



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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AN ACTOR'S PILGRIMAGE, A LIFE IN PROGRESS

This summer *Road to Emmaus* staff spoke with actor Hal Robinson in his vintage Midtown West New York apartment about his rich career in American theatre. Hal's work encompasses sixty years of music and theatre productions, from church singing to musical theatre, Shakespeare, opera and six Broadway shows. One of his most demanding "roles" was his decision to take eight years off from acting to help found Raphael House, a shelter for homeless families in San Francisco. Hal's life is closely linked to his Christian faith and he has recently become a lay Benedictine oblate at Mt. Saviour Monastery in Elmira, New York. He continues to perform and write in Manhattan, and when we asked if he would talk about the interface between acting and faith, he replied, "I don't have a spiritual blueprint; I can only tell you what has happened in my own life"—an invitation we eagerly accepted.

HAL: I once met a young man who had studied the old Jewish practice of life readings with an elderly Conservative rabbi in Israel. He gave me a reading, and at the end of it he said, "It's amazing to me that you have done what you have, starting from where you did." It wasn't "in my cards" according to my family background.

I think this is true. My parents never had any interest in the arts. I was raised in rural Indiana in the Depression era when it was all about providing for your family and remaining faithful to God. My father's life-long dream was to be a farmer, but in order to provide for his family he worked his entire life at a desk job that he hated. Nevertheless, he had a small farm on the side that just broke even, and every night he'd come home, put on his work clothes and go to the farm. Except in winter, we wouldn't see him until after nightfall. My father died in 1978, but it has only been in recent years that I've

Opposite: At home. Hal Robinson, New York, 2014.

fully understood the sacrifice that he made in choosing to do something that was so unpleasant for him, in order to take care of his family.

My mother married at eighteen. She had my brother at nineteen and I was born three years later. She was a strong influence in my life, and I wanted to be like her, but of course if you are trying to emulate a saint you are probably doomed to failure. I remember at four or five, the age when children usually become aware of death, that I got up one night and went into my mother's room—Dad was out of town—and woke her up to tell her that I thought I was going to die. She cried, and held me, and then she said, "Let's pray to God." She prayed, "Dear God, dear Father, You know that we love Harold and we want to keep him with us. But he's not ours, he's Yours and if You want him, you can take him." Then she had me pray the child's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep ..." As an adult hearing the words, "And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul will take," you might think they would scare a child to death, but they didn't. I knew that my mother wouldn't lie to me, and that if she said I was safe in God's hands, I was safe. So I went back to bed and back to sleep. I never forgot that, it was such a strong teaching that you could absolutely trust God, even to take you.

Much later when I was living in New York as a struggling actor, my mother once said, "I don't worry about you." I felt a little hurt, and thought, "Well, there's a lot to worry about. I don't have any extra food on the table." She went on: "I give you to God every morning, and if I worried about you, it would just show that I don't have faith in God or in my own prayer." It was another lesson.

RTE: Wonderful. When did you first become interested in music and the theatre?

HAL: I discovered the piano when I was four years old. My great-grandmother died in the 1930s in Bedford, Indiana, and my parents and older brother moved in to help my great-grandfather. I was born and raised in that house. One of my earliest memories is pressing down a key on a neighbor's piano. Evidently there was a tune going in my head, for I said, "Oh, that's the note *Jingle Bells* starts on." I went home, sat down at my great-grandmother's piano, and played *Jingle Bells*. Later, I learned to play with chords. No one taught me, the music just came.

Movies were a great influence on me, and when I was nine, I acted in a church play called *Nobody's Child*, in which my father played a homeless

man who befriended a child. That same year the pastor of our Baptist church announced a "youth week" from the pulpit one Sunday: there would be youth preachers, deacons, ushers, a youth choir, everything. I remember going up to him afterwards and saying, "You know, I'd like to be one of those preachers." I'm sure he'd envisioned college-age volunteers, but he said, "Alright." My Dad wrote a sermon for me on faith from Hebrews 11, which I memorized and preached to the congregation. I did that for a few years running, and came to be known as "the little preacher boy," which was fine until I became a teenager and it was no longer fine to me.

With my music and my family I thought, "Here is a place where I am absolutely safe." I'd had my piano from age four and my great-grandfather taught me to garden, so before I got into Junior High School I was perfectly content with my garden, my piano, and Jesus. Later, when I tried to catch up with sports, I was never very successful. My great love was still music, which just came out of me. It was not in any way imposed, and my connection to music became intertwined with my faith in God. Music was always linked with being right with God, and if for any reason I didn't feel that I was right with God, music wasn't accessible to me in the way that I needed it to be. It's always been a kind of barometer.

RTE: As if you needed clarity to access that talent.

HAL: Yes, I didn't own it. It was something I was allowed to use, but it wasn't mine. I don't know how old I was when I discovered this connection, but I certainly knew it early in my performing career.

Louisville Summer Stock, 1953

Summer stock was very big in those days and there were two large companies in the Midwest. One was the Louisville Summer Opera Company in Kentucky with a 5000-seat outdoor theatre, and the other was the St. Louis Municipal Opera which was even larger. The summer of 1953 between my junior and senior year in high school, I went with a friend from my hometown to audition for the summer stock chorus in Louisville. It was the first time I'd auditioned for anything, and neither of us were chosen. The next day, however, we received calls that two people had dropped out and we were being offered their places, so we went back to Louisville and did nine shows that summer.

Our first play was *Kiss Me Kate*, and for each play, we had one week of rehearsal. This was when I got my Equity Actor's Union card. It wasn't an accident that I was allowed to join the union at seventeen, but it couldn't happen like that today. Petruchio, the lead, was played by Ted Scott, who was the understudy for Alfred Drake on Broadway. Patricia Morrison, the original Kate on Broadway, was the very epitome of a lady. She stayed at the Brown Hotel, already a step above the rest of us, and she would go home at lunchtime and change her whole ensemble. She had very long hair, far below her waist, which she would magically turn into a bun right in front of our eyes. She was elegant and kind, and we all adored her. I thought, "All of the women in the theatre must be just like this!"

RTE: Were you ever disillusioned?

HAL: Well, on the opening night of *Kiss Me Kate*, the cast for the next show had already arrived to begin rehearsals, including the now legendary actress Elaine Stritch, the niece of Cardinal Stritch, the Catholic Archbishop of Chicago. We had a separate boys' dressing room for the chorus and dancers, and a girls' dressing room (they called us "boys" and "girls") with only a curtain separating us from the vestibule outside. So we were all sitting there in our underwear putting on gobs of makeup for this huge outdoor theatre, when suddenly the curtains parted and there stood Stritch. She yelled "Rudy Tone, you old son of a ..." and she walked right in. We all grabbed our towels.... Well, Elaine Stritch changed clothes at noon also, right on stage, in front of us all. She'd take off everything down to her underwear and put on another outfit and go out to lunch. It was total disillusionment about "all the ladies in the theatre," but, of course, we all loved her too. She was a real wise-cracker and a wonderful woman. We did nine musicals that first summer and I did that for four summers until my junior year of college.

RTE: And you hadn't yet had voice or acting lessons?

HAL: No, I'd only had two or three voice lessons and hadn't developed any real technique. Of course, I lost my voice in the first week of rehearsal, but I managed to get through the summer. Those shows were a wonderful experience as they brought in all of the principal performers and we worked with real professionals. Our musical director was like a father figure to us. I remember him saying that first summer, "Some of you may say, "I don't

use deodorant," but let me tell you something, it's summertime and you are all sharing a dressing room. You will use deodorant." (*Laughter*) His instruction was that basic, and you never ever were late for a rehearsal or, God-forbid, for a performance: that was instilled in you. Nor did you speak when another actor was rehearsing. Unfortunately, that tradition has been lost now, but we were told, "These are artists at work and you must respect the artist's space." It was wonderful training.

1956: A First Taste of New York

RTE: Did you go on to study acting in college?

HAL: Not at first. When it came time to go to college, my Dad didn't consider the theatre to be a profession. He was determined that I become a doctor and even the teachers who really believed that I had talent backed him up. They said, "Hang out your shingle, and then do music on the side." So, I went off to college to study pre-med. It was another world for me, but it wasn't my passion. After two years, I knew that I just couldn't do it, so in 1956 I transferred to Columbia University to major in theatre arts. I could only afford one semester, but afterwards I stayed on in New York to study with a wonderful and quite elderly Polish voice teacher named Franz Prochowski, affectionately called "Pro."

In 1957, I had a role in an opera at Madison Square Garden, *I am the Way*, which portrayed scenes from the life of Christ. The opera was written by and starred the famous operatic bass Jerome Hines, who sang for forty-one seasons at the Met, and was not only a Christian, but a member of the Salvation Army.

To support myself while I studied voice I also got a job singing in the choir at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on 46th Street. Because I was raised Baptist, this was my first exposure to the liturgy and I was fascinated by it. It was an Episcopal church, but they were more like high Anglicans, and everyone in Manhattan affectionately called the church "Smoky Mary's" because of the amount of incense they used. We sang wonderful music: Gregorian chant in Latin, as well as medieval, renaissance and baroque. That Lent, they had Tennebrae services in Holy Week starting on Tuesday night and leading up to Holy Saturday and Pascha. Thursday night was the liturgy of the Last Supper, ending with the stripping of the altars, and Good Friday, of course,

was the Crucifixion. I found this all fascinating and wanted to know more about the liturgy, so I went to the priest, Father Tabor, and told him that I was interested. He said, “Well, come and take instruction,” so I did, and in each of his talks on the tenets of faith, the final proof of its validity for him was, “This is what the Catholics teach.”

The last time I saw Fr. Tabor was the following summer when I left for a job at a resort in the Pocono Mountains with the unfortunate name “Pococabana,” as the resident baritone and wall-flower dancer. When I came to say good-bye he said, “Now some of these small Episcopal churches don’t have mass every Sunday, only morning prayer with Communion once a month. If they don’t, you go to the Catholic Church,” So I went to the Catholic Church all summer with the Irish from Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. When I came back to New York that fall, I thought, “Well, why not go to the source,” so I went to the Jesuit church on 15th Street, asked for instruction, and was received into the Catholic Church.

RTE: How was that for you?

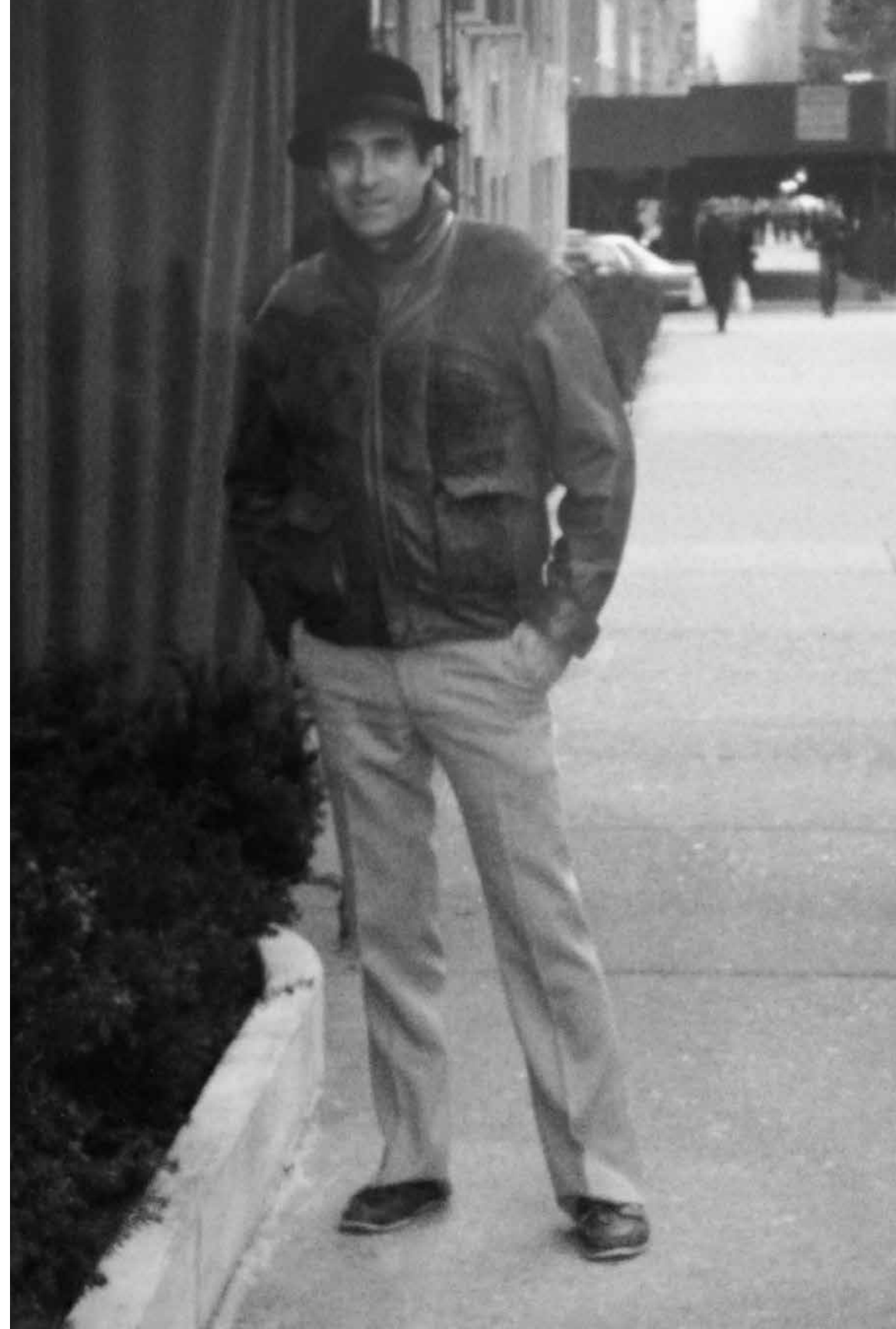
HAL: Entering the Catholic Church was a haven. I was so at sea about who I was, that now I think it was also an escape from having to face myself—although certainly my heart was always restless for God.

Dallas, 1959: A Break into Regional Theatre

After a year and a half in New York I returned to Indiana where I finished my junior year in theatre. Halfway through my senior year, I was offered work with a new theatre company opening in Dallas, Texas. The producer-actors were two men and two women who had put money into this, and they hired two more actors, a young man named Bob Moak and myself.

I felt I needed a change of scene and my theatre professors all said, “Do it! This is wonderful experience that you can’t get here. Go to Dallas and come back in the summer to finish your degree.” The Korean war was over, and Vietnam had not yet begun, but we were still liable for the draft and I’d already told my draft board I’d be available after graduation that spring, so when I decided to go to Dallas, I wrote asking to delay my entry until fall to finish the degree. They said, “Sorry, you’re already on the list for June. We can’t change that,” so I knew my time was limited.

Opposite: Hal Robinson, 1984.



The six of us arrived on a Sunday and took over a theatre owned by Baruch Lumet, the film director's father. The actor Rip Torn was living on the stage at that time, on the set of the last play that had been performed there. This was a thrust stage, built out into the audience so that the audience surrounded the stage. We wanted the more typical proscenium stage, so in one week—seven days—we rebuilt the stage, painted the lobby, built the sets, made the costumes, rehearsed the play, did the publicity, and opened.

RTE: Unbelievable.

HAL: It was so intense, but we didn't care. We were happy to be there, and at the beginning we were paid \$80 a week, which was great. By the time April rolled around we had done four plays: *The Moon is Blue*, *A Hatful of Rain*, *Dark of the Moon*, and a joint performance of two one-act plays—*Hope is a Thing with Feathers* and *A Phoenix Too Frequent*. *Phoenix* was by Christopher Fry, written in rhymed verse, and the producers only decided to do it a week before it opened.

I hadn't done any classical theatre at that point and here was a play in verse with only three characters, so each of us had a lot of lines. I was just lost. The one producer of the four who was adamantly against putting on this play, unfortunately ended up directing it, and since he didn't want to do it in the first place, he just left the cast—Sally Hager, Joyce Randall, and me—to rehearse on our own. David Hager, who was one of the producers and also Sally's husband, was so busy building sets and doing the costumes that he didn't even see us rehearse until the day before we opened. He stopped us five minutes into our dress rehearsal, and said, "This is terrible." We said, "We know it is, David. What can we do?" He answered, "Well, first of all you've missed the concept of the play." He then took each of us aside and talked to us about our characters: "Go home and think about this tonight and tomorrow we'll rehearse this all day long."

But the next morning I found myself awakened from sleep to hear, "You need to get up and drive twenty miles out of town to pick up a monkey—which we needed for *Hope is a Thing with Feathers*. So, I went and picked up the monkey. We were busy all day and I remember that we finished painting the set a half-hour before we opened. We got into our costumes and did the two plays without a chance to run through the lines again. When I performed that night, I still had paint on my skin.

We had sent out news releases to both the morning and evening papers the day we arrived in Dallas; the evening paper got it in time to print that day, but the morning paper felt like they'd been scooped. Their main art critic, Rual Askew, was at the next morning's press meeting, and said drily, "Usually when new groups start up, I bend over backwards to help them, but because you gave your release to the evening paper, you'll have to prove yourselves to me."

Well, we got slaughtered in the reviews. I was awakened the morning after the opening by Bob Moak, the actor who had been hired with me, throwing the paper on the bed and saying, "You might as well read this now as later." Well, Askew had torn us apart. I'll never forget when I read, "And the worst offender of the evening was Hal Robinson, whose distorted dynamics..." (*Laughter*) It was horrible, as befitted my performance.

David Hager's rule was that we fed something to the newspapers daily, and the next thing that happened, even before I'd dressed, was David coming in to say, "Hal, you have to drive Bob Moak to the Morning News with this article for Askew." I said, "I don't want to see Rual Askew." "You don't have to see him, just take Bob over and wait for him." Bob had gotten the only decent review of the whole evening: he was a good character actor and Askew liked him. So, I took Bob over and sat in the waiting room. He took the article in and Askew asked, "How did you get here?" "Hal Robinson brought me." "Well, where is he?" Bob said, "He's out in the lobby." "Well, go get him!" "But he doesn't want to see you." Askew made me come in and sit there and chat. It was terrible.

By April, after four months, we were all exhausted. We'd built a faithful audience, we were now critically acclaimed, and when we announced we were leaving, Rual Askew wrote, "Why can't Dallas keep their talent?!!" But we were just worn out, and by this time we were no longer receiving \$80 a week. Although we were a critical success, the expenses were so high that we were getting dinner, and cigarette money if you smoked. At the end of the run they told us that, as a parting gift, they would give us a bus ticket anywhere we wanted to go.

Marriage, the Draft, and the Chicago Symphony Chorus

I was to be drafted in June, and when I got a letter from Sally Kolb, the only friend who had written while I was in Dallas, saying that she was going to

New Orleans for spring break, I decided to join her. It was Holy Week in New Orleans, as quiet as the city ever gets, and afterwards I went back to Bloomington, where my Dad had found me a job deep in a forest preserve as a fire-tower-watcher over a huge naval ammunition depot. I had two months alone at the top of a fire tower, and there I read Thomas Merton's *Seven Story Mountain*. Merton said, "There are two paths to sainthood: Holy Orders (priesthood/monasticism) and marriage." I knew I wasn't holy enough for Holy Orders, and marriage seemed a reasonable possibility.

After that grueling four months in Dallas, I was exhausted. Sally had been a real rock, and as she was the only person with whom I was really comfortable, I spent all my time with her. We fell in love, and days before I left for the army, I proposed to her. We married in July, 1959 after my basic training. The army assigned me as a clerk-typist to the Recruiting Main Station in Chicago. This was "frozen duty," meaning that if you were assigned to a recruiting station you had to stay there for a minimum of two years, while other recruits who received their choice of assignments were almost always sent to Korea after six months. Sally and I had a wonderful apartment on Lake Shore Boulevard in an apartment tower owned by the Fifth Army Headquarters overlooking the lake. While serving there I sang with the Chicago Symphony Chorus for the next two years.

Margaret Hillis was the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, and when I auditioned for her with a song by Schubert, she asked, "What are you going to do with your life?" I answered, "I'm going to be a musical theatre actor." Margaret replied, "Well, that's Schubert's loss." Working with Margaret was an inspiration, and when I got out of the service I went back to Indiana University at Bloomington, one of the best music schools in the country. No one told me that I could just finish my theatre degree and then get a Master's in Music, so I started again from scratch. It didn't matter, though; it was the best scholastic experience I ever had. I also had to pass a proficiency exam in piano for the degree, but because my parents had not allowed me lessons—they said I already knew how to play—I began studying piano with Ford Hill who would play a major part in my life a few years later.

Again, in my senior year, I was offered a season of leading roles in winter stock in Memphis. Sally was also interested in theatre, especially in costume design, but she'd been offered a teaching job, so we decided that I would take the Memphis job and she would stay in Bloomington and teach. Sadly, within a few months, after four years of marriage, Sally and I agreed on a trial separa-

ration. I was emotionally shaken by this turn of events and so only stayed in Memphis for one show where I played Frank Butler in *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Return to Chicago, 1963

After the separation I moved to Chicago, where I didn't work for a year, but a friend with whom I shared an apartment was in the Sybil Shearer Dance Company. Sybil was a pioneer in modern dance, a true artist, and I knew instinctively the first time I saw her perform that she had something that I wanted. Her art was centered and from a deep place within her. So, I worked for Sybil that year: mowing lawns, washing windows, sewing scrims (the background for a stage) in exchange for a daily ballet class and the privilege of being in her healing presence. At the end of one year she said, "Go sing!" (*Laughter*).

I began to study voice again in Chicago with Tom Peck, the founder and conductor of the Grant Park Chorus. After a year of study, I felt ready to go back to the symphony chorus where I auditioned again for Margaret Hillis. During my army years with the chorus, Sherrill Milnes, later the great baritone of the New York Metropolitan Opera, had been our first-chair baritone. The top soprano rating in the chorus was #101, and the increasing numbers assigned to each chair were ranked according to skill. Sherrill was #401, the first baritone, and #501 was the first bass. A few years later, Sherrill made his debut at the Met, and for decades was the most acclaimed baritone in the world.

So now, in 1965, I auditioned a second time for Margaret and sang a Hyden aria with a lot of coloratura. Then she gave me a tri-tone piece to sight read—I was fortunate in being a good sight reader, and when I finished she said, "#401". I dropped in my tracks. I was sitting in Sherrill Milnes' seat. For the next two years I got all of the baritone solos that Sherrill had done earlier, and was twice a soloist with the Chicago Symphony.

New York, 1967: Temple Choruses; Touring; An Apartment and Community

By 1967 I'd exhausted everything I could do in Chicago. I could have used the city as a home base and traveled around the country to sing, but there was no musical theatre to speak of in Chicago at that time, so I went to New York.



My first audition in New York was for a Jewish temple chorus on Ocean Park Boulevard in Brooklyn. I'd already had experience singing in a synagogue in Oak Park, Illinois.

RTE: They didn't mind that you weren't Jewish?

HAL: In Chicago they didn't mind because the temple was Reformed and they were satisfied that I'd learned to read the English transliteration of the Hebrew. This, however, was a Conservative temple where they had a professional choir to back up the cantor. The conductor was from Yugoslavia and only came to the US to conduct the high holy days. He said, "So, tell me Mr. Robinson, are you Jewish?" I said, "No, sir, I am not." He said, "Mr. Robinson, in New York there are three million Jews, in New York it pays to be Jewish, do-not-ever-let-me-hear-you-say-again-you-are-not-Jewish!" (Laughter)

I got the job and sang for three years on high holy days. I was also one of his singers in the Yiddish Chorale which performed at the Waldorf and Town Hall, but he was so paranoid that someone would find out that I wasn't Jewish that he made me get off a stop before the temple and come in the back door. He wouldn't introduce me to anyone, although he tried to convince me that Robinson was "a perfectly good Jewish name".

RTE: What was your experience of singing in the temple?

HAL: The cantor was wonderful, and I did concerts with him over the years in other venues, but the services themselves were very distracting. I don't know if you've ever been to a Jewish temple, but people chat all through the service. The other choir members were used to it, but I found it very difficult to access the beauty of the music and the worship in such an atmosphere. I do remember certain things that everyone respected—such as Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.

I had studied voice technique for a while with Sherrill Milnes, and before I moved to New York, he had connected me with the conductor, Boris Goldovsky, who popularized opera with his Met radio broadcasts. Sherrill had traveled and trained with the Boris Goldovsky Opera Theatre, and as Goldovsky's emphasis was on education, the company performed in colleges all over the country. That summer, after attending his opera camp in West Vir-

Opposite: Hal Robinson (left) as Roland Headley in the musical Doonesbury, based on Gary Trudeau's comic strip, 1983.

ginia, he hired me to tour with him as Basilio in the *Barber of Seville*. These were all one-night stands and we often slept in our seats on the bus enroute to the next town.

Before the tour ended in December, my friend Bob Wait told me that an apartment had come available in this very building. I was able to get it, so this has essentially been my home since 1967. When I returned to New York after the tour, I began singing again at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on 46th Street. New York was still a culture shock, so during the day I only went out to my church job at St. Mary's and for voice lessons. I stayed up late listening to the radio, and spent a lot of time alone. I also started to meditate.

My closest friends lived in or near my building and one of these was Richard Tuttle, an artist who lived on the third floor, who, if he saw my light on late at night, would knock on my door to see if I wanted to go for a walk. We'd walk from our building in Hell's Kitchen down the Hudson River, through the Meatmarket district to Battery Park, then around under the Brooklyn Bridge, through Chinatown, Little Italy, and back again. It was a four-hour walk. Often there was no conversation at all. He would just point at things for me to look at: architecture, junk in the street... He was a minimalist in his art and his life, and he taught me to see. It was a wonderful education.

My friend Bob Wait lived in the building behind here, a pre-Civil War brick tenement that sadly fell down in the 80's because it had gone to ruin. He had a tiny two-room apartment, and his girlfriend Ann, whom he married soon after I moved here, had one on another floor, so they actually lived in both apartments. When I moved in, Bob, Ann, Richard Tuttle, Tom Barnes (a scene designer who lived above me) and I were all broke. When any of us got any money we gave it to Ann, who would go shop and cook for all of us. It was a wonderful little community.

Chicago, 1968: Grant Park's *La Traviata*; A Call to the Desert

On the tour, Mr. Goldovsky had suggested a New York voice teacher who I went to the following spring, but he wasn't good for me, which sometimes happens with a new teacher. They want to imprint their technique on a blank slate, so they strip away whatever technique you've learned and then build their own technique on you. The technique I'd been using had worked pretty well, but when he deprived me of it, I found that I didn't trust the one he was imposing on me, so I stopped the lessons. In the meantime I'd signed a con-

tract to sing in four or five operas in Chicago's Grant Park for the summer, including a small part in *La Traviata* with Beverly Sills, before she did it for City Opera and the Met. But now, to be stripped of a reliable vocal technique was a disaster.

RTE: You couldn't just pick up the technique you'd used before?

HAL: No, I couldn't. It was now the summer of 1968 and during the intermission of the last performance of *La Traviata* we heard that the Yippies were marching from Lincoln Park to demonstrate against the Democratic National Convention. We finished the performance and I drove back to New York. Three days later, when on television I saw the Chicago police battering the young people with billy clubs, I wanted to drive back and join the protesters, but it was too late.

RTE: Many of us felt that. Was there a conscious connection at this time between your acting, singing, and your spiritual life?

HAL: Singing had always been my connection to a deeper self, but at this time, having been divorced from Sally, I also felt estranged from the Catholic Church, although I was still singing at St. Mary the Virgin. Once, during meditation, I received a 'command,' "Read the Gospel of John." I did and then, sometime later, while meditating, I felt I'd received a message that said, "Leave, go to the desert, and talk to a certain man, who will tell you what you are supposed to do." Well, this man was a Baptist evangelist that I had known when I was nine years old, someone whom I'd always thought had a face like Jesus—a kind, spiritual face, with deep eyes and a penetrating presence. I thought to myself, "This is crazy, he's not in Arizona, he's a missionary in Alaska." Well, I came to find out later that he was indeed in the very place to which I'd been told to go in Arizona. I'd just gotten settled in New York and didn't want to go anywhere, but I felt convicted by my resistance, so one day on 51st Street I passed a little evangelical storefront church on my way home that had a big neon cross outside. On one side it said, "Repent for the time is now!" On the other side it said, "Sin will find you out!" I thought, "Wouldn't it be terrible to have an apartment across the street and have a huge neon SIN blinking outside your window?"

The church was having a Bible study in Spanish, and because I was so troubled, I went in. I sat in the back, and when they finished a man came to me and said, "Do you speak Spanish?" I said, "No, sir." He said in broken

English, “If you sat through a Bible study in Spanish and you don’t speak Spanish, you must really need to talk to someone. Let me get someone who speaks better English.” He left and went upstairs and soon a young man came down. I told him I was troubled by this call to leave everything and go to the desert: “I don’t want to do it, I just don’t want to do it.” I was weeping. He replied, “Well, my advice to you is to go home and forget it, if you can. Don’t worry. If it’s a real calling from God it will come back.” So, I went home and I found that with his blessing I was freed of this conviction. For now.

1968-1970: Rebuilding my Voice; Success, Grief, and Healing

The next year was wonderful. After getting through the summer operas in Chicago, I returned to New York to study with Franco Iglesias, who had sung the role of Figaro in the Goldovsky tour. Franco rebuilt my voice and I was singing better than I ever had in my life.

Consequently, I felt closer to God as the source of my music and was at peace with my calling.

In the spring of 1969 I entered a contest sponsored by the National Association of Teachers of Singing, where the winner was given bookings for a year. I won first place in New York City, then New York State, and finally New England. Now I was on my way to the finals in Albuquerque. Singing had always come from this inner source, but I was again in personal turmoil and the night before I sang in the finals I did something that cut that connection. For me it was a sin, and the next day, although I technically sang very well, that inner life just wasn’t there. They didn’t declare a winner in my category, and I knew that I should have won, but that I’d let myself (and God) down.

I went into a deep depression and grieved for the next two years. However, in that spiritual desert, I discovered my habitual negative thinking and found a way to deal with it that changed my life. I read a little book called *Psycho-Cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz, who theorized that the brain is like a computer and that you can key in what you want for yourself—a very familiar concept to us now. I said, “OK, I’ve been unhappy and I want something better in my life.” Because of my training as an actor, I already understood that there was a little tape recorder within constantly replaying the past, and if I allowed a certain thought, I found that I could fast-forward to the end result of that thought and say, “Is that what I want?” So when I had a negative thought, I began to mentally throw it away over my shoulder, saying, “I want

good things for myself.” Of course, the negative emotion that came along with the thought was still there, but I said it, and said it, and said it, until I felt it. In the beginning it took me twenty minutes to turn a single thought around, to feel it and accept it emotionally, affirming that I really did want good things for myself. After I’d been doing this for about a year, I didn’t get caught in negativity anymore. If something happened that was contrary to what I had planned, instead of automatically assuming it was negative, I would wonder why it had happened and start looking for the positive reason. This created a wonderful openness and synchronicity and I met people whom I would never have met otherwise.

Then I thought, “Why should I just want good things for myself? Why shouldn’t I want the very best things possible?” So, that became my new focus, not realizing that I was actually praying for God’s will. If you’d asked me to pray for God’s will I would have been scared to death that God might have had something for me to do—something that I didn’t want to do. However, in truth, God’s will is the very best thing that can happen to me, so without defining it, without knowing what it was, I “prayed” for God’s will at every moment of the day.

Pittsburgh, 1971-1973:

Guys and Dolls, Man of La Mancha, Carousel

This positive work, and it was work, led to my getting my first performing job after this long period, playing Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* in Pittsburgh in 1971, although I never again sang the kind of lieder and opera that I’d done previously. The next year I was back in Pittsburgh for *Man of La Mancha*, which I’d done earlier with Richard Kiley, who starred in it on Broadway. Then, I’d played the villain, Carrasco, but now I was cast as Don Quixote. I was definitely on a spiritual journey again, and I’d come to believe again that I had something deep within me that I could draw upon.

When I returned to Pittsburgh the next year in 1973 to play Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*, I went to a Sunday service and received Holy Communion. I don’t remember much about that Communion, but it must have been very significant, because I wrote in my journal that I wanted that back in my life. That Communion was what brought me back to the Church.

At this time, I’d been studying voice for months with a teacher at Rutgers on the soliloquy from *Carousel*. There is a high “G” at the end of it and I

cracked on that note every time. I just couldn't do it. I asked, "What am I going to do?," and the coach answered, "Just tell them to take it down one step for you. You'll be fine." The musical director agreed that he could do that, but said that first he wanted to hear me sing it once in the original key. "Well," I thought, "he'll see why I want it lowered," but at the first rehearsal, rather than reading through the script and skipping the songs, which is traditional, the director announced we were going to do it all from start to finish, including the songs! "Oh no," I thought; I didn't want to crack in front of everyone. But I had discovered that, in a pinch, there was a source within

me on which I could depend to do what I could not do on my own. So when we got to that song, I surrendered to that source and said, "It's all yours." The high note came out as clear as a bell. I had no understudy that summer, and sometimes my voice was so hoarse that it came out raspy, everything except that note, which was always perfect.

Some weeks into the run, an Episcopal priest at a reception said, "You know, I love this production. I've seen it three or four times now, but there is one moment in that show that's absolutely magic." It was *that* moment. I realized for the first time that not only could I depend upon God, but that He can act better than I can. During that run, I became aware that this point of contact with God can only be through Jesus who made that contact for us. I thought, "Oh no, I don't deserve that." But it had been working for me, so that must mean I didn't have to deserve it. Once again I suddenly had this close relationship not only with God, but with Jesus Christ, and also with my fellow actors. If I saw any of those people today we would have the same high camaraderie and bond that we had then, partly because we were so young.

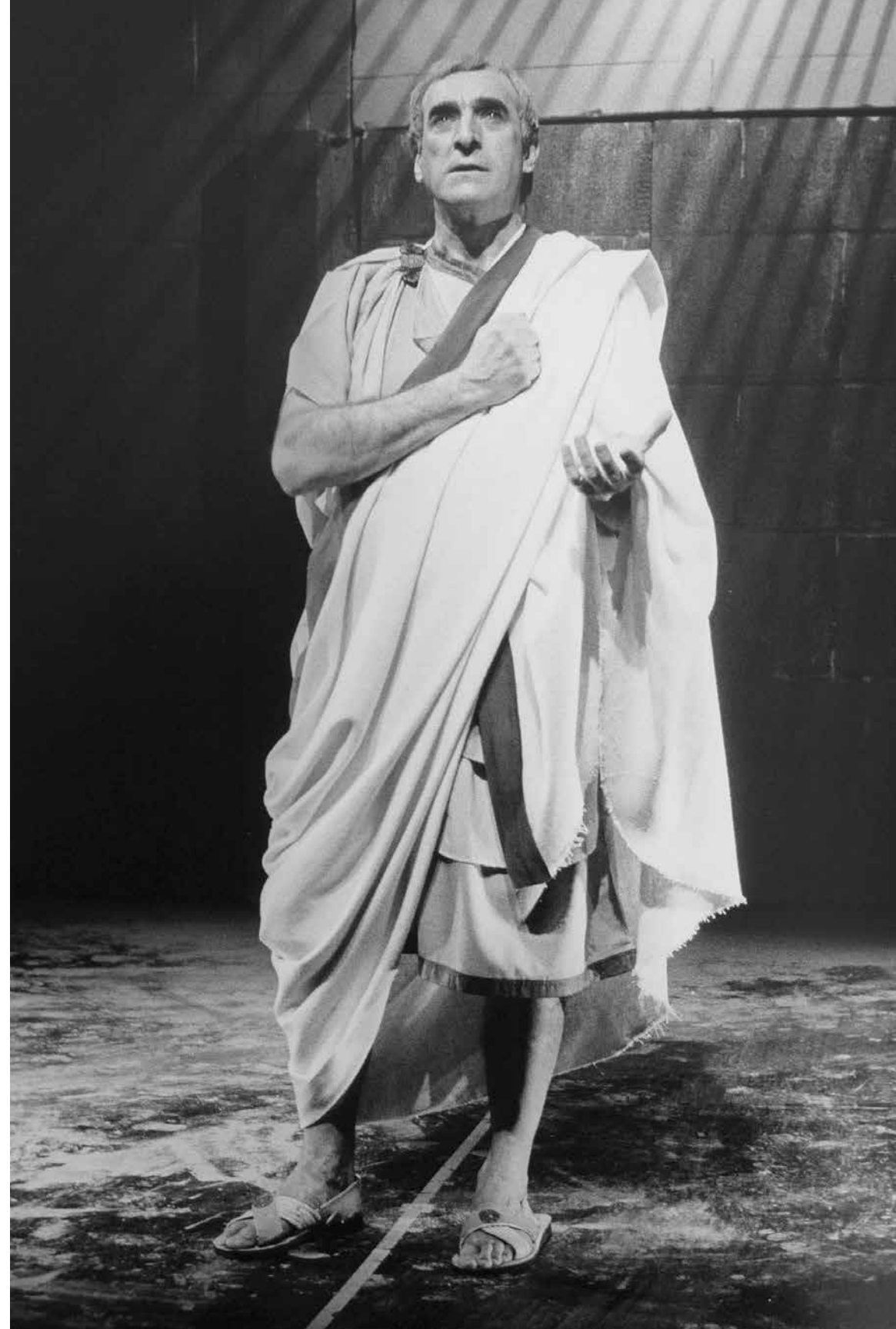
RTE: And you were all dedicated to this common art.

HAL: I'm glad you said that, because later when I lived in community with people who were dedicated to the common cause of serving God, I compared



Off-Broadway poster for Cicero, Samuel Beckett Theatre, New York, 1986.

Opposite: Hal Robinson as Cicero at the Off-Broadway Samuel Beckett Theatre, 1986.



it to a theatre company where you do whatever there is to be done without complaint. You did it with enthusiasm because you wanted to.

Early on I'd worked in companies where there was no delineation between the actors and the stage crew. We did everything: carried props, moved scenery, cleaned, anything that was to be done, but there was never any grouching. I also spent time backstage at the Barnum and Bailey circus before I did *Carousel* because I wanted to get a feeling for their life. What I found was that they were like a family, and the people who were hired to scoop up after the elephants took as much pride in their work as the acrobats who performed on the high wire. It was an amazing tradition. The theatre was also like that. We were all there for a common purpose and I came to even more of an appreciation of this later when I lived in community.

RTE: We often hear about actresses being *prima donnas*? How real is that?

HAL: Oh, it exists. When money becomes part of the formula then you run into the genre of the *prima donna*, who can be of either gender, but that's a fantasy life and you don't find it when money is not a factor. I also find that the people who are the most advanced in their craft are the most generous, and they don't have anything to prove. I once had occasion to sit around the swimming pool with Betty Grable, whose famous legs, in the 1940's, were insured for \$1,000,000 by Lloyds of London. She had slacks on, and was probably in her 60's at the time, but she knew that everyone wanted to see her legs, so she pulled her slacks above her knees and looking down said, "Half a mil; half a mil." (*Laughter*) She never confused who she was with the movie star image that she portrayed.

RTE: Did you ever run into difficult actors?

HAL: I'll tell you a funny story. At the beginning of *La Mancha*, Don Quixote lays out the premise of the play with his donkey standing nearby. One night as I gave the opening address, I realized that the audience wasn't looking at me. This went on for several performances, and finally I looked over at the donkey, and he was doing all sorts of donkey antics. So, after the performance I said, "Ron, when I'm doing the soliloquy, please don't distract the audience. It's important to the play that they hear the premise." Well, he did it again the next night, so I went to the director, who said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." I knew that he'd talked to the actor, but the next night he did

it again, so I took my sword out and rapped him with it, saying, "Stop that!" and went on with my speech. He was so furious that he brought me up on charges with Equity for hitting him on stage with a sword. (*Laughter*)

Acquiring Faith, Living Roles

RTE: And what happened after *Carousel*?

HAL: Right after *Carousel* in 1973, I did a short tour of the musical play, 1776. Coming home from the tour on a Sunday night, I got a call from my agent who said, "We have an offer for you to go tomorrow to the playhouse in Fishkill, New York, to play King Arthur in *Camelot*. The show's already opened, but the lead wants to leave. You'll have five days of rehearsal." Even though I'd just gotten back, I said, "Sure," and took the bus up to Fishkill the next day. When I looked at the script I realized that not only did I not know a word of the script, I didn't know a note of the songs. Fear just overwhelmed me, and the words on the page were swimming. So, every morning for the next five days, I down got on my knees and gave up the fear to God. I would stay there until the fear went away. Only then could I read and memorize. After that five days, I opened successfully. I understood that faith was the only way I'd performed, and that this was one of the best things I'd ever done up to that point.

RTE: These are some of the positive things you've learned from acting. How about when you took on darker rolls, such as Carrasco, the villain in *Man of La Mancha*?

HAL: I have more technique than I used to have, but my natural approach to acting was to enter into the character completely, and I always personally experienced the primary thing that happened to my character in the play. This isn't a healthy way to approach acting, but that was the only way that I knew how to act. In my first run of *Man of La Mancha* when I played Carrasco, the negative counterpoint to Richard Kiley's Quixote, Kiley was after me every night saying, "You must be meaner." This character represented pure evil and I didn't want to go there. I wasn't totally successful at it obviously.

Later, when I played Don Quixote myself, I decided to memorize my lines before I got to the rehearsals as there were many technical details associated with the part to be worked out. I'd already met with someone who'd done

the role on Broadway, so I knew what these details were and how it had to work, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't memorize the lines. When I got on the bus for Pittsburgh, I finally understood why. In reading the script I could feel the grief of Alonzo Quihana (the man who became Don Quixote) over the evil and travails of this world. That was what drove him mad, and I realized that my resistance was because I didn't want to go there, yet this was the only way I knew how to act. I had to experience that grief and Don Quixote's demise. What happens is that Carrasco, as the Knight of the Mirrors, shows Don Quixote his own image, his ego, his foolishness, and he can't take it. It kills him.

Thankfully, I'm not at the mercy of the parts I play anymore, because I have better technique and more control over my emotions, but I still have to find something positive in a character to allow me to enter into it. In real life, no one is totally evil, yet there are certain roles that I won't play. I turned down a movie offer in Los Angeles in which I would have been cast as a totally depraved character. I couldn't put my voice to those words. As an actor you do have to protect yourself.

Film is more difficult than theatre for me because, although the play goes from beginning to end and is resolved each night, filming is episodic and not necessarily filmed in sequence. I was always amazed at Trini Alvarado, who played Anne Frank. She was nineteen at the time and would be laughing and carrying on like a kid, but when the director said, "Let's go," she would immediately be in the moment as Anne Frank, whatever the emotional circumstance. She could turn on a dime.

Spiritual Watersheds

Another spiritual watershed was in 1974, when Ric Crislip, a friend from the Chicago Symphony Chorus, came to audition in New York and stayed with me. He'd just become Mormon, and was eager to share his new-found faith with me. At this point I was finally really happy with where I was in the Church, was going to mass every day, and told him, "I'm not interested right now in anything else. I'm where I'm supposed to be, and very happy being there." He said, "Then will you just pray with me?" I said, "Sure." So, we knelt on my kitchen floor and Rick prayed a prayer that had never occurred to me. He said, "Dear Jesus, show Hal a way to serve you that is unique to

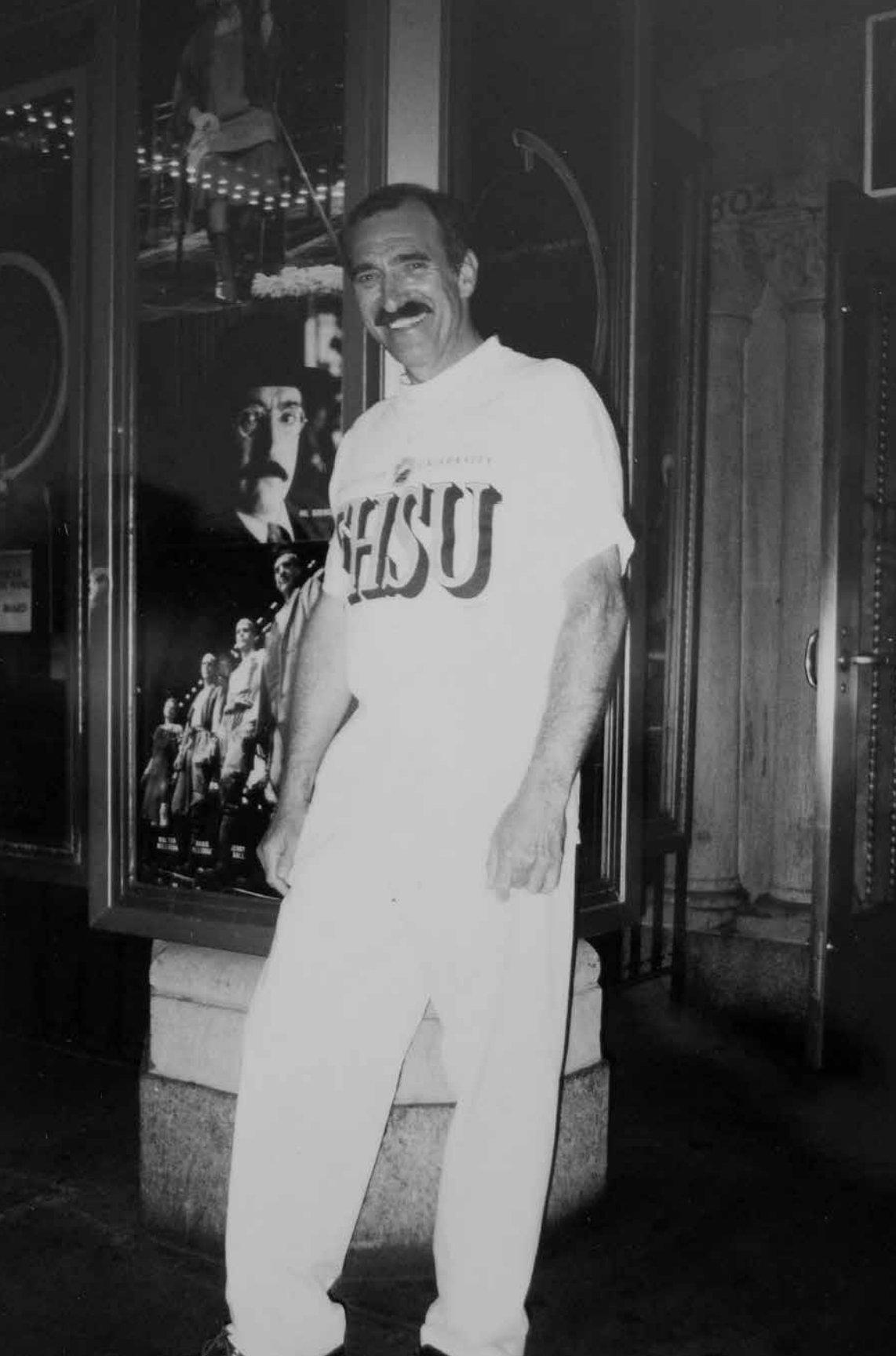
him." I thought, "Yes, show me what to do in that light, and I'll do it." To this day I don't know what really happened, but at the time I thought that I saw my soul. I saw light deep within me and a place of incredible peace, and I was filled with an energy I'd never felt before. I didn't say anything out loud, and Ric finally just ended the prayer. When we got up, he said, "Wow, I've never experienced anything like that." I said, "Me either."

Two weeks later, I met the Christian community that would later start Raphael House, the homeless shelter for families in San Francisco. I'd gone there because my friend George Wilby had cancer, and believed that he could be healed with the help of prayer. Ford Hill, my voice and piano teacher from Indiana U., had told me that these people believed in prayer, so I made the trip to Boston to talk to one of their clergy named Fr. Ruiz.

After I'd made my plea for my friend George, Fr. Ruiz said, "Don't try to heal him, just be his friend and pray to God for him. We'll pray for him too, but don't try to do anything." As we talked I told him my story and said, "You know, I've always had a feeling that I have a calling, but I've never trusted it because as a child everyone expected me to become a minister." He asked, "Well, do you like what you're doing?" I was doing *The Fantasticks* at the time, off-Broadway, and having a wonderful time. I said, "Oh, yes." "And you are able to make a living?" "Yes." He said, "Well that's a pretty good sign that you're rather good at what you do and probably doing just what you are supposed to. But if you have a calling, you'd want to know. If you ever want to find out, you can take three months off and come spend that time with us. Work and pray. Chances are you'll find out you don't have a calling, and then you'll go back to your profession without that cloud hanging over your head. Your career will just take off."

RTE: What a sane thing to say.

HAL: Yes, it sounded pretty good to me. I didn't tell him at the time, but I'd just developed a node on my vocal chords. We'd been doing eight shows a week of *The Fantasticks* and the doctor had just told me to rest my voice for three months! As I was about to leave the office, I added, "There's another reason I've always felt I might have a calling. My mother told me that when I was in her womb, she gave me to God saying, "God, this child is Yours. You can do with it whatever you want." Father Ruiz looked at me across the desk and said, "Son, you've had it!" (*Laughter*)



Before I left the house that afternoon, I prayed in their chapel for Jesus to remove the effects of negativity and sin in my life and to take away all personal need. I had an intense experience of Christ's presence, and when I stopped by the minister's office on the way out to tell him about it, he said, "What you've experienced is from Jesus Christ. It's a gift and people will be drawn to it, but you mustn't confuse yourself with it, it's not you. With that in mind, go and have a good time." So I left feeling absolutely renewed and wanting to reread every book I'd ever read and see everything I'd ever seen over again.

The interesting thing was that people did start noticing something had changed. For example, in our apartment building we didn't have a lock on our front door, so bums would sleep in the stairwell. They didn't bother us or ever ask for money, and we weren't worried by them, we just stepped over them. They'd always been part of the landscape. So, either the first day I was back or the day after, one of these guys put out his hand. I reached in my pocket for money, and he said, "My name is Jimmy." He wasn't asking for money. Within a week I knew all of their names and I knew which ones could be trusted and which ones couldn't. They came into the house for coffee.

One day when I came back from the theatre, a young street guy was sitting on the stoop. He looked up as I passed and asked, "Can you help me?" Again, I thought he wanted money and was reaching into my pocket when he said, "You know, I've been strung out on drugs since I was a kid and my little brother is at the age where it's going to happen to him too. I don't want it to happen to him. Can you please help me?" He came into my house and we talked for hours. I don't remember how I thought I could help him, but we talked about God and prayer.

The biggest change however, was that when I walked out on the stage the next night to perform *The Fantasticks*, I felt that I had never been on stage before. It was all new. I didn't know what to do, though I'd been playing the part for months. It was terrifying and I prayed, "Oh God, please don't take away my ability to act, please don't." Of course I knew the songs, I knew the choreography, and I knew what I was supposed to do, but it was empty. I didn't feel the connection with the audience that I had always depended on. Finally on Sunday afternoon, three friends came to the performance. They sat third row center and I could see them. I knew that they loved and sup-

Opposite: Hal Robinson in front of playbill depicting his character, the attorney Zinnowitz, in Grand Hotel, 1990.

ported me, and that I loved them. I did that performance for them, and I felt the old connection: "Oh God, thank you, it's flowing again." It was flowing out from me, and I was receiving back from them.

Of course, that was how I'd always acted: I gave everything I had, and the audience gave back to me. I had prayed that my personal needs be removed, and perhaps God took me at my word that I didn't need that affirmation, but I hadn't known what to do without it. Then that night, the last performance of the week, the performance came through me in a new way. It was pure life, pure gift, it was prayer, it was a flowing river. I could see people's faces change; old men near the front who'd been dragged to the theatre by their wives, but didn't want to be there and just wanted to go to sleep, come alive in response to this life-giving energy.

At some point I thought, "*The Fantasticks* is a beautiful play. It has beautiful, even poetic words, and the subject is remembering first love. But, what would it be like if I were to speak something like the Gospel of John, while feeling that closeness to Christ? What would that be like and how would I present it onstage as a narration?" What could the Holy Spirit do with those words?" That was finally why I joined the Christian community that would become Christ the Saviour Brotherhood, to learn how to do that. I felt then and still believe that God led me there.

Co-Founding Raphael House

RTE: During those years in the brotherhood you were co-director of Raphael House, the San Francisco shelter for homeless families, along with Mrs. Ella Rigney, a native New Yorker whose father was instrumental in founding the American Cancer Society. Taking off eight years from your career was a major sea change for you. What was it like?

HAL: I'd joined the brotherhood in 1974 and Ella two months later. Because of her family's social position and her personality, Ella had always been in charge of whatever she was doing, and much of her life was spent in philanthropic charity work. In fact, she had joined VISTA, the domestic Peace Corps, when she was well into her seventies. So now, at 84, when she was asked to step in and find a building for an expanded shelter for homeless families, she gave three stipulations: First, it had to be a building large enough to keep the children there during the day so that they wouldn't be out

on the street. Second, the families had to stay long enough so that they left with a more stable situation than when they'd arrived, and third, that I help her start it. She said, "He's been an actor, so he knows how to meet people. Because I'm going to be asking for money, I can't guarantee I will live long enough to see that that money is spent the way we promise it will be. I need someone younger to give me credibility."

That is what she said, but I also know why she really chose me. In her first year in the brotherhood, I was the maintenance man at one of our community houses where she had been given the job of building a library in a tiny room on the second floor. Being Ella, she went to the San Francisco library, learned the Dewey Decimal System, and started organizing all of the books appropriately. She filled up every bookcase, every inch of space, and one day she said to me in passing, "You know, there's room for a small bookcase right behind that door." The next day when she came in, I'd built it. She understood that we thought alike and that was why she wanted me to help her.

In helping Mrs. Rigney found the new Raphael House, I didn't have any idea of what I was doing, which was good because, again, I had to rely on God's Providence. First we had to convince the brotherhood that buying the old Golden Gate Hospital on Sutter Street was necessary for the people we were serving and a good investment. I obtained floor plans for each of the four floors and we mapped out how each of these spaces would be used. The first floor was for families with both mothers and fathers with children, or men with children, and for the chapel and library. The second floor was mothers and children, the third floor was staff. I had free reign over the basement, so I created the senior program, with a pottery and sewing room, and so on.

When it was time to present the proposal, the procedure was to give a written copy of the presentation in advance so that brotherhood council members had a chance to read it. This time the new director general said, "Don't show the proposal to anyone in advance," so we didn't. I believe he wanted there to be room for the Holy Spirit to speak. We came to the meeting laden with statistics about the homeless, the program's structure, plans for how each room on each floor would be used, engineering and structural details, but I know we didn't have any information about why it was a good investment.

Now Mrs. Rigney had always said, "This is the right thing to do, this is the only thing to do, we have to do this." But just before we went into the meeting she said, "Well, who knows if it's the right thing to do? Let God decide." I breathed a sigh of relief. Now, the president of the corporation wasn't sold—

understandably, as his duties were financial—and as I finished the presentation, he “applauded,” making sport of me as though I’d given a performance. We expected the council to spend at least two days discussing the proposal, but we’d just barely put our coats on when someone came and said, “They want you back in there.” We returned and were told that our proposal had passed unanimously. The director had simply said, “Before we discuss this at all, let’s have a few moments of silent prayer.” The Holy Spirit just came down. The president of the corporation told me later, “I abstained from voting, not because I didn’t know it was the right thing to do—I’d gotten the same message as everyone else—but I couldn’t just make a 180 degree turn.” (*Laughter*)

Soon after we bought it, someone broke into the old hospital, which still had a fully-stocked pharmacy, so I moved into the shelter and slept on the library table. Later, our heroic work crew came in to begin clean-up and renovation, but at some point Mrs. Rigney decided, “The work isn’t moving fast enough. I’m moving in myself, tomorrow.” The paint was still wet on the walls of her room when she came in, and it did move a little faster because she was there.

Mrs. Rigney always said, “Don’t ever be afraid to admit that you don’t know something. Admit it, then go to someone who does know—and go to the top. So, with all five of the major inspections we had to pass: structural, electrical, plumbing, fire, and health, I went to the head of each department, brought them over to the hospital, took them through the place and asked, “What do we have to do to pass inspection?” They each gave me a list of things to do and we passed all five.

When we opened, we had ten in-house staff including social service workers, receptionists, administrators, and cooks, with fifteen other brothers and sisters who lived there but worked at outside jobs and donated their salaries to run the shelter. Although later that number increased, it was unrealistic for us to be self-supporting as a shelter forever, so Mrs. Rigney asked me to start writing grants. We were taking in up to fifty residents at a time, some as long as six months, so we knew we needed help. I went to the head of Coleman Children’s and Youth Services and asked how to go about submitting a grant proposal. He told me and I wrote the grant. It was two inches thick, but I quickly learned that people who review grants only want three pages. I didn’t know this at the time so I had a financial plan, a staff plan, an organizational chart.... I showed it to Mrs. Rigney and when she got to the organizational chart she threw it at me and said, “That isn’t right!” It was the

only time I ever cursed... I said, “Damn it Ella, I’ve been working on this for two months. If there’s something wrong tell me and I’ll fix it, but don’t just throw it at me!” Later she told me, “I thought, ‘Well, I’m going to have to deal a little differently with this one.’” (*Laughter*) She never did that again, and we learned how to work together.

Mrs. Rigney and I developed a symbiotic relationship. If she got a headache, I felt it; that was just the way it was. That doesn’t mean that I couldn’t disagree with her, because I did. She respected my opinion and sometimes she would change—not necessarily what she thought, but she would change her decision. Her first response was always to dig in, but once she was able to listen, she was willing to see the other side.

Raphael House was unique in that the staff shared a life with the residents. We ate together, we worked together, we shared household duties. Earlier, I’d volunteered at another shelter, and although we were serving a good basic soup that people were grateful for, the smell of the pork chops that the staff had had for dinner lingered in the air and it broke my heart. I told Mrs. Rigney that story and she said, “That will never happen here. We will eat the same food and we will even eat together.”

Besides offering housing and job referrals, we also had programs for children, for seniors, after-school tutoring, activities for resident families, and eventually an award-winning yet affordable public restaurant called Brother Juniper’s Bread Box. While I was there we formed a Renaissance madrigal group of staff and friends, performing in costume at festivals. Music became a part of the fabric of our lives at Raphael House. Most importantly we had daily prayer in the chapel, eventually the Liturgy of the Hours, to which the residents were welcome but not required to come.

RTE: Both in its pre-Orthodox Christian beginning and later when the staff and volunteers were almost all Orthodox, Raphael House’s patterns of life seem similar to the spirit of St. Basil the Great’s recommendations for the *Basilad*, his philanthropic foundation where the poor, sick, orphans, and aged received food, shelter, and medical care from monks and nuns who lived and worked alongside lay people. His friend St. Gregory the Theologian spoke of it as, “the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, where disease is regarded in a religious light, disaster is thought a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test.” I like to think that you, Mrs. Rigney, and all those who served there followed in their footsteps.

HAL: I hope so. Fortunately, my relationship with Raphael House continued even after I went back to acting. I served on the Raphael House Board for two years, flying in from New York for meetings, and Mrs. Rigney even came to New York to see me in *Grand Hotel* on Broadway.

Some years later, Fr. David Lowell, the director of Raphael House, sent me an email from a young man who had come across the website, who said, "My mother and I stayed at Raphael House when I was five years old; she was escaping an abusive marriage. I don't remember much about the place, but I do remember our first meal, I remember being taken to the beach, and I remember how grateful my mother was. I'm graduating from medical school next year and I'm writing to thank you for helping us when we needed help." I figured out from his letter that they were among our first group of residents who came in right after Thanksgiving in 1977. I wrote to Fr. David and said, "I don't need anything else for Christmas."

RTE: Another important thing you did after leaving San Francisco to resume acting, was to visit in the spring of 1983 and invite me to my first Orthodox Pascha service. We went to the Joy of All Who Sorrow Russian Orthodox Church on Geary Street, where St. John Maximovich was then buried in the crypt. After that service, I knew I would be Orthodox and whenever I've thought of you it was with a very deep pulse of gratitude.



Broadway playbill for Grand Hotel, Martin Beck Theatre, New York, 1989-1991.

HAL: My goodness, I had no idea.

1982-1985: Return to the Theatre; Broadway Debut

HAL: When I joined the community I was 38, and was doing leading roles: El Gallo, the narrator for *The Fantasticks*, and Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*. When

Opposite Top: Hal Robinson and Mrs. Ella Rigney with San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein, as the mayor declares Raphael House Week, November, 1981.

Opposite Bottom: Hal Robinson and Mrs. Ella Rigney, New York, 1986.



I returned to New York at the end of 1982 I was 47 years old, a little young to be a character actor, but because I'd given up that time of my life, part of me just expected that God would make my career flourish. Not that I was depending on God to do this without my own effort: I wasn't just turning it over to God and saying, "You are my manager." (Would that I had!) I had to go through another spiritual journey before I could come to that.

It took me awhile to learn that trust in performing again. I had never concentrated on building a career, however, I made my Broadway debut very unobtrusively in 1985 when I was hired as a vacation replacement for an actor in *On Your Toes*, directed by George Abbot. I remember that on opening night, I was on my way up to the dressing room for a costume change and thought, "This is my Broadway debut!" It seemed anticlimactic. Even though I was on Broadway, I made so little money that year that I didn't even qualify for a credit card. It wasn't until later, when I was part of the original 1989 cast of *Grand Hotel* on Broadway that, for the first time in my life, I was making a real living. My salary more than quadrupled. It didn't make me career mad, but I began to entertain possibilities of success that I hadn't ever thought of.

In 1985 I also worked on *Yours, Anne*, the story of Anne Frank, in the form of a simple opera with a reverent treatment of her diary. To add music to that story, however, offended so many that we didn't have the support of the Jewish press or community, which was odd. Nevertheless, we performed it at Jewish Repertory Theatre Company, off-Broadway. The Anne Frank Foundation here in New York was very supportive of it as was holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, whom I was privileged to meet.

After a number of small jobs, I did two seasons at Great Lakes Theatre Festival in Cleveland, including the first show of the 1987 season in which George Abbott was honored for his 100th birthday. They did two of his plays, Mr. Abbot himself directing *Broadway*, and the artistic director Gerald Friedman directing *The Boys from Syracuse*, a musical from the book Mr. Abbot had written. As always, I prepared to put myself fully into it, and

suddenly realized that I was doing the same play I'd done in my first year of summer stock in Louisville, playing the same part I'd played then.

1988: Shakespeare, Shaw, and Ibsen

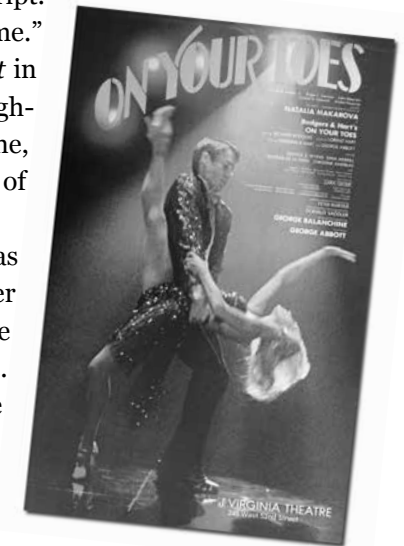
One day, Gerald Friedman came to me and said, "I hope you know that we realize how fortunate we are to have you here. It's a joy just to see you perform." He understood that I was giving everything I had to these small parts, and during the run he asked me, "Do you ever get angry?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Really? Then I'm going to give you a script. I want you to come in tomorrow and read for me." So he gave me a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in which Capulet was giving his disobedient daughter Juliet what for. I came in and read the scene, and he told me later that I scared the hell out of him. (*Laughter*).

So, Mr. Friedman cast me that summer as Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*; the next summer it was *Love's Labour's Lost*. Doing Shakespeare for the first time was a tremendous experience. That summer and the next I had a leading role in every show: Shakespeare, Shaw, Lorca, Ibsen, and even Sondheim's *Follies*. It was all a great blessing to me, though I was treading in unfamiliar waters. Fortunately, Shakespeare wasn't a problem. Although the words are sometimes archaic, if you go to the trouble of looking them up, understand exactly what the character is saying, and then just speak with the rhythm in which the play is written, the acting is there for you. It's brilliant.

The first show of 1988 was *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which I played Boyet, a slender elegant character. Gerald Friedman had cast both *Love's Labour's Lost*, which he was directing, and Shaw's *Man and Superman*, which he was not directing. After Shakespeare, Shaw was another matter entirely. When Amy Schultz came in to direct *Man and Superman*, I met her at the opening night of *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which I played a completely different character than the Shaw role, for which I had to wear a fat suit. She looked at me and



Playbill for *Yours, Anne*, Playhouse 91, New York, 1985.



Playbill for *On Your Toes*, Hal Robinson's Broadway debut, 1984.

I could just hear her thinking, "This man is miscast for *Man and Superman*".

So, we started rehearsals. Now, Shaw inserts very long stage directions for the actors, telling them exactly how to act the play, which, unfortunately are the very definition of bad acting in today's theatre. But at that time it was the style. Amy wanted me to do all of the things Shaw had put in the stage directions. I always try to do whatever a director asks, and in this case I really did try, but I just couldn't act that badly. (*Laughter*) Finally, she gave up on me. After the dress rehearsal of *Man and Superman* she gave the cast an hour and a half of notes, without a single mention of me. At the end I asked, "Amy, don't you have any notes for me?" She said, "Um, I couldn't hear you." "You couldn't hear me?" I thought, "I was yelling at the top of my lungs, but if she can't hear me it's because of placement." So the next day I went into the theatre, moved all of the vocal placement forward, and went through everything I said in the play onstage by myself. That was all I could do.

At the beginning of the play I would be seen onstage talking on the phone, and as the curtain was about to go up on opening night I wondered, "What am I going to do?" Psalm 63 suddenly came to me, "My soul clings to you, Your right hand holds me fast." I mentally grabbed ahold of the Holy Spirit, and as the curtain went up, I felt God's hand beneath me. I began to speak and the play just happened. After the performance I was spent, and took my time getting out of the dressing room, but Gerald Friedman had waited to talk to me and he said, "That's the best work I've ever seen you do." I said, "Well, I had very little to do with it, but thank you."

At the party, Amy came up and said, "I owe you an apology. I've been trying to force you into a mold and what I saw on that stage tonight was a living, breathing human being." Again, I said that I'd had little or nothing to do with it, but thanked her. Once again it had been proven to me that God can do better than my best plans, but only if I've prepared. I wasn't going in blind and saying, "God, help me." I'd done my homework, but then I had to turn it over.

Something else happened to me spiritually during those two years of doing classical pieces: the Liturgy of the Hours had become an important part of my life, and I was doing matins every morning, along with evening prayer and compline. Those familiar psalms, readings, and prayers always came up just when I needed them. Hence, Psalm 63 from Morning Prayer, Week One.

By the end of 1988 I'd worked six days a week, fifty out of fifty-two weeks in regional theatres and made less than \$20,000. (*Laughter*) It would be

a little more now, but the pay scale in those theatres is pretty low, though it included room and board. But I got to do wonderful things. I spent three months in Kansas City doing the comedy, *A Little Shop of Horrors*, which was a joy to perform. I went from that to *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Man and Superman*, and we finished with Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, which we then took on the road, ending up at the Old Globe in San Diego.

The Theatre, Audience and Actors, *Grand Hotel*, 1989

The next year I did *Grand Hotel*, directed by Tommy Tune, which played on Broadway for two and a half years. The script for this production had originally been "through-composed." With no stops for applause, it just unfolded. To be done on Broadway, though, there had to be room to let the audience in.

RTE: What does the audience do besides giving their attention?

HAL: Well, they need to participate through applause, expressing their appreciation (or in Italy, hissing if they don't like it). Also, a play needs breathing space. When the tension builds, the audience needs a chance to breathe, which those moments provide.

RTE: Having been both an actor on stage for over fifty years and a member of many audiences, what would you say that theatre gives people?

HAL: I believe it's a medium that can change people's lives, and for me, it is a vocation. When an audience comes to a theatre they come to be entertained, so they are more open than, say, sitting in a public meeting. I watch people's countenances change during the course of the play, and can see life coming back into them. I've also found that I can legitimately be connected to the scene and to the emotions of the play, that is, honest as an actor and yet also able to direct this transformative power in a prayerful way, which is why I want to do the Gospel of John. I can't produce that phenomenon at will, but I can be there as an instrument for God to use as He wills.

RtE: Opening nights are glamorized, but are they also traumatic for the actors?

HAL: There can be both exaltation and great fear. I spent two wonderful years on Broadway in *Grand Hotel*, and that was also my best experience of



an opening night. Theatre is always a series of experiences of having to let go, and in a show like this that has so much intensity and millions of dollars behind it, the energy is palpable. The stakes are really high and you can't help but feel it.

Tommy Tune, the director, rehearsed us by starting from the beginning of the play and choreographing as far as we could go that day. The next day we ran everything we'd done so far, and when we finished he began choreographing from where we'd left off. Then we'd run it again from the beginning. By the end of the rehearsal period you've staged the whole show and you've gone through the entire show every day. It creates a "body memory". Opening nights can be frightening because there is so much riding on it, but when the show is in your body already, it's not stressful at all. You just do what you're used to doing. In and out of the theatre, that experience of just having to trust and let go has contributed more to my spiritual development than any of the devotional things I've tried to do.

Grand Hotel was a wonderful company and a wonderful family. We started every rehearsal in a circle, and if we had something to say about the play or what we'd done that day, we would say it. Tommy really believed in creating a spiritual bond, and we had a circle every night before the performance where we held hands and had a silent prayer. You didn't have to go, but most of us did. It was just nice to see everyone's faces, just looking into the eyes of people you cared about. After all, we hadn't seen each other since the night before. (*Laughter*).

So, now after *Grand Hotel* I hoped I was on a career trajectory. I didn't fully realize at the time how rarely hit shows come along. Not many shows play for over a year, but you just assume that once you get such a job, you'll have jobs like that forever. Perhaps not. I finished *Grand Hotel* in 1991, and went into rehearsals for *Nick and Nora*, a musical version of the *Thin Man* series, which had starred Willam Powell and Myrna Loy. There were well-known stars in it and it was expected to be a huge Broadway hit, but instead it was a huge flop. Arthur Laurents, the script-writer, had politicized the original charming story by making Nora as smart as a whip and Nick a dull companion character. Of course, it didn't work. We worked on that show for five months, and it closed within a week after it opened. You form bonds with the people you work with, and when something like this fails, it's like a

Opposite: Old Wicked Songs. Hal Robinson as Professor Josef Mashkan and Justin Kirk as Stephen Hoffman.

death. Although some of us could see the weaknesses in the script, we'd just hoped they weren't fatal.

RTE: Could it have been rewritten?

HAL: *Nick and Nora* couldn't be fixed because Arthur Laurents who did the script was also the director, and he didn't think there was anything wrong with it. When he got bad reviews he was shocked, but he still thought they were wrong.

1995-1997: LA, Philadelphia, New York: "Old Wicked Songs"

In 1994 I was at the Goodspeed Opera House on a very beautiful stretch of the Connecticut River doing a Marx Brothers comedy, *Animal Crackers*, which was one of the best experiences of my life. It was a three-month contract and as an actor you get to live in these wonderful old mansions on the property and share a kitchen with other members of the cast. At that point *Grand Hotel* was finally taken to London, but I had to turn the offer down as there was no way out of the *Animal Crackers* contract.



Broadway playbill for Old Wicked Songs, Promenade Theatre, New York, 1996-1997.

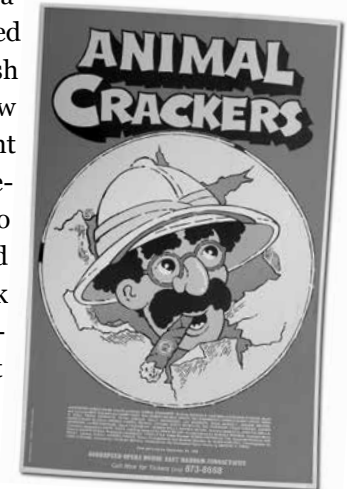
However, it turned out truly providential that I stayed because afterwards, Frank Ferrante, the actor who was playing Groucho, sent me a script he was going to direct, asking if I played the piano. The script was called *As the Birds Sing*, about a cranky old Viennese voice teacher, down on his luck, who has a young American piano student come to him for voice lessons. The piano student has lost his passion for music, and had been sent to this teacher to recover it. It just happened that

I do play piano and that over thirty years before I had sung and recorded Schumann's *Die Dichterliebe*, the songs he used in the play. I already knew them like the back of my hand.

In the meantime, I'd done a tour of the Lincoln Center production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*, ending in Los Angeles, where I decided to stay and get acting jobs while working with Frank and Jon Marans, the author of the play, on the script and translation of *As the Birds Sing*. It ended up being

called *Old Wicked Songs*, which is the English translation of the last song in the cycle, *Die alten, bösen Lieder*. During that year I went back to Chicago to work on the songs with Lola Rand, the dialect coach for the Chicago Symphony Chorus, who herself was from Vienna and had coached me on this same song cycle thirty years before. It was a reunion and so much fun.

In 1996 we premiered *Old Wicked Songs* in Philadelphia where it got great reviews. Daryl Roth ended up producing it in New York, and in 1995 the Jewish Repertory Theatre agreed to put it on, but the new director didn't want to follow the author's intent and the play wasn't jelling. Finally, in our last preview before it opened, the producer asked me to do what I could to make it work again. It did work and Clive Barnes, the drama critic from the New York Sun-Times, wrote a review saying, "This is a Pulitzer Prize play." Although it wasn't exactly what the author had intended, it came in second for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama that year, and Michael Stuhlbarg who played the young man and I both won Drama League awards.



Playbill for Animal Crackers at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Hadaam, Connecticut, 1992.

It took almost a year for the producers to find another theater to reopen the play for an extended run. Justin Kirk played the young man this time and we opened at the beautiful Promenade Theater in the fall of 1996. It was a great critical success. Julliard School of Music required all of their students to come see it. Isaac Perlman came as well, and told Justin and me, "Watching this play, I felt that it was written for me." It ran until April of 1997.

After that I did *Nine Armenians* in Los Angeles, and then *Old Wicked Songs* again at the Geffen Playhouse in the fall and early winter of 1997. While on the West Coast I also took on the role of a hard-nose judge named Callahan in *The Practice*, a television series about lawyers, which turned out to be a recurring role.

RTE: Did you like television?

HAL: No. Television on the level I was doing it wasn't satisfying. I was told by one producer that I was like someone coming into an entry-level job with forty years of experience. And that was true. It was almost mechanical, in

that there were no line rehearsals at all. They would just tell you where to stand and you would repeat your lines as they filmed. There was no process.

Six Broadway Plays

Finally in 1999, I got a call from my agent in New York to come back and do an audition for the part of Herr Schultz in the first national touring production of *Cabaret* with Sam Mendes directing. We talked, I sang for him, and as I was leaving, the casting director came out and said, "You've got the part." That production got me out of debt and I stayed with *Cabaret* from that September until July, 2001, almost two years. Later, I did ten months in the same part on Broadway, which was the only time my name appeared above the title on any Broadway play.

RTE: A quick list of all of your Broadway plays?

HAL: I made my debut in *On Your Toes* in 1985, then George Abbot's *Broadway*, which was 1988, *Grand Hotel* in 1989-1991, and *Nick and Nora* in 1991. The next was *Cabaret* in 2002-3, then *The People in the Picture* in 2012.

RTE: And your favorites?

HAL: In order of preference, the first was *Old Wicked Songs*, which was off-Broadway and the Pulitzer Prize Winner runner-up that year, in which I created the role of Professor Joseph Mashkin. Then, the three plays that I did back in Pittsburgh in 1971 to 1973: Guy Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*, which was really my return to the theatre after not having sung for two years except in church. The following year I was Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha*, and then Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*. Those three shows were crucial to my formation.

Embattled/Surrender

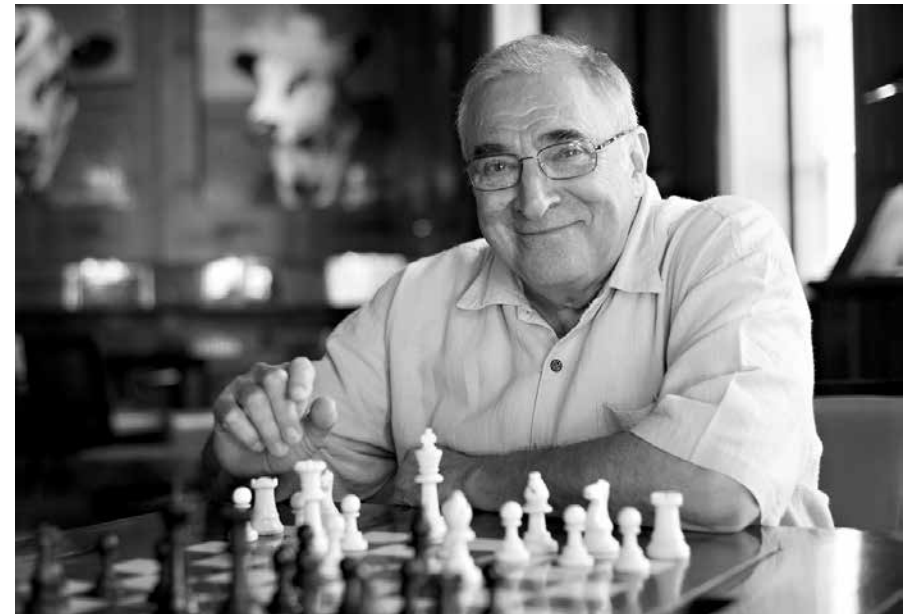
HAL: In about 2004, I inherited a house in upper-state New York from an old friend, which I spent the next nine years fixing up. During the previous tour of *Cabaret* when I was having trouble with insomnia, I'd begun drinking wine to help me sleep. But habits like that can have consequences and the practice continued for many years. Finally I received an inner direction to stop drinking and to be celibate. I thought, "What is this about? I'm not hav-

ing relations," but as you know, there is more to celibacy than abstinence.

I stopped drinking for awhile, only to start again, and the inner command came back even more forcibly. I said, "Alright," and felt that I'd surrendered to God. I experienced two days of feeling on top of the world, as if I was in God's hand, but on the third day, without any warning, I went and poured a Martini, and then another and another. The next morning I felt something inside me say, "You've committed the sin of Adam, you disobeyed Me." That was my last drink, and a few weeks later I joined AA. Being in AA has helped my understanding of my obligation to God and to myself; depending on Him every day is a choice with no other acceptable option. Through all of this, the Liturgy of the Hours has been my rock, and last year I became a Benedictine lay oblate at Mount Saviour Monastery in Elmira, New York.

The last Broadway show I did was two years ago, 2012—*The People in the Picture*, about a troop of six Polish actors in pre-WWII Poland, after which I became seriously ill. That illness prepared me for death—I remember being unconscious and seeing that death was right there, a line that I could cross, and it didn't frighten me. At that time I really felt that my life was over, a feeling that continued until fairly recently.

RTE: What are your plans now?



HAL: By God's grace, I hope to finally do the Gospel of John. It can only happen if it's a true calling as at this point I don't know if I have the capacity to memorize the gospel. My idea has always been to tell the gospel story as the Apostle and Evangelist John would have in old age. It would complete the circle.

Pilgrimage: A Work in Progress

RTE: Have you ever written anything of your own?

HAL: Yes, I started a musical play called *Pilgrimage: A Work in Progress* when I was at Raphael House and worked on it for over twenty years. I completed my most recent version along with the music in 2001, though I'd like to do one more revision before it is performed.

There are three characters in *Pilgrimage*: a young man who is seeking, an older man who has lost his way and is looking for answers, and an older woman who is kind of a *staretz* character. She has no visible means of support and lives like a homeless person, yet she ambles about all day singing to God. She also gives away money and it becomes very obvious in the play why that is and who she is.

RTE: Can you read us a passage?

HAL: Alright, this is the woman explaining to the young man about why she sings:

Singing is a wonderful spiritual practice. It teaches faith and opens the heart and soul to God. Monks and nuns for centuries have sung the ancient Gregorian chants. They learn a technique of blending in with one another, an abandonment of ego and self to become one voice. They learn to imagine a stream of sound flowing through their body.... As they sing a phrase, they take hold of the stream and become one with it, releasing their hold as the phrase ends.... It is the music I so look forward to hearing one day. But for now, it just comforts me to know that it exists.

This explanation of Gregorian chant in *Pilgrimage* is actually one that Margaret Hillis used in the Chicago Symphony Chorus, about how as a musi-

cian you join to a sound that is already sounding, and ride that sound to the end of the phrase, then let it go.

RTE: Wonderful. This brings up an interesting question. Traditionally some Christians, including some Orthodox, have not been in favor of Christ or the saints being portrayed on the stage or screen. What do you think of this?

HAL: It's absolutely true that no one can play Christ; no one can do justice to playing God. That is impossible. But that is not to say that the Holy Spirit can't use an artistic medium. In a sense, when you are reciting the Gospel in church it is a drama: you are quoting Christ, you are saying Christ's words. In the Gospel of John, it is John remembering what Christ said, but these are Christ's words and the Holy Spirit is in them. I don't think we can limit the Holy Spirit. God can only reach us where we are. In my case it took years to understand the most basic things, and God had to use the theatre to teach me because that was where I was.

The actor's partnership is with God, with greatness, with genius. Even actors who are not religious at all will acknowledge that their best performances have come from a place within them that was out of their reach. It came through them. Any artist I've ever known would say that. God is the artist within us. I'm just a sinner, who struggles day by day to find God's will. ✦