. There was a Memorial Center, there was Presser Hall, there was—there were the dorms down along—not Franklin, where? Down across from Hansen. That dorm—

Miner: Beecher.

Ficca: There were several dorms—yeah, right. But the building then, of course, of the campus was extraordinary in terms of its development. Each president contributed. In the time I've been here there have been some losers.

[Both laugh]

Ficca: Brief, very brief losers. But when I came here Merrill J. Holmes—of course Holmes Hall is named after him—was in the basement of old Duration—or was in Duration Hall, which was old Hedding Hall and that's where I interviewed with him. And he gave way to Bertholf and the story was that Bertholf was an academic who really wanted to be a clergy and Holmes was a clergy who really wanted to be an academic.

Miner: Interesting.

Ficca: So those two...[laughs]...the evolution of those two—but Holmes held it together after the war and started to build. Bertholf went from the country bumpkin to the small town in his evolution of building it. Eckley stabilized that and built onto it both academically and professionally. And then, like I said, you had one of those little glitches in there that I won't mention...that you know about—

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: Probably. And then Minor Myers came on the scene and Minor was the Renaissance guy. I don't know...anyhow, he was a Renaissance person who really saw a vision for the campus, which included Shirk Hall—I mean Shirk Center—and Ames Library and the science building which doesn't have a name attached to it. It's just the science building, isn't it?

Miner: Center for Natural Sciences.

Ficca: Yes, Center for Natural Sciences. Anyhow, Miner came and he was a Renaissance man who saw all that development, so, I mean, the campus is built up to where it is now and I think with the addition of a couple of more gems that the campus will be fairly well built and stabilized. Rust House—he got her to sell. You know, it’s remarkable. The people come back that were here when I first came and can’t believe the campus.

Miner: It’s astounding.

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: Well what about the changes in faculty on campus? Were you involved in faculty governments? It’s a really big issue for us now.

Ficca: Well there—yeah, it is still. It’s always been.

Miner: Okay.

[Ficca laughs]

Miner: So if you want to talk about that a little bit.

Ficca: Well I want to say that there’s always been a Middle Eastern turmoil in terms of “Freedom, freedom”...[laughs]...and “No this is the way things pretty much have to be”. I don’t know what it’s like now with—

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: But, you know, you’ve had that struggle for independence which has gradually shifted from a kind of—what do I want to say? Not monarchy but—anyhow, from a centralized governments to more of a broadening, liberalized—but it’s always a struggle in universities, you know? So that has been a very long and evolutionary struggle but one that is to the point where it—again I don’t know the insides of what it is now—but evolved pretty well to where you, toward later decades, a couple of them, you got a better balance in terms of faculty governance and restructuring of department leadership. So that has evolved also and—but, again, it went through—when I first came it was almost a dictatorial empire as such and that evolved slowly. I’ll never forget, I would not—I would be in the McLean County Nursing Home right now, not a senior home but—do they still have a poor house? I’m not sure.

Miner: I think so.

Ficca: They have a county home. I would be in the county home now if we had not gone from the archaic, totally inept retirement program that we had when I came here to TIAA-CREF. And that was the visionary that both Bertholf and Eckley—

Miner: That’s interesting.

Ficca: Made this because it was when we got into that and then the liberal, the very liberal ten percent retirement program, which now is in a state of...[laughs]...

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: Adjustment. Hopefully it'll get back to that because that was the program that really gave me a great deal of independence and has—that TIAA-CREF.

Miner: Independence in your retirement years?

Ficca: Financial. Yes.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: Right, because it became your retirement.

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: And people say, “What do you think about the retirement?” Some people thinking that we are still governed by a state retirement system or—which is, you know, this is the way they should've gone a long time ago. The state should've gone this way.

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: You know, with something like TIAA-CREF. It wouldn't be in that—because it doesn't cost the university anything now for my retirement, the health things.

Miner: It's probably best left unsaid...[laughs].

Ficca: Well let's not say anything about that.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: I mean that is something akin to this state...[laughs].

Miner: Well you prompted another thought with your comments about the evolution of the building, faculty, and it seems from my vantage point that the student role on campus has evolved as well. Do you have any observations on that?

Ficca: Well, yes, in terms of—you know, the undergraduates that we had when I first came here are essentially the same as they are now. I mean academically they are—I don't want to say of a higher quality—better prepared and of a higher pool. They're from a—you know, academically and, of course, in the Theater Department it was talent that we always looked for...[laughs]. They still do and—but the emphasis was always a little bit—was never quite so stringent on the academics, but that, again, has been a gradual evolution of the academic abilities and there were always the brilliant ones but more and more when the testing systems came in and—Wesleyan really has kept pace with the expansion of much higher academically-prepared students by and large than you had. And the academic requirements and—are much more stringent and that, again, was an evolutionary process. And then there was also the diversity, which started with the Bertholf kind of and really caught better fire with the Eckley years. I mean because it just—there was more—there were more assets available to offer, and then with Minor Myers, and that continues now to where it is a big part of the university's philosophy and...I don't know what the ratio, again, is right now but I know we saw that evolve over a period of time as well as the academic preparedness—what do I want to say?—levels of students as they gradually became more stringent. So there has been that evolution. Everything has evolved, which makes me almost believe in evolution.

