

Interviewee: Keith Decker

Interviewer: Bryant Taylor

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Project: Monterey County Theatre Alliance

[00:00:39]

Bryant: One. All right. So today is April 13th, 2020. I am currently interviewing Keith Decker who is an actor, playwright, currently in Monterey. I'm currently in Richmond, California. We are recording via Zoom because of the coronavirus social distancing and all that. So my first question... I actually introduced you already, but I always like my interviewees and narrators to introduce themselves. So can you please tell me your full name?

Keith: My full name is Gerald Keith Decker. My professional name is Keith Decker. I'm with SAG-AFTRA.

Bryant: Nice. Can you also tell me the date in which you were born, if you feel comfortable.

Keith: July 8th, 1946. [inaudible 00:00:53].

Bryant: Right. So the very first question I'd like to start with is, can you recall your earliest childhood memory?

[00:01:04]

Keith: This would be... My father was in the air force. We lived in Puerto Rico. I was three years old, and I remember these trucks would tour the neighborhood, blowing DDT all over because of the mosquito outbreak. And I remember my brother and I gleefully playing in clouds of DDT. So there's nothing wrong with me. But at Puerto Rico, I remember it quite well, mangoes, lobsters. Like I said, I was three, and then we moved again and again and again. I think that started with the process of wanderlust that I've continued.

Bryant: Can you tell me the story of how your family began to move, was it due to military?

Keith: Yeah. Air force. I think with great respect, my mother, she adapted so readily to this constantly moving because as soon as we arrived in a new place, it was set up. It was decorated, curtains, everything. I remember when we arrived in Puerto Rico, she was perturbed because when she opened the refrigerator, there was nothing in there but rum and coke. Then I see, Puerto Rico to March Field, California, Valdosta, Georgia, and then finally my dad retired at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and we were there for seven years. And then my mother, she had enough. It was uncomfortable for us there being from California, they assumed we were Yankees and we were not welcome. And finally mother said to dad, "I'm going back to California." So went to Pacific Grove, she found a lovely house there, bought it. And that's where I started Pacific Grove High School, which was a short walk away.

Bryant: So to go just a little further back, you and your brother played in chemicals. Obviously as a child, I assume that there wasn't a lot of thought to it, but what did your mother think or your parents think for playing [crosstalk 00:03:40]-

Keith: That's an interesting question because the revealing of the DDT problem only came later. Because I'm a naturalist also, I had a radio program on natural history, but it was only when they discovered that peregrine falcon eggs, the shells were breaking, and they discovered that that was DDT. I don't think at the time in Puerto Rico that there was knowledge, in other words. It was necessary to eradicate the mosquito problem. That's what they were concerned about, which was also a health problem with malaria, et cetera. I don't think that we were even aware. It's like running through a cloud or something, but it was probably not that much of a submersion in it.

Bryant: So when your mother found this house in Pacific Grove, this is where your family decided to settle down really and build a life. Were there other family members in the area, or was it just your intermediate family?

Keith: It's just our family. I have an older brother and three sisters and a brother. The only reason she wanted Pacific Grove was... My older brother was born in Salinas in 1944, Salinas Air Force Base. And she used to shop at Holden's department store, which is downtown Pacific Grove. And she always remembered the town. So when we left in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, she determined to move to Pacific Grove. It is a lovely village. It's just a wonderful place to grow up. Yeah. And that of course that's where school is. I started as a sophomore at Pacific Grove High School.

Bryant: Okay. So you were traveling for pretty much, up to 15, 16 years of your life?

Keith: Yeah.

Bryant: What do you remember most about traveling throughout those years?

[00:05:52]

Keith: Sitting in the backseat in the sedan, a large sedan. I don't know, an Oldsmobile or something. My mother would roll a cigarette for my dad, and then she'd take tortillas and she would roll baloney tortilla with a little mustard and pass them to the back seat. She had a tube burner hot plate that she would take at hotel rooms, when we stayed at hotels. She was able to cook a fabulous meal on a two burner hot plate in a hotel room. We were a very close family and still are, constantly communicating with one another. A lot of love there, I tell you.

Bryant: Do you think you can describe your family members to me? And the personalities and for you, what do you think the most memorable story is when you had all of them together?

Keith: Probably my brother.

Bryant: Your brother.

Keith: He was living in Imperial Beach in San Diego and went to his landlord and said, "I'm going to build a boat in the backyard," and landlord said, "Fine." He put together a 40 foot hull and the landlord came by and he said, "That's a nice boat, it's not finished." He built a 42 foot trimaran, Norman Cross design. Trimaran in the backyard. And I think it cost him \$18,000, last I checked. But he assembled this boat, had it carted to the bay there in San Diego and set sail and spent many years sailing the Caribbean, Cuba. He wrote several articles about it, but we're all really proud of him. And the tragic thing is that he was off the coast of British Honduras in the middle of the night, cruising along at about 12 knots and hit an uncharted reef. The coast guard eventually found him on the reef because he had radioed a warning, but because he radioed a warning, several boats, fishermen came with weapons and started rifling, and there's nothing Loui could do. So then the coast guard said, "Well, we'll let you take whatever you need." He took the bell and the charts and whatever he needed. And then he took one more trip back and he went down inside the boat, took out a metal can of diesel fuel, doused the hull and burned it. He said, "If I can't have it, nobody can." And that was the end of his career as a sailor. But the stories... He's written a couple of books and there is a delightful read.

Bryant: What kind of games did you play growing up?

Keith: Monopoly. Monopoly was quite popular. Yes. Checkers. Dad loved checkers. My dad, he was sweet, sweet man. And very, very much in love. I remember seeing them dance. They'd turn up the radio and dance, and that's such an endearing

thing. But the games, yeah, Monopoly, checkers, a lot of games on Christmas. Christmas morning, waking up and seeing how this Santa Claus had arrived. We used to put out a pie and a bag of Bull Durham. And then the next morning when we woke up, of course there was a slice of pie missing, but there was also a stub cigarette in the ash tray, and we knew Santa Claus had been there.

Bryant: Santa Claus smokes for y'all.

Keith: The interesting thing is, even to this day, I have that bag of Bull Durham and I hang it on my Christmas tree every year. I still have it. That's fun. That's fun. I think that's kind of what family is. It's that close bond, that wonderful bond of just sharing moments like that, It's so important. It's so important for all of us, the world over.

Bryant: So you came into Pacific Grove High School as a sophomore. And that was around what decade, what time?

Keith: '60, '62, '63. I graduated 1964. And certainly my brother and I are a bit tall, both tall and we were encouraged to join the basketball team. So we played some basketball. But what really drew us in was track and I became very, very good at running the mile. And shall I tell you this story of the theater?

Bryant: Yes, yes.

Keith: I was running track and then it was practice and then a young lady, a classmate came to me and she grabbed me by the hand and she said, "Follow me." I said, "Where are we going?" She said, "Just follow me." We went to a classroom and it was Shirley Tepper's English classroom. And I walked in and I looked around and I said, "Why am I here?" And Shirley stood up and said, "Hello, Keith, would you please read this paragraph?" And it was a script. So I took it and I read a text and I was about halfway through reading the paragraph when she stood up and slammed her fist on the desk and said, "Where the hell have you been?" I was cast as the father in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And subsequent, I worked with some actresses that have done quite well for themselves. Michelle Buehler was one of the daughters in the movie, *Fiddler on the Roof* and Layne Littlepage, went to New York and studied operas. It was just the most talented people, and it was my first play. But we were requested to immerse ourselves in that era of the takeover of Germany at the time and the family unit. Some of the best drama's in confined spaces and you can't be more confined than a family hiding from the threat outside. And not knowing much about theater, I became accustomed to looking at the world through the character's eyes: "How did he feel? How did father feel when he read the ceremonial prayers for the meals and suddenly there's a noise outside? How did he feel about it?" And I remember opening night, backstage waiting to crawl into the entrance way,

thinking to myself, "I have my own time machine. I am going back in time." And I still retain this belief that if I believe it, the audience believes it. And it was Stanisloskii who said, "The truth, nobody knows good theater, but everybody knows the truth. That's the beginning of my career. I remember walking down the street, walking home, thinking about marquee lights, fame, fortune. First play. And then, historically in Carmel, there are three theaters, the Golden Bough Theater and the Studio Dinner Theater. And I was encouraged by my friends to audition at the Golden Bough Circle Theatre in Carmel. And I was cast and we did the Tempest by William Shakespeare. And then the Miracle Worker, I was the step son in that, and Venus Observed. And learned backstage how to apply makeup and how to wear a paper collar, for instance. Victorian times they wore paper collars, so they always look fresh and clean. How to put on a tuxedo and tie a tie. And I was learning from just some of the finest people, Betty Fallston, Gertrude Chapel, Floss Larson and Ruth Maryann McElroy, who was a comedian and she worked with the W. C. Fields in Los Angeles. And I didn't realize at the time that I was in an authentic, semi-professional theater. I was learning from the people there. And that began... Again, I was a little impetus to continue doing what I was doing because I was successful, encouraged in fact.

Bryant: So we have this sort of jump from an athlete to being a drama student. Were you able to continue both or did you decide track was fun, but theater is really what's calling me. What was that process like for you making that transition to a different world?

Keith: Interesting that you ask that question because I was so successful in track, I couldn't, I just couldn't. We would go to track meets outside all over Northern California. Now, I was running the mile, I ran a mile and I think my best time was actually 4.42 seconds, which was okay. But Bob Chris was running the mile. In 1963, he ran a 4:15 mile. So when we went to these track meets, we'd take first and second place in the mile run and astounded the coach. Our runner sweaters were covered with metals from all these different track meets that we won. And we were particularly good in the distance medley, which is the quarter mile, half mile, mile. And I ran a half mile, two minutes half mile. And the other team members, they were... Johnny Johnson was spectacular, very fast. He ran the 4:40. Again, you relate the success in theater to the success in the sport and I think you've raised an interesting question there, in that as long as you're encouraged, as long as it beckons you, it says, "You can do better, come on, keep going." And I guess in that sense they paralleled, but as soon after leaving high school, I did not pursue it. That was when I escaped.

Bryant: Can I ask why you chose not to pursue track and field?

[00:17:47]

Keith:

I was much more interested in theater and I took a semester at the Monterey Peninsula college and they had a small theater there and had wonderful experiences there. Morgan Stock was the theater director at that time. Bless him. But I wanted to get out, I just wanted to get away. And that's when I... In the newspaper, if you looked in the more jobs at the time, you could find somebody needed a car delivered somewhere. So I found out by looking at the paper, there was somebody needed a car delivered to Denver, Colorado. And so, I wrote a letter to my mother saying I was going to go camping in Big Sur or something. I made some excuse. But I loaded up a little pack and I drove this car to Denver and then started hitchhiking to... I wanted to go to the East coast. And I discovered that the world's fair was occurring in New York city. And so, I went through great difficulty because of the threats on the highway, but I got a ride from truck drivers. And one time I got a ride from a chef who had a job in St. Louis and he had to get there quick and he said, "I'm going to sleep in the back, you drive the car." It was a big Buick. He says, "Don't worry about the speeding tickets, I'll pay them all." Because he had to get to St. Louis. And then from there took a bus to New York City. And I was walking down MacDougal street, ducked into a cafe and said, "I just hitchhiked in from California, can I get a job?" They said, "Yes, start tomorrow 6:00 AM washing dishes." And I worked there for seven, eight years. Eventually I was managing, became day manager, but kind of living on the streets. I found a vessel, that it's a harbor, \$168. I could student vessel, go to Calais. Then I went with a pittance in my pocket and a pack on my back. And I wanted to see Paris. So I did. I was there at Paris. And then of course, dear mother had to bail me out. There I was penniless and unknown in the streets of Paris. And I went twice to London. Once to London, once to Paris and then back to New York, just drifting. Not really knowing that much about auditioning per se. And that was the key. I didn't have the tools. I went to a couple of auditions in New York, but I was too green, much too green. And then finally arriving back in California, and the owner of the Studio Dinner Theater requested that I perform there again. So I returned and we did those silly little British comedies and stuff. I did the first production of *The Fantasticks*, which is the longest running play in New York city. It closed in 2001. But our piano player was with the original production in New York and I got to play the man who does, the Indian in there. Oh, that was great fun. Really fond memories of the Studio Theater because they'd have dinner and then they could bring their wine. And by the time that curtain open, they were well on their way to... We used to go, "What's the play tonight? It's the *Stewardess in the Closet*" or something. Because it was always some goofball English comedy. And that was great theatrical form. I love it. And then, let's see. It's hard for me to follow the timeline because of... I got cast as Count Dracula at The Western Stage. Now this is going up. This is 1976, I believe. Elaborate, huge production on the main stages in Salinas. And I got to play Count Dracula, which when you start to

pursue a character who historically was so evil and so brutal, a leader, Vlad Dracula, in fact he existed. Bram Stoker based a novel on this person. And that's when I decided that I can't play results. I can't go out on stage and say I'm going to be the evil person. I had to study the play as though I was bound by lust. When you take a positive motivation in your character, a positive motivation, the audience is much more accepting of you. And I remember signing autographs after the play and a lady came up to me and she goes, "When they pound the stake through your heart, I really felt sorry for you." A sympathetic Dracula. He was just driven. He was just driven. Oh, another fascinating story. I was a waiter at the Village Corner in Carmel and nice little Bistro, and I auditioned for the American Conservatory Theater and I was accepted. And so, I told the patrons of the restaurant that I was going off to schools to learn acting. It was great institution, the ACT in San Francisco. I arrived there and the director of the program said, "Well, Keith, it looks like you've got a scholarship." I said, "I've got a scholarship? Well, I didn't apply for a scholarship?" "Well," he says, "It's paid for." And it's 10, 15 years later I find out I'm at a funeral for this gentleman in Carmel, and someone told me that he, being a patron of the restaurant, had paid for my education.

Bryant:

Wow.

Keith:

Yeah. The spirit of generosity runs deep, it affected me because he had passed away. I didn't have an opportunity to thank him, but it was anonymous. But again, I guess blessings is... But ACT, was a wonderful experience. The program was intense, very intense. And I got to work with Anna Deavere Smith and Mike Hecht and other people. And then after the production of Count Dracula, I auditioned at the Pacific Conservatory Performing Arts in Santa Maria. And I got accepted there. And I was there, rented a little room in a house. And did the theater all day and all night. We take classes during the day, rehearse at night, help build a set, paint the set, total immersion in theater, which is I think one of the ways to really get focused. And I was there for a year. It's a two year program, but I had met a woman and fell in love and moved back to Pacific Grove and continued in the theater. But me and my lady friend raised two children, Keegan and Hart. And we're still very close.

Bryant:

Yeah. One of the questions that I want to ask you is that, I know theater has been a really big part of your life, and I also know that you had gone to Hollywood for a little bit. Can you tell me a little bit more about that experience and how the transition between being in theater and then also going to Hollywood, what the transition was like for you also when that occurred?

Keith:

Well, one of the more remarkable characters that I've been pursuing for the last 30 years is a writer known as Robert Louis Stevenson. And I've kind of made a side career on that with many, many productions. I've written a play about him,

a one-man show that occurs in Carmel Valley where he was found. And through these performance pieces, I met a director his name was Lamont Johnson. And we started talking theater and he happened to be producing and directing a ABC movie of the week and it was being filmed in Santa Clara. And he asked me to come up and audition, and he said he had one, so it was one line, "Try to define empathy" was the question. And the answer was, "I ain't got 'em." So then I returned home and then I got a message from a casting in Los Angeles. I got a featured role in this ABC Movie of the Week, bingo. And I had a three week contract and we shot it in Santa Clara. And I was the, as I say, a featured role. It was Annette O'Toole and Pamela Reed and Michael Ontkean. So when the film was going to be released, it took a while to release it, I decided I would be in L.A. When it hit the screen nationally. I wanted to be in L.A. So I packed it all in, drove to Los Angeles, slept in my car in Santa Monica, found a room, picked up a drama log magazine, which is the casting magazine. And there were two theaters that were auditioning. So I decided just to immerse myself in theater while I was there. Auditioned at the Long Beach Playhouse and also in Pasadena, another theater. I got lead role in both plays and that kept me very busy. I had to deny one. I decided on Long Beach Playhouse because when I went into the lobby and I noticed the Rock Hudson's picture was on the wall, that's where he got his start. And the play was Captain's Paradise, another English comedy. And then from there, kept working in the theater: Glendale Center Theater, Pasadena and the Night's Bridge Theater. And then met several actors and directors in Hollywood. So I was doing... theater was the main thing. But I decided, "Okay, the movie's coming out. The ABC movies is finally going to hit the screen." Well, it opens between Seinfeld and ER, you got George Clooney inside, but I don't think many people saw the ABC Movie of the week because you're up against two of the hottest television programs at the time. But of course, some people did see it and I started getting background work, extra. She's So Lovely with Sean Penn. And then I remember one morning Bill Dan's Studios calls me, "Hey Keith, can you get to Malibu? Quick, get to Malibu." "All right, sure. Yeah." I had a little 280Z at the time, so I zoomed out to Malibu, and there's Timothy Dalton and Nastassja Kinski are filming a... It was a film called Time Share in which he played a chef. Evidently he got on location, he knows nothing about cooking. I had put on my resume that I was a trained chef. I was, I went to cooking school. Big restaurant career. So I'm at Timothy Dalton's arms slicing, dicing in sauté. Just another curious incident. I was in the kitchen and in sauté you kind of take the sauce pan and you flip it to get this ingredients all fried. And I'm merrily flipping away, well, costume would put me in a rather fuzzy sweater. The sweater caught on fire. I didn't notice at first, it was a kind of a mohair theme and these flames were pretty up high and the grips and everybody, they started grabbing blankets and stuff and they throw it over to put out the fire. Well, the next day when we continued filming, I noticed that they had several fire extinguishers in the corner. But the wonderful thing about that was, I was happy to be involved in a production of the Glendale Center

Theater, you can't take it with you. And at lunchtime, every day at lunch, I sit down with Timothy Dalton and we talked theater. He's deeply involved in the theater. Actually given up film, he's back at the West End in London working there. But when he realized that I was involved in this production, I had a 7:00 call. He did say to the director, he said, "We're going to do his scenes first." So I got priority to get these scenes done where, sautéing and dicing and shit. And was able to get back into the car and then make my call back to the theater to perform in the theater. So generous in that way too. But nothing came of Hollywood. I was there seven years. I worked in a hardware store in Beverly Hills, because I know hardware. Who are my customers? Jack Lemmon, Nancy Reagan, Sidney Poitier, Carl Reiner. Do you want a joke? So okay. I'm working in the hardware store, and so someone calls me and says, "Hi, this is Barbara Streisand, I wonder, can you get me one of those door viewers for the door?" And I said, "Barbara, you're in luck. People who need peoples are the luckiest people in the world." I'm sorry.

Bryant: I know that song. So I totally get it.

Keith: I'm sorry. But it was Carl Reiner, a sweetheart, we talked theater with... Everybody was so enthusiastic. I even knew that the President of Paramount Studios. So he says, "Hey Keith, send me your headshot." So two weeks later he comes, "Hey Keith, send me your headshot." "I sent you my headshot." His neighbor, Howard Carl, he was the one that actually took in over as director for Ghosts that movie that one film. Somebody along the line sees the headshot, "Oh, that looks like my boyfriend, I think I'll put it over here." He never got it. But the other thing I realized was these actors, they can't help your career. The career, it's locked in and it may be, as they say, 100% luck, I don't know. But finally, they wanted me to be the Marlboro Man. I was ready and looking at it, and meant billboards all over the country advertising everything, and then they called me and they said, "I'm sorry, they just passed a ruling that there's no more tobacco advertising." So I'm out of a job. Then Verizon Network, this was early on, Verizon cast me as a Senator in a film about Washington, D.C. And the production manager called me and said "Keith, we've decided to go non-union." I said, "I can't do this." They said, "Well, we're disappointed." I said, "Well, I'm disappointed you're the most wealthiest production company and you're going to go non-union?" So again, disappointment. Then of course, I was there for the writer's strike, the WGA struck against the producers, and the Screen Actors Guild, at the time the Screen Actors Guild, we joined forces with the Writers Guild, and supported their strike. And we're marching down in Hollywood Boulevard with hundreds, hundreds, hundreds of people, a big event. But this brings me around to another point. The producers and the writers decided that they didn't need actors. It's the birth of reality television, and that evolved into what we have today, reality TV stars. So I returned to Pacific Grove.

Bryant: What time did you return back to Pacific Grove?

[00:36:31]

Keith: September 11th, 2001, that very day. The last thing I packed in the truck, in a moving van, last thing I packed was a TV, because it was just tragic what was happening in New York, and there's a lovely little bar called the Rustic Inn, where we'd go meet friends there. A lot of ABC television people were there, and they were going to have a party for me, and my going away, and it was of course canceled because some of these people actually had friends that were in the Twin Towers. And I remember that night driving down the 101 and not a plane in the sky. But I just want to emphasize the fact that my decision to leave Hollywood, I could have hang on, who knows what would've happened? But I thank my lucky stars that I decided to do what I did because I returned home, and I was able to stay with my mother and cook her meals, and I take her on trips. Sidelined, my mother was raised on Alcatraz. And I used to take her to San Francisco, and we'd go down to Alioto's in the wharf, and we'd have a meal and she could see Alcatraz in the distance. I'd show her school where she went to school, Galileo High School. I was able to spend the last years of her life with her, cooking her meals, and taking care of her. And then arriving home one night and finding her on the bathroom floor with what do they call a Subdural hematoma, taking her to the hospital and the family gathered around for her final days. So I think the decisions we make in life, they're spontaneous, but at the same time there might be just some little notion that maybe it is the right decision. I think, like I say, to spend that time with my mother, it was so rewarding.

Bryant: So we've talked about your career in theater. We've talked about Hollywood. Something that I want to ask you about is playwriting. You mentioned a little bit that you wrote a play about a specific character. How did you begin to get into playwriting?

Keith: Actually in the reverence of Robert Louis Stevenson, it was my intensity to tell the story. Nobody knows the story about him. How he very nearly lost his life. Had not, again, somebody made the spontaneous decision to pick him up and carry him to a cabin and feed him and nurture him back to health. It wasn't just a desire to tell the story, and I always felt like if the story begins at that point, that crossroad, the time in his life when he very well could have lost his life. If you begin there, and then tell the story of how did I get here? It's in the sense of a flashback. That's the basic structure of the play. I've written, also a kind of a rough sketch for a film. I've written several short stories, but that's the only play I've written. The interesting thing about this coronavirus, being isolated and sequestered at home is now I'm reading in sequence. I read Becket, A man for All Seasons and Lion in Winter and they all contain the aspect of honor and God.

Becket uses God over Henry. Henry hates this because he can't carouse with Becket anymore. Beckett of course, is murdered. Thomas Moore and Henry VIII. Henry VIII wants Thomas Moore to do what he wants, he wishes. So the only reason I'm mentioning this is, this is actually influencing me to understand more clearly play structure because these plays are brilliant, Not only the time in which they occur and the seasons and how the influences have changed so radically over these centuries. Here we are dealing with many of the same issues. What is honor? What is God? What is our notion of what is important to us, especially in a hierarchy? But of course there are many brilliant places written about the common man too, but I think that's interesting. I had a job but I've lost my hours. I only work three hours a day now. My time is spent playing a guitar and reading plays and studying theater still. I have to say, here it is, 50 plus years, I still I'm so enthusiastic about the craft, about performance and storytelling. I was cast as the Wizard of Oz in a production which was canceled. I don't know what the future is, but I'm quite fond of guerrilla theater. And two weeks ago I put some posters around town and it said, "Keith Decker is going to give a dramatic reading of the Masque of the Red Death at Devindorf Park here in Carmel," and at the bottom, it said, "Keep your distance." So I went there with full cape, dagger and it was a reading, I had the script. The Masque of the Red Death about Prince Prospero going to his castle with his friends and welding the gates shut to escape the plague. But eventually the plague does enter. So there were about four people there, but I realized I didn't need an audience. So, I've got to keep working. I've got to keep working, what? So keep your chops. So that was fun. My friend here, I had him film it, but he's taking his time editing it because I'd like to see what it means to hear it, because here we are in essentially another plague. We have a serious problem out there and you can't hide from it. A group locally put out a post says, "We're all in this together," and I kind of feel that this situation is going to bring us closer together, all of us, because it doesn't discriminate. Interesting time we live in. Maybe it's ripe for theater, because theater is, as Shakespeare says, "To hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature and virtue around scorn her own image." That it's been with us since the beginning of time, my theory. But it says cave man, he lives in the caves and back in the Neanderthal times, his name is Og. Then his next door neighbor, Charlie and his lovely wife, Charlene. Well they go out and they come back home and they've got this big haunch of a Mastodon. They're cooking it over the fire and the family's there and they're... So Og's wife says, "How did you come by this great hunk of meat here?" And he goes, "Well, we are out there with our spears and we're hiding and they charged us and blah, blah blah." And Charlie's sitting over there going, "Stop it. Stop it. We found it in a ditch, whizz." That's the first theater. He's going to tell his dramatic story about stabbing this Mastodon when it's all a falsehood. Anyway, I digress. I told you you got to stop me.

Bryant: No, these are interesting. You're actually hitting a lot of my questions that I already had lined up [inaudible 00:45:44] stories so don't worry about it. I did want to kind of switch gears and kind of ask you, so you've done Hollywood, you've done theater, you've done playwriting what about all three of those things do you enjoy most? So what do you enjoy most about being an actor? What do you enjoy most about being an actor on screen? And what do you enjoy most about playwriting?

Keith: I enjoy film. I detest theatre.

Bryant: Really?

[00:46:25]

Keith: I have the worst stage fright. I recently had to play or had to, I recently was wonderfully cast by Tom Parks in a play called Lucky Lindy. Interview with Charles Lindbergh and it's two people on the set, but this was a small theater up here in Carmel. But I had 18 monologues and I had to know the life and history and motivation of Charles Lindbergh. And every night, every night I would walk out, I'd have to leave the theater, stand outside and say, "Why do I do this? Why do I do this?" I question. This is not a very pleasant time. But I had some early training with the Committee Theater in San Francisco that would be in the early '60s. And I remember Del Close, he was actually the creator of Second City and the whole creation of Saturday Night Live, Del Close. He said, when you, when you're off stage you breathe out, as you enter, breathe in the character. So that's what I did. I'd backstage and I keep on waiting for my cue and I say, "Okay, Keith, center, center, center, breathe out, breathe in Charles Lindbergh or breathe in Long John Silver, or breathe in," whatever character I'm playing. That's what I mean by detest because I go, "Why do I do this?" But film, I love the process. There's a short film in Big Sur called The Old Man And The Mountain Lion. And no, I don't play the mountain lion. But what a wonderful process. The Director Michael Harrington, he was so good, and we had these very expensive cameras, Red Epic. I don't know if you know camera at all. Hiking miles and miles into the wilderness and setting up the camera. And then he'd come out and he'd put his arm around me and he'd walk me a little ways and he'd say, "Keith, when we film the sequence, I want you to think about your father. Think about what it meant to your father to know that you were going to hunt down a mountain lion and how proud he'd be of you at this moment. Okay, Rolling, set, mark, action." And the interesting thing is that these were silent bits. It was all in my head as I walked, carrying the gun, tracking down this mountain lion. Then every sequence, every shot that we made was done the same way. He was a caring, very thoughtful and nurturing director, and that's what I look for generally. Even on the stage, the same thing. One character I really enjoyed was Captain Nemo in 20,000 Leagues Under the Seas. And that

was another true test, a true test of my abilities to command this vessel. But I succeeded, I believe. See what the creatives said.

Bryant: What are some of your favorite story/characters to write, to perform and why?

Keith: In other words, you're asking, were there some character that I would like to write about?

Bryant: No. What are some of your favorite characters to write about or to perform? What traits are you looking for in characters that you're like, "Wow, I really enjoyed playing this character. I really loved writing this character." What are some things that you enjoy about performing certain characters?

Keith: We did a production of Treasure Island at the Outdoor Forest Theater from a script written in 1912, and I found myself immersing into Robert Louis Stevenson's mind. He wrote The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, which is a duality. There are two people, there's Dr Jekyll and there's Mr Hyde. One of them is very evil and one of them is very kind. When I approached Long John Silver, Long John Silver would cut Trelawney's throat, but at the same time make a sandwich for little Jimmy Hawkins. That duality of character I think makes a more fascinating, a more intriguing story. There's many... I mean it's scattered over 50 years span and all the characters that I've played. Again, I think I would go back to that sympathetic vulnerable, no matter who... Sherlock Holmes still being vulnerable. But I don't know if that answers your question. That I am definitely involved in life and in the pursuit of a career and have found a great comradery and a family. Here's an interesting anecdote and I don't know why I think in this way. I was born in '46 so I found a book about all the theater that was done in 1946. So I opened it up and there's that Scottish play starring Michael Redgrave, and I go down the cast list and who's name is at the bottom? Lamont Johnson, the director of the ABC Movie Of The Week. Lamont Johnson worked with Michael Redgrave and I put that connection together. And then when I was in Hollywood, I was in the Screen Actors Guild offices and there was a notice on the billboard, and there were free Shakespeare workshops with Lynn Redgrave, Michael Redgrave's daughter. And I attended these workshops. It was a remarkable experience.

Keith: And I'll just share, again, share a story. 150 people, maybe it varied, but you put your name in a basket as you went in the door, but Lynn would lecture and perform, just marvelous performances and then she'd pull a name out of the basket. She'd read the name. You had to go up and perform a monologue for her from Shakespeare. Now I went week after week, and some of the students who got up there were brilliant doing the St. Crispin's speech from Henry V or Romeo and Juliet. And also some of these younger kids, they'd get up on stage and they'd absolutely just collapse because they were just too nervous, couldn't

do it. Well, she drew my name and I went up on the stage and I was prepared, the studio actors in Hamlet: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue." But it began by going off stage and yelling at Ofelia, "To a nunnery go," and then marched on stage and then there are the players and "Oh, I got the rustics here, I've got to teach him how to act." And I had a dagger and I pulled a dagger, I go, "To hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." I had made this choice early on in the monologue and it was over, there was applause. Lynn Redgrave came over to me and she put her arm around me and she took the dagger and she goes, "Of course it's a mirror." And she leaned over and she whispered to me, she says, "Keith, you belong here. Now go out and let's run this again." But what a delightful, bless her. She passed to cancer, I think probably maybe a year after that. But again, it's just another anecdote in a long list of anecdotes in my career. I actually think I've worked with the best. I've worked with these people and have been accepted into that family. The SAG-AFTRA had a party in Hollywood for Gloria Stuart who was in Titanic, the movie. And she was up giving her little speech and she goes, "In the '50s we did three, four, five films a week." And the producers would come to her and she said, "Gloria, you're working too hard. We're going to send you to a little village called Carmel-by-the-Sea and you're going to work in a little theater doing Summer Stock at the Golden Bough Circle Theater." And that's when I realized it was, as I said earlier on, semi-professional theater. She worked there in the '50s. But there again was that circle, that wonderful circle, the family that curious little dance called life, which if you take notes, you can connect the dots in our little constellations. Thank you. This is fun.

Bryant: Thank you. You're welcome

Keith: Anything else?

Bryant: Oh yes. One of my last questions is, what impact do you hope to leave in the Monterey County Theater community?

Keith: Just to be remembered. Well, the opportunities here, they're extensive. We've got the Golden Bough Theater, which is an Equity Playhouse, the Outdoor Forest Theater, the Carl Cherry, and there's the little Paper Wing Theater over in New Monterey, which I've worked in. There's just an opportunity to work and to continue working. As far as legacy, or impact, or anything like that, I have no desire. My desire is to carry on the work, and hope that eventually, someday I could maybe pass on the knowledge, the legacy, the approach to developing character or create in a role for younger students. I've often thought that I'd like to go... I remember the Carmel Foundation, which is a senior center here to do... Why not introduce the elderly to theater? You can start any time. And also,

it's a wonderful educational format. You've got to know where you're coming from, what you want and how to get it, and you have to know history. Everything that goes on around the character that you create: what is the temperature outside of the building? Who's president at the time that you're... Or King at the time? What are the outside circumstances which compress this character? All of those things. I would like to... I think as far as to answer your question, that would be my desire. To leave my print in that sense as an educational tool. It's something to be learned.

Bryant: Cool. So we've reached the end of our interview, but before we officially close, I do have what I'd like to call a rapid fire fun questions. And so, we're going to go through about six questions, and your job is to answer as fast as you can. So whatever comes to your mind, that's the answer. Are you ready for it? All right. On your Mark. Get set. Favorite color?

[01:00:09]

Keith: Blue.

Bryant: Favorite vacation spot?

Keith: Yosemite.

Bryant: Favorite book?

Keith: Favorite book?

Bryant: Mm-hmm (Affirmative).

Keith: The Horse's Mouth by Joyce Cary.

Bryant: Favorite movie?

Keith: Jojo Rabbit.

Bryant: Near beach?

Keith: Carmel Beach.

Bryant: Favorite song?

Keith: People Are Crazy And Times Are Strange by Bob Dylan.

- Bryant: Favorite play?
- Keith: Oh, favorite play. Ooh, that's a tough one. They're too many, I think they're all my favorite. It's play, it's theater.
- Bryant: And favorite. Oh, that was it. That was the list of favorites.
- Keith: Favorite play, that's an excellent question. I read one recently called Full Circle, it's a one act. I like concise theatrical events. Boy. Well that's a tough one. They're all my favorite.
- Bryant: Thank you so much for taking the time out to do this interview with me. Again, circumstances have been crazy, but I appreciate you so much for finding a way to do this. And actually I do have actually one last question. Is there anything that you'd like to add that perhaps I didn't ask or that you would like to say to close out this interview?
- Keith: Just, I thank my lucky stars that I've chosen to do what I do because it's given me family, and it's giving me joy, it's giving me inspiration. It's given me so much. And I would recommend to anyone, give it a whirl. The world will only be richer because of our knowledge of theater. And we all have a habit in us. Can we acknowledge this lovely studio where I'm sitting in?
- Bryant: Yes.
- Keith: Michael Buffalo has been generous in allowing us to conduct this interview in his studio. Carmel, what's it called? Carmel Makers? Oh, he's not listening.
- Michael: Maker Space
- Keith: Carmel Maker Space here in downtown Carmel. And I just would like to acknowledge them. Thank you.
- Bryant: Thank you, Michael, yeah.
- Keith: Anyway, maybe I'll write a play about the Coronavirus 19. I saw the sequence of people in London, they performed a play from one window to another window.
- Bryant: I'll do it, except [crosstalk 01:03:43]-
- Keith: Do you know why they use the term Guerrilla Theatre? In San Francisco, in the '60s, there were these pop up theaters. They'd drive a flatbed truck down to Financial District and then they'd perform a play about the Vietnam War or

something, that they would just pop up theater. That's why I was inspired to do the little piece in Devendorf Park. And yeah, magic happens anywhere. Thank you so much. Really enjoyed this.

Bryant: Of course. Thank you so much for doing this. Yeah, so thank you. You have such beautiful stories. Hopefully when this is all over, I'll get to see your work, you perform. That'd be really cool.

Keith: Good. Good. Thank you. Carry on. Keep up the good work and thank you CSUMB for doing this. Yes. Yeah, all right. Okay.

Bryant: It is officially 11:25 AM and we are ending this oral history.

[End of Interview]