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This interview was conducted with Dennis E. Catrell, Professor Emeritus of Theatre Arts, on October 29, 2009, at his home in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewer is Tamara Belts.

TB: It's October 29, 2009. My name is Tamara Belts and I'm here with Dennis Catrell, Professor Emeritus of the Theatre Arts department at Western. He worked there from 1966-1999. We're going to do his oral history. Our first question is: How did you happen to come to Western?

DC: Well, I wanted to leave the community college I was in, since it was in my home town back in Flint, Michigan. I started making applications to colleges. In 1964-65 I was not really attracted to an offer I had in Mississippi. Then I did interview at a Lutheran college down at the south end of Lake Michigan and I was attracted to that because it was near Chicago, which was my stomping ground when I went to Northern Illinois University. But the story really is that I made an application out at Western as well. I remembered when I was a kid, I had this sort of history book of the United States and I opened it up and there was this sort of hand-drawn, hand-colored map. Where there were forests, there were trees kind of growing straight up and where there was water there were fish leaping out of little waves and there were mountains. There may have been some other icon too. But the only place where all of them were clustered was out here. So I took my infantile best bet and came out to Western.

TB: Excellent. So who hired you and what was the process? Was it Bunke?

DC: It was Bunke. In those days, as was common in much of the academic United States, theatre, speech and hearing, audiology, all of that stuff was lumped together in one huge kind of department. And so it was at Western. I was hired by one Sene Carlile who was the department chairman at that time. I came and had an office and I think it was an old toilet at the end of a hallway on the top floor of Old Main. So after I had the effort of climbing all those stairs in the morning, I had the indignity of being put in this tiny little room as well that was my office. But I didn't spend much time there; I had another little cluster of spaces for doing design work, in the eves of Old Main, since we were on the top floor. And then of course, over to the Auditorium where the scene shop was located on the stage.

TB: Oh, my gosh.

DC: It was like that for the first three years, I think, when I came here. I was the technical director and designer. I began immediately politicking to get that changed. But yes, I had some interesting experiences with that because there were classes in the Auditorium, there were huge lectures in there. I forget what—humanities lectures or something. Then of course there were the rehearsals for the plays and occasionally music programs, as well as other kinds of presentations. So it was a little hard to get in there and build scenery. So sometimes around three or four o'clock in the morning I would work. But I would share the space with organist, David Schaub, who came into practice at that time. I suppose most people don't recall that the Auditorium has a gigantic fully equipped pipe organ. That hasn't been played I expect, since the

Baroque organ was installed in the Concert Hall in the music wing. But that was some very strange times for building scenery and hearing Dave. I would be painting and he'd be playing the organ.

TB: That's cool, that's a nice story. Could you tell me a little bit more about the speech department, what it was like at the time? Did everybody get along being in that big department, because within ten years, you would form a new college?

DC: I recall that it was fairly agreeable. I don't remember any particular overt contentiousness between anybody. I expect there were the typical kinds of people stepping on people's feet. Must have been twenty people, with lots of different interests, you know. I think the one thing that kept us more or less together was that everybody had to teach Fundamentals of Speech, Public Speech 101. I don't know if everybody did but that was something that was shared, and I certainly taught it along with stage craft and other things.

But Tom Napiecinski was the head of the theatre area and Gayle Cornelison was here at that time, he was the children's theatre person. He subsequently went down to Sunnyvale, south of San Francisco, and established the California Children's Theatre Program which he operated for many years down there, as a professional program. And Dr. Byron Sigler was another faculty member. Don Adams was the costumer at that time. And I think that was pretty much the whole theatre crew at that time.

I remember Paul Herbold, the speech professor and instructor, I remember he was, at that time not too many years away from having been a pilot in the Air Force and I think he had been a radio announcer. He was quite a personality in those days. Dr. Laurence Brewster was sort of the second man in charge in the speech department next to Dr. Carlile. Then Loren Webb who was the head of speech and hearing, I don't know what it was actually called at that time. Loren went on and was actually Provost for a while and had various administrative jobs, and I think retired several years after they built the new space over across the campus. Dr. Erhart Schinske was a lovely gentleman. I was always profoundly amazed by looking in his office, which had at one time been tidy stacks of paper that he passed out to students, but which over time had become a complete tumult. Yet he could still lay hands on things in there, it was amazing.

TB: He wrote articles for *FAST*, little poems and some—I've seen his name on different little things, commentaries about campus.

DC: He was a charming gentleman. After he retired, he would walk by my house with his weird little dog, Tinky, from time to time. They lived half a mile away. And I think that's pretty much the whole crew that I can recall.

TB: Well Engdahl and Flanders.

DC: Yes, Flanders. Mark Flanders was there for only a year or so.

TB: Didn't he die?

DC: He died, yes. What was the other name?

TB: Engdahl.

DC: Engdahl, yes. He was the forensics person. He was here for a couple years and then went down to a private college in Oregon. And I can't say the name of it, a highfalutin private college. He was a real champion with his debate teams. Larry Richardson replaced him and carried on with that tradition. So that was 1966 and about 1971, we picked up lock stock and barrel and moved over to College Hall; from the top floor of Old Main over to College Hall. Those were all of course converted dormitory rooms. And so I had this vast office, by comparison. Even though it was dark as night in there, tucked up against the hillside on the back of the building, but I thought I was in heaven.

TB: So what was campus like in 1966? I think it was a pretty exciting time, wasn't it? A lot of new professors got hired in the early to mid-Sixties.

DC: I was so busy that I was not much aware of what was going on with the campus. It certainly was growing; it was exploding as a matter of fact. Subsequently I became aware that there were lots and lots of people hired around the same time and shortly after I was because the campus just grew like crazy. Then there was the establishment of the other colleges: what do we call those?

TB: Fairhaven and Huxley; and Fine and Performing Arts, the School of Education and another one (Ethnic Studies) all kind of got started in 1976.

DC: That's right. The cluster colleges, I think they were called.

TB: Yes, that's right. So could you tell me a little bit more than about how you built the theatre arts program during that time and which ends up being Fine and Performing Arts and separates from speech?

DC: Well I was personally very hampered by the situation in the Theatre Arts department. There was no vehicle to transport anything, so I used my own personal vehicle, a van, for three or four years or more. Moving stuff and students so we could build things on the stage, which was okay if we were working on the stage, but we also used Old Main Theatre. So that everything that we built had to be moved over there. Then I'm not sure what year it was, but around, I would think 1969 or so, the campus planner at that time was—

TB: Bartholick, George Bartholick?

DC: Actually it was our senator,

TB: Oh Barney Goltz.

DC: Barney Goltz, yes. So he was after Bartholick, I think, yes. So I was down talking to Barney Goltz frequently about whether we could do something and I guess with Dr. Carlile as well. So eventually something got done. These apartment buildings over here which—there's the old hospital and then associated with them is this string of—

TB: Oh, right.

DC: Right in the middle of those, down on State Street, you can see an old stone building.

TB: Right, the armory.

DC: No, not the armory. It's made of the same stuff but it's in the next block up here, this side of that old hospital building. It sits right into the hill and that was the boiler plant for the old hospital when it was operating. Somehow they got a hold of it for me as a scene shop. The hospital at that time was owned by—he was converting it into apartments by the guy that had the Cliff House and the Top of the Towers and I'm drawing a blank, I know his name as well as I know my own—Bolster.

I remember meeting him down there in hip boots, mucking the place out. At any rate, it was a funky old building; it was almost close enough for students to walk to, although I carried many of them back and forth. I still used my van to [transport] things down here but it was a much better deal. It was really the thing that made it clear to me how limited we were. I mean—resource limitation--was that I was the guy where the pressure point was. People who were directing plays expected the scenery should be there, and rightly so. But it came out of my hide. So there was a kind of conversation between several people, Larry Hanson over in the art department, Phil Ager in the music department, and Gene—I can't think of his

name, in the English department—Gene, oh he left years ago [Eugene K. Garber]. I worked with him on grants for several interdisciplinary arts programs. Gene—maybe it will come back to me.

At any rate, we kind of discussed things amongst the three, or four, of ourselves. They were having similar kinds of sensations, of resource limitation and that it seemed to be unfair competition. We of course were buried in the speech department and they were otherwise buried in chunks of the old arts and sciences. So we began to talk amongst ourselves and a little further afield, amongst the faculty, and decided that we would attempt to simply devise a petition that we could get the faculty to sign that—we were being very careful not to talk about things breaking up or taking away, but that we wanted to get better allocation of resources towards our areas of interests. So we got it signed pretty much by most of the faculty of the arts areas. Finally the English department, that aspect of it, pulled back. They were not seriously inclined to leave the humanities. But music, theatre and art were.

I was one of the people that wrote and handled the petition. And one day I got called into President Flora's office and charged to do something about it. He says, —Yo've got this petition you've given me. I want you to make a plan and something that we can work on and then present to the Board of Trustees," which all subsequently happened. Frankly I don't recall my part of it very much more than that. I followed his instructions to prepare something. And so in 1976, that became a fact.

There's a kind of an interesting parallel to the story about the scene shop. First I said we moved off the stage down to the basement of the old power building on State Street. About two years later we were moved again, and this time to the basement of—the building that was a cannery, you know Pacific American Cannery. It's now the train station. So we were in the basement of that building. Still I'm driving my car back and forth.

Eventually (this was after the department was formed, I became the department chair) the armory was acquired in that one dollar deal from the state. And so once again, the department moved. By this time there was a vehicle and there was somebody else who was working in the scene shop, Roger Germain had come on board about that time. That was in probably 1973, something like that.

But parallel to this moving of the scene shop around was another piece of our operation, the costume shop which also changed locations. When I got here in 1966 it too was located in the PAC green room area, actually the basement where there were a couple of toilets and two mirrors. Costume storage was under the stage. And of course at that time the orchestra pit wasn't operational, it was just a big empty space with racks of clothes. So there was some effort to remodel that area down there. Miller Hall had just been, I think seismically upgraded or had some work done on it. At any rate, there was a big basement space over there, so the costume shop was moved from underneath the stage over to Miller Hall. And it was there for several years. And again, I think the last president to live in Canada House was Bunke. Somebody may have lived in there for part of their presidency, but eventually it became available. So the costume shop moved over there and joined Canadian Studies who were on the second floor. So at least there was one time where they were not underground. Then they were there until the remodel of the wing of the Auditorium which created the costume shop. Where it partially is now, at least is a classroom. I understand it has now moved again to a warehouse, Haskell Business Center. But it has way outgrown itself.

But that's been kind of an endless movement, both of those things. Still all of it is an attempt to try to get resources. And effectively the objective of the attempt to create the College of Fine and Performing Arts was to try to get to a level of where we could effectively compete for resources of all kinds. I think we all had dreams of other things as well but I think they were pretty unformed—identity, so on.

TB: Well what about some of the other campus activities? I know my boss wants me to ask you about the Library Advisory Committee [which you were on] for a long time, or Allocation Committee.

DC: I was on it from the beginning to the end.

TB: Eight years, she said. So she would love to hear what you remember of that experience.

DC: Well I was chairman of that committee for all that time.

TB: Did DeLorme appoint you?

DC: He did, yes.

TB: Okay.

DC: It was a matter of dire straights when that committee was formed. What I remember, maybe most of all, was the mathematical formulas that were created and generated to create fairness when it came to the matters of cutting or allocating resources. There were mathematicians and economists who worked for weeks on these permutations. I remember going over them and trying to explain them. There had to be something like that because there was essentially no rational way of splitting the pie any differently than it already had been. So we had to take into account [things] like usage and cost and growth factors and on and on and on. All of these were put into a formula. And over time people became at least accepting of it if not totally comfortable. There were some areas that lost some funding and those that grew a little. But things got better over time, and the formula worked pretty well. But I remember we talked nitty gritty about allocations time after time. People had to present their budgets, but they really tried to work within these frameworks. It was so different. You'd hear from, Mary Terey-Smith from the music department was on it for years. Oh and that lovely gentleman from Huxley—nearly blind.

TB: Oh, Dave Engebretson?

DC: Yes, Engebretson. And Robbins, did you say?

TB: Yes, Lynn Robbins. He's also in Huxley though.

DC: Yes, he was there for awhile too. Anyway, lovely people, just brilliant people, working their hearts out to try to accomplish a good end. And I remember Diane Parker. I spent hours and hours with her trying to formulate agendas that would be accomplishable, in the times we had, that would address the right issues. It was a real education for me.

TB: Now how did DeLorme happen to pick you? Were you a good friend of his or did he know you had worked through some of these things before?

DC: The only thing I can think of is that, once upon a time when President Ross held a kind of retreat for department chairs. At some place out on the lake—

TB: Probably Lakewood.

DC: Lakewood, yes, or Wildwood [Camp], whatever it's called. I was attacked by a bit of enthusiasm and thought that there were some good things happening there and tried to create some follow up to it. I did a kind of study and sent it around. For a while, a few department chairs continued to meet, which included Larry as a matter of fact, he was head of the History department at that time. And we just got together Wednesday afternoon or Friday afternoon for an hour every couple weeks and talked about things. There may have been anywhere between six and a dozen of us at any given time and finally it petered out. It may be from that that Larry when he became provost and found this challenge—

End of Tape One, Side One

TB: What do you think are some of the most significant changes that you've seen at Western over the time that you were there?

DC: Well one thing that I was going to say about the library, a significant change, and that was, of course, the digitizing and the computer catalogue. That happened right near the end of my watch. And I remember early on going and arguing: *Why isn't this a bigger issue for the Library Committee?* I mean it wasn't an acquisitions issue, but it was called the Library Advisory Committee and so I kept advising that we should be moving toward getting this system changed over to something electronic, it was happening all over. But there was another branch of the campus government, and I remember there was a physicist who was the chair of that. And he was opposed to the idea of the electronic library or didn't think it was a good use of money, or whatever his reasons were. But he was an obstacle to overcome. I remember making several forays to try to get him to put it onto agendas for the governance system. And eventually that happened. But I think the pressures were just so great and they were far beyond me and the committee. I remember we got a little bit involved with it and boy what an entanglement that was! Sheesh, I was way out of my league. Some people started talking to me about retro---

TB: Oh, retrospective conversion.

DC: Retrospective conversion; I thought what does this mean? Oh, okay, I finally got it. But anyway that was a huge change. Well certainly the change from a college to a university which happened early on, that was a big deal. And I think the establishment of the cluster colleges was also a big deal. They really set the personality of the university, in very important ways I thought. Yes I think those are kind of the main things I can think of. Oh there is another one though.

This also goes back to another hard time at the university; it must have been in the early Eighties. Paul Olscamp was president at that time. And he really made the university bite the bullet with the changes, with the limits that the legislature was imposing. I know there wasn't any cheating, there wasn't any padding. And the university got rewarded for that.

TB: So he really made you hold the line on the budget? Because I know in the early Eighties there was a big budget crisis.

DC: Yes. And other universities were fiddling and fiddling, as I recall. As I make out the story from this distance, anyway. Olscamp really tried to play it square. And what happened was that the Legislature said you can't grow, but you can keep the money from tuition. We're not going to change the cap, but there's some kinds of revenue that you can keep. And that went back into quality. So the institution stayed about the same size for a while. But it kept getting better. They were able to hire better faculty and the reputation of the institution turned around.

When I came here, I would guess that application acceptance rate was in the 90% [range]. If you wanted to go to college, you know, you just apply and you get in. But because of that change in the Eighties where quality became an issue and the institution became recognized as a better school, the demand went up. So consequently those admission rates went down. And that phenomena I think is still with it. Western has got a real good reputation and students apply like crazy to try to get in. So I think that was a really important move from just a so-so teacher's college to something pretty good.

TB: So what about—you didn't say anything about Bill Gregory.

DC: Oh Bill Gregory, yes. Well after we moved to College Hall, Bill Gregory showed up on the scene. It was like in—I can't remember.

TB: I think it was 1971.

DC: I was going to say 1972 but I don't remember exactly. He brought a completely different attitude toward things. He had been in the professional theatre for years and so he had a different expectation. And he was ambitious. We worked together pretty nicely. We wanted to do things that made our kids'

experiences here better. We both knew we were not the University of Washington, we can't compete with them. But if we work hard we can give these kids experiences that they can't get at the University of Washington. And so we had a very active academic year production program. We did at least six shows. And in 1972 we started Summer stock.

TB: Whose idea was that?

DC: That was our idea, the two of us. I designed and he directed six, and I directed two or three of the nine shows we did each summer. And we did a touring theatre program. We did a study abroad program. It was just wildly active. The students in the directing class all directed plays. The first level had to direct scenes and the second level directed one act and the seniors, the third level had to direct full-length plays. And we had a few graduate students who had to do thesis productions. So we had stuff coming out of our ears. And all of that meant the undergraduates were getting work. They weren't just observing or sitting in classes. We really believed that that's what it was about. Bill and I worked very hard; we worked very close together for that too.

He was supportive of the idea of creating a college. Then he got really interested after it was established and he was appointed as the interim dean. So he got a taste for it and then was elected the first dean. I had something to do with that too, as a member of the selection committee. As a matter of fact, I heard Bill was not the front runner. I figured that if we could get into him into third place, for his ego, it'd be a good thing and so I managed to do that. And along the way I heard that the first place person was going to pull out and then the second person refused the money.

TB: Oh, so he won by default.

DC: He won, yes.

TB: Excellent.

DC: But I figured we should get him pushed up as far as we could. Then as the college was established, that was the establishment also of the Theatre Arts department and I became chair at that time, as Bill became dean.

TB: How long were you chair?

DC: Twelve years. So I finally saw myself catching up to myself, going around the track. That was like 1976 I guess to 1989. Well it was a long time anyway. Yes, 1976 to 1989.

TB: Wow. And then in 1989 is that when Robert Sylvester came?

DC: No. I think Bill was still dean for a little while after that. But then Sylvester did succeed Bill, about that time. And then it's kind of musical chairs in the dean's office.

TB: Is there a reason for that? I mean obviously there's been something—is it all the artistic personalities that cycle through? Obviously Sylvester's more music than theatre arts ...

DC: I really don't know. I think with Sylvester it was personality. He was a kind of a tender thing. He had been a professional cellist. And I think he worked in conservatory situations. I just don't think that it suited him very well. He kind of fell out of favor I think with the faculty. And you know, he was kind of put over in Old Main.

TB: Yes, Distinguished Lecture Series or something.

DC: Yes, to kind of just hold him down, an office until he could relocate. So you know it was not a good fit for a while. Then Bert Van Boer succeeded him. And I thought that Bert was okay. I mean I thought his management was more effective. But I retired right about then. So I don't know what happened, whether that was an uprising of the natives or whether it was Bert just got tired of doing it. But for my money, Bert was fairly effective. And I thought he dealt pretty even-handedly across the departments. And he was followed by—

TB: Well Ron Riggins has done it a couple times.

DC: Yes. Ron's been interim twice that I know of.

TB: Oh and also [Linda Smeins].

Interruption

DC: Then, and I only met her one time. In 2005 the department invited me back.

TB: Carol Edwards.

DC: Carol. Carol Edwards. The department invited me back for a quarter to teach and sit in the chair while the regular chair was on sabbatical leave. Two weeks into that there was an uproar because that chair's wife was not rehired into her position and so he quit. He resigned from the chair so they could both look for jobs elsewhere. None of that occurred; they're both still at Western.

I had to replace the chair while I was there. It was the second time I had done it. I was in the chair when I retired. Tom Ward, who had been chair at that time [stepped down]. I expected the last quarter I could just clean out my office and leave. Well I didn't, I was sitting in the chair. So I had to replace Tom while I myself was leaving. Anyway, at that time I met Carol. That was the only time—I mean, I saw her several times but I actually had a meeting with her about twice. But she seemed like she was really on top of things, but I guess she decided to go back to Texas.

TB: Be closer to family or something.

DC: Yes. And I have met the new dean and I think he is really something, outstanding.

TB: Excellent, excellent. So what about students? Did you see a lot of change in the students over the years?

DC: Oh boy. Well like many of the students that I still stay in touch with who were early students, you know, we laugh over the fact that they probably couldn't get admitted to Western now. One of the things that I can say was consistent in the theatre area was there were always hard-working and talented kids. But it's no joke academically, you could see this surge coming, starting in the mid-Eighties. Those kids were just much more academically able than their predecessors had been, as a group, and it showed in the classroom. There was something in their competitiveness as well. So that was a real clear sea change in fact of students, between when I got here and what happened twenty years or fifteen years later.

TB: What do you think are some of the highlights of your career or your time at Western?

DC: Well being elected to the chair in the first place. I think that living through that first season of summer stock. I remember Bill and I stopped after the last show and were just hugging each other, we had made it. We'd established that it could be done. And my first study abroad to England with twenty students, that was a real high point. My last years teaching I worked mostly with graduate students. I was very proud of that. I felt like we had really established at that time a corps that was good. And I felt good about the

students who were turning out and about the program. I was very proud of gaining my full professorship with only a master's degree, that I could earn that respect from my colleagues.

TB: Excellent. Do you have any disappointments from your time at Western?

DC: Not that I didn't put behind me. I'm sure there were lots of them. But that was the name of the game, to try and overcome those things. Now I don't remember.

TB: That works. So overall did you think Western was a good employer? Are you glad you made that decision to come to Western?

DC: Absolutely, absolutely. I remember having a beer with a couple of students late one night down at a bar after a rehearsal. And they said, "What are you doing here? Why are you here?" You know, and they were very congratulatory and making me feel like I was something important. And I said, "Gez, where else could I do this? You may think I'm great, but the rest of the world doesn't."

This is wonderful. You can't eat the scenery but at least it's here. I could make an effect. It's a small place, I could get to the administration, I could argue my case. It was not so impenetrable that you couldn't make changes. And changes needed to be made. I take a look now and I think: *Look at those buildings, they're gorgeous, just boom, boom, boom.* Theatre has still got its building to go somewhere sometime, but things change and things happen. I've kind of lost touch with the department over the last ten years, staying busy with my own stuff. But I'm hoping that they're carrying on with operations that allow, especially the undergraduates to do lots of theatre.

TB: Are you still participating in some theatre yourself?

DC: I am; at the Theatre Guild. And I regularly direct radio dramas at the museum, the [American Museum of] Radio and Electricity. As a matter of fact, we've got *The Pride of Dracula* which happens tomorrow night. And I have acted in pieces. I did a show in summer stock a couple of years ago at Western. He calls me his mentor, but an ex-student teacher in White Rock, who is also a playwright, wrote a play which we performed at the Vancouver Fringe Festival two years ago. And I performed at the Bellingham Theatre Guild and I've directed about four or five shows there. So I stay pretty busy.

TB: Excellent. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to talk about?

DC: No, but I figure I can email you.

TB: You bet. Well this has been great, this has been great. Like I said, we'll transcribe it and then send you a copy and you can make any additions or corrections. So if you don't have anything more to say, I'll shut it off.

DC: It sounds good. Thank you.