[Miner laughs]

Miner: Almost

Ficca: Oh my god.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Do you realize it's five after one? Nothing has happened—

Miner: Do you—okay.

Ficca: No, no, no, no.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: Nothing has happened.

Miner: Nothing has happened?

Ficca: Oh thank god. Talk about evolution and—don't you know?

Miner: Oh, is today the day?

Ficca: Today is the day and I thought it was around noon.

Miner: Oh, so we're—

Ficca: I was looking out there to see what—

[Both laugh]

Ficca: I mean, the rapture was supposed to—

Miner: The rapture was supposed to happen today.

Ficca: Maybe it's later.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: There was a time set for it kind of specifically.

Miner: Okay.

Ficca: People sold their houses and—

Miner: I heard a little bit about that on the news.

Ficca: A lot of that.

Miner: That's interesting.

Ficca: “When I was a child”—the Bible tells you very clearly—“When I was a child, I thought as a child.” I don’t know what your persuasion is. I won’t go into that.

Miner: That’s okay.

Ficca: That is a private thing.

Miner: We can go there.

Ficca: That is a private thing.

Miner: Okay. Well why don’t you tell me a little bit, since we do have more time, about what you’re doing today. You said you’re still involved with campus today?

Ficca: Well I—up until two years ago I taught a May Term course but, again, funds were often tight and there’s a lot of adjunct faculty younger than me and they don’t know that I would’ve done it for nothing but they paid me for it—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: And then have given those positions to full-time faculty to fill in—

Miner: Sure.

Ficca: And some adjunct. So I did that with a May Term course and have an office that, as we say, has some archival interest perhaps—

Miner: I’d love to come and visit.

Ficca: That maybe needs—once I get up there and throw out the old junk, and I intend to do that little by little. I’m right in the yard right now and I’ve got a yard that’s too big for me.

Miner: Mmm.

Ficca: So I always say I’m going to do this. I still dabble with—as—I guess I always kind of dabbled with playwriting and still dabble with playwriting. In fact I have—Nancy Loitz is trying to get some students to go read something that I’ve been working on for quite a while that I’m still hoping to get possibly into a venue in Chicago or someplace, but it’s going to take—but I keep busy with that.

Miner: That’s great.

Ficca: So—and we attend events in the Music School and exhibitions in the theater, so that tie is still with the university. So, yes, that’s how I keep going. But I noticed in the obituaries—I’ve been doing a statistical test, and between eighty-two and eighty-seven, eighty-eight is when the majority of people go to enjoy the rapture from another perspective...[laughs]. So just keep, you know—

Miner: It doesn’t mean we give up.

Ficca: That's right.

Miner: That's right.

Ficca: Rage, rage, rage—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Against the dying of the light. So—and I saw an evolution here from going to chapel and wearing beanies when I first came to doing away with Chapel and—not doing away with Chapel but mandatory chapel where we would all assemble in Presser Hall and we would go there as examples that the students should be there on Wednesday at eleven o'clock. Is the Chapel thing still at Wednesday at eleven?

Miner: Wednesday at eleven. Nothing gets scheduled on Wednesdays at eleven.

Ficca: That is from time *in memoriam*.

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: Anyhow, so there was that evolution, you know. And, again, we could go into this—the evolution from a Methodist—

Miner: Yeah. Do you want to go there?

Ficca: Centered college—well that was, again, the major part of that obviously did not happen with Bertholf—

Miner: Right.

Ficca: That happened with Eckley and I don't know if they still have the Visitors who come in from the Methodist Church or—

Miner: There are three on the Board of Trustees.

Ficca: Three on the Board. There used to be a whole coterie of them...[laughs]...who would keep us centered.

Miner: Do you want to talk a little bit about that transition? Do you have any perspectives on that you'd like to share?

Ficca: Well I think that the arrangement was a moderate—my own impression was—is—was that there was a moderate financial support of the university from the Methodist Church which tended to dictate out of proportion to what the monetary was. Now I don't know if that's totally true or not and I think that eventually that those strictures were kind of relieved systematically so that, you know—you have Wheaton, you have where else that are still very—do you know anything about Wheaton?

Miner: I don't. I mean I know that it's—

Ficca: Where are you from? Where are you from.

Miner: I'm from everywhere...[laughs].

Ficca: Texas? What?

Miner: No, I'm from everywhere.

Ficca: But where are you originally?

Miner: I was born in the northern part of the state around the Wheaton-Aurora area.

Ficca: And you don't know about Wheaton?

Miner: Well, I know that it was a religious—is a religious school.

Ficca: Yes, it is—

Miner: Yes.

Ficca: A religious school, yeah. I don't know what your religious, you know affiliation is or your—but you didn't totally blink when I said the rapture and—

Miner: Hey, well I follow the news...[laughs].

Ficca: Do you? Okay, good.

[Both laugh]

Ficca: Anyhow, that evolution, again, took place over time to where when I came really the—those components of the Board were almost equal—

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: To where there was that input and then, again, gradually it's come back. Now there are three people from, you say, from the visitors—

Miner: I believe so, yes.

Ficca: Who are on the Board, and so the Methodist—I think, and you would probably know more about this than I do, the Methodist influence is more seen as having built the traditions and allowed for the university to begin and to move and in some hard times has come to the rescue and aid, but that—it has dwindled to the point where it is more historical, archival than it is practical now...[laughs]. Is that your opinion or—

Miner: I think that would be an accurate—that would be my—

Ficca: Yeah.

Miner: Understanding of it. I know we've reached to some very inspiring words about education—

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: Due to the Methodist Conference.—

Ficca: Right.

Miner: That was in this area at the time.

Ficca: Yep.

Miner: And it's something, I think, that is genuinely felt—

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: And appreciated as a philosophy on campus.

Ficca: Right.

Miner: Yeah. But it is a difficult tension between the influence of the doctrine and the beliefs versus the, I think, sometimes more broadly accepted ideas of approach to education—

Ficca: Of education...[laughs].

Miner: That you have now. I'm dancing a little bit but we—

Ficca: Heathens as a road to—

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Sodom and Gomorrah very often.

Miner: But you know what I love about the beginning documents of this institution is that they definitely had an interest in moral underpinning but they were not dogmatic in their approach to that and that everyone was welcome.

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: And I think when we think about the diversity of the institution we very much emphasize—

Ficca: Mhmm.

Miner: A diversity of all levels and all cultural—

Ficca: Right. Is there an Atheist—I see a lot in the newspaper sometimes, it's the *Tribune*, Atheist clubs on university campuses. I don't know if there's—

Miner: I think there is one on campus. They were a little bit more active a couple of years ago.

Ficca: Mhmm.



Miner: But yes, there is one. Mhmm, it's a registered student organization.

Ficca: The play I'm working on has to do with prosperity gospels.

Miner: Mmm.

Ficca: Do you know about the prosperity—

Miner: I do not, no.

Ficca: You don't?

Miner: No, I don't.

Ficca: You don't watch early morning television?

Miner: I don't watch commercial television...[laughs].

Ficca: Creflo Dollar?

Miner: I'm sorry.

Ficca: The—Osteen. Have you ever heard of Osteen?

Miner: Sorry, no.

Ficca: God. You're out of it.

Miner: I am.

Ficca: God wants you to be rich. God wants you to prosper. There's nothing wrong with prospering. God wants you to prosper...

Miner: Interesting—

Ficca: Yes. Well, it's gone from that but anyhow, this play that I'm writing is about—or working on, I've been working on it for a long time, is about—now shifted to the prosperity gospel.

Miner: Mm.

Ficca: And if you watch in the morning on channel 9 and channel 17—you surely have somehow accidentally come on one of those guys that march in front of the, you know, the extreme was Jimmy Swaggart and that bunch. Anyhow, my theory is that those people audition for parts like theater people do.

[Both laugh]

Ficca: Anyhow, that's—

Miner: Why shouldn't they be in theaters?

Ficca: That's another story entirely.

Miner: Well have talked for a long time. I really appreciate your time and are there other things, thoughts you want to leave with us?

Ficca: You know, I'd be here for god knows how long.

Miner: Yeah.

Ficca: I mean in—at the campus '56—

Miner: So I just need to get your recorder.

Ficca: What is it? '56 or '57, '58, '59, '60—that's four plus—four plus forty and another ten, how long?

Miner: That's a long time.

Ficca: Yeah, a long time with the university, right.

Miner: You can do the math.

Ficca: Yeah, right.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: A long time and so there's been a lot that went on here. You know, Dwight was here and he and I would argue about who had the longest tenure.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: And when I retired there was no one on campus who was here in any capacity when I came or even before that. Not even maintenance people. Hm, the administrators, and god knows they hang on forever.

[Miner laughs]

Ficca: Whoops. Watch that! So anyhow, maybe we'll meet again or talk when I get into my office and if I have some junk up there that might—I don't know what there is that would bear on. You know, the whole history of the Theater School is in the production records that are in the—but it would take forever to sort those through. I might tradeoff doing that for people who would allow me to produce a play in McPherson Theater.

Miner: Ahh, let's see if we can do a deal.

Ficca: Or in the lab theater at least. The next time you see Curtis, you know Curtis of course.

Miner: I do.

Ficca: The next time you see Curtis propose that.

Miner: Put a little plug in.

Ficca: Say—yeah say, “He didn’t say anything about it but what if you offered him something like—he writes plays, you could do one of his productions.”

[Miner laughs]

Miner: I’ll put a word in.

Ficca: Be careful though. You’ve got to do it just right. “The Lord thy God is a jealous God,” and the production people are jealous gods. I mean, they guard their—everybody does.

Miner: Yeah. Well thank you so much for talking to me—

Ficca: Well, it’s been—

Miner: I really appreciate it.

Ficca: It’s been a pleasure to relive all of these moments.