



Oral History Interview of James Kaufman

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Interviewed By: Fatou Yatma Thiam

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Jim Kaufman, the former managing director of the Modern Theatre and the Theatre Department at Suffolk University, discusses his educational background, early career, and his start at Suffolk University. He describes the evolution of Suffolk's theatre program and the university's growth from the 1990s until 2021. He also reflects on the key figures and moments that defined his experience at Suffolk University, including the value of collaboration and the importance of student-led projects.

Subject Headings

Kaufman, Jim

Suffolk University – History

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Interview Transcript Begins

FATOU YATMA THIAM: Hello, it is 2:14 p.m., Tuesday, November 29, 2022. We are currently meeting online on Riverside.fm.

My name is Fatou Thiam. I am a student in Professor Reeve's *Getting Started with Oral History*. This interview will be made public as a part of the Suffolk University Retiree Oral History Project. Today, I'm interviewing Jim Kaufman, the retired managing director of the Theatre Department and the Modern Theatre at Suffolk University.

Prior to this recording, all parties have completed a consent form so that this interview can be made public at the Suffolk University Moakley Archives. With us here today, we also have recording operator, Jonathan Wardle, and Professor Patricia Reeve.

So, hi, Jim. Today, we'll be focusing on your professional career and your time before, during, and after working at Suffolk. So, to start off, can you tell me a little bit about your early adulthood? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to college?

[00:01:04]

JAMES KAUFMAN: I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, part of a big extended family there. A big loving extended family who I'm still close to, who were immigrants from Russia and the area around Lithuania, some of whom settled in Kansas in the 1880s. And I still consider myself a Midwesterner, even though I have lived in the Boston area most of my adult life.

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I went to the University of Michigan, where I studied psychology. I did a lot of things before going to graduate school. I lived in Europe for several years. I worked in research on child development and the daycare system in Sweden. And I returned to Kansas City, where I worked in the deinstitutionalization of the big mental health campuses that was going on in the '70s at the time.

And I made my way. Serendipitously, I got involved with theatre. I had no experience with theatre. I met some people and took a class, a theatre class, on a whim. And what do you know, I found myself invited to work with these people in Boston where they had a theatre company. And so, at a certain point I moved to Boston, and I continued to work in the theatre. But I also had to make money, to earn a living — I also continued working in the field of psychology.

There are a lot of interesting stories I can tell you, but eventually what happened is that I went to graduate school at MIT and got a degree, a master's degree in city planning, and my focus was on cultural policy and planning. At a certain point, I answered an ad that was in the newspaper — in those days, people looked for jobs in the printed medium. And I interviewed for a job with a fairly newly established theatre department.

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And the person who hired me was Professor Marilyn Plotkins, Dr. Plotkins, who I think somebody is probably going to interview at some point. This was like in the late '90s. And she had grown the program; she had persevered and worked hard and finally developed a separate theatre major and a separate theatre department. And that was the beginning of a tremendous amount of growth. I was fortunate enough to be working in that program as it really started, as Suffolk started to change, as the university started to change and expand, and really change profoundly, I would say. And simultaneously, the theatre department and the mission changed as well. So, I can go into more detail if you want to ask me about that, but I suppose that's the most important part of this oral history.

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Anyway, just to sum up, I had a very diverse set of experiences well before I ever got into theatre. And then, once I got into theatre, I did a lot of things, even before Suffolk. And I won't go into the details, but it's been fun. I can tell you, it's really been fun.

THIAM: Well actually, we'd like to hear about that. Specifically, I think it's interesting that you studied psychology as your undergraduate program and kind of moved into theatre later on.

What was the thing that kind of drew you to stay in that area, instead of keep on working in psychology?

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KAUFMAN: Well, actually, I started learning about myself in a new way. I kind of accidentally got involved in a theatre class; there was no intention to do that. And this class was very inspirational, and I started seeing myself as a creative person. And I don't think I knew that before. And I somehow found a key to understanding myself in this different way. And also, working with other people through the theatre in collaboration to develop something, I found to be exciting and compelling in a way that was different from what I had been doing before.

And so, I went on that track. You know, I resisted doing it completely, quite frankly. I kept having work, interesting work in the area of psychology. I worked as a researcher in a really interesting study of the socialization of first-admission psychiatric hospital patients, inpatients, and how they came to — they and their families — came to assimilate a certain perspective about themselves in the psychiatric system that existed. This was 40 years ago. And then I also worked in another really interesting project which studied what were called polydrug abusers; so, people who were addicted to different kinds of substances depending on the circumstances. And essentially, the premise there was that they were self-medicating themselves for some kind of clinical condition that they had. That was our starting point. And we were looking at the benefits of a cognitive therapeutic approach versus a kind of more traditional in-depth therapeutic talking therapy kind of thing. It was more about, would changing the behavior really help change their thinking about themselves? Or, did you need to go into this deep, kind of therapeutic process to help them work through their clinical condition?

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KAUFMAN: Anyway, so I continued to do that, and I felt that theatre was a way of benefiting the world in a new way for me, that we could really rouse people to understand their world and take action in their world through the interaction of theatre. I was never that interested purely in show business or entertainment. It always had this underlying purpose of mutual enlightenment about politics and the way the world is. That was one of the big motivations of getting involved

in theatre. It felt like it would be a great tool to do that. I was with a group of people, an ensemble, that worked together for about ten years. And we've all gone our own ways, but it was a very, very fruitful period for me. I actually started making documentary films, producing documentary films, so I spent some years doing that. Those were usually about people in their own worlds.

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Anyway, I've done a lot of things, as you can see. I could send you my description. But I was really, we had been — my spouse and I had been living in Tennessee while she was working at the Oak Ridge National Lab. And then we decided to relocate back to Boston — Cambridge actually — and I needed a job, so I started looking. We had two children, very young children. So, we both started looking for work and I — actually, we were talking about it last night. She got a job at Boston University; she's now a professor of electrical engineering at BU. And I got the job at Suffolk at almost the same time after we relocated here from Tennessee. And so, we had to figure out, okay, what do we do with our one- and our three-year-old when we're at work? So, we had to [laughter] get childcare, which is not easy to do.

Anyway, your life interweaves with your work. There's no way they're not separate. And as you go on, you'll find out that these decisions [laughter], they're always — there's an impact of one on the other all the time. There are a lot of other little streams and creeks and gullies and small valleys. But I ended up coming to Suffolk in, I think, '99, at the same time that my wife started working at BU as a professor. So, crazy, huh?

THIAM: Yeah, that is interesting.

[00:13:44]

KAUFMAN: It's not been a path, it's not been a straight path. It's been a really weave-y path, but it's been great.

THIAM: Yeah, for sure. So what positions did you start at, in Suffolk University?

KAUFMAN: Well, at first, I was the general manager. And this was when the program, Suffolk was going through a big change. It had primarily been a commuter school, and there were a lot of working adults in the school, and its identity was shifting and it was growing. The university was really growing, and they were starting to become really a regional university. And since then, it's grown into an international university with a large international presence, which is great.

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But when I got there it was still, I could call the vice president of finance on the phone and ask a question. The layers of bureaucracy were much smaller and you could really get — and the dean was tremendously supportive. It was much more run as, it felt more like a family, I guess, at that time. Its footprint in the city, which had been kind of restricted to a couple blocks on Beacon Hill, that was starting to change, and it was really — so physically — it was starting to grow. I don't remember when the library, 73— oh wait a minute, the library on Tremont Street, what's the name of the library?

THIAM: It's the Sawyer Library, I believe.

[00:16:05]

KAUFMAN: Yeah, I don't know when that came online, but it's a beautiful library. And so, the university really started to develop a new identity and became much more of a residential university than it had been. And of course, it had a campus in Senegal and it had a campus in Madrid. So, it really had a much, much larger vision. And there were some really smart people who were figuring it out.

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KAUFMAN: And likewise, the Theatre Department. Right when I arrived, somehow Marilyn Plotkins had lobbied, advocated, to get a studio theatre in the old Pallot Law Library. So, she was, in addition to managing the C. Walsh Theatre — which is now very luxurious condominiums, which was built in 1921, I think, and had been the main law school building and law lecture hall — there was now a studio theatre. And we saw a great increase of interest in students who wanted to go to Suffolk.

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And I think part of that was tied into greater changes that had happened in Boston. In the '70s and '80s, Boston was still in the '70s — Boston was still kind of a depressed and repressed, unwelcoming city. And Beacon Hill, believe it or not, the North Slope of Beacon Hill was kind of a shabby place. And so, Boston itself was financially, economically, going through big changes as it moved into the financial sector and tech. And so, I think Suffolk and a lot of other organizations kind of rode the back of that into the '80s, and then well into the '90s. And so, Suffolk, I would say, it went on a big building spree. President Sargent and his team raised money to build Sargent Hall. There were, I think, a couple of dorms added. So, it really expanded. And I think the Theatre Department, likewise. I think, when I got there, it was a new major. I think there were three students. And now, I figure there are maybe 80 majors. And Marilyn was the driving force behind that. It was really great, great times.

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So, I started off as general manager. I was dealing with, “Oh, gee, do we have the right person doing tech? Do we have the right people running the office? Do we have the budget to do what we want to do?” All of the operational issues, which also included dealing with neighbors on Beacon Hill who weren't that happy to have a theatre operating there and a bunch of students hanging around the street.

So yeah, that would take us into — so we really developed a program. We hired some great, great professors and a great staff who taught me a lot. And at a certain point, I don't know how familiar you are with Washington Street, but Washington Street had been sort of the urban hub of Boston, with shopping and movie theatres and newspaper offices. It really was an exciting place. And then the suburbs, after the war, the suburbs came along, and people stopped coming downtown, and it really became fairly derelict, and also the adult entertainment district.

KAUFMAN: Anyway, at a certain point, as Suffolk was expanding, this was around the year 2000, a little beyond. They started realizing that there was a possibility of expanding onto Washington Street and moving off of Beacon Hill, which was problematic. Some of the

buildings were old and filled with bad stuff, and weren't really functional for 21st century education. Expensive to operate. And at a certain point, the university saw that the Modern Theatre, an historic theater, movie theater, was basically abandoned and the city wasn't maintaining it. I wasn't privy to the negotiation, but the deal was that the university could get the Modern Theatre, which was a wreck. It was collapsing, the roof was collapsing, birds were flying around. You should try and get some photos of that, actually, the old and now the newer.

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So, the city and the university made a deal, and Suffolk took over the Modern Theatre and was able to get air rights to build dorms on top of the Modern Theatre as long as we kept the Modern open as a public amenity. That was the way the deal was determined, I think. And so, I think the Modern, I think I'm going to say that it opened in 2010. I sent you an article about, *Car Talk: The Musical!!!*, I think.

THIAM: Yes, that's correct.

[00:23:45]

KAUFMAN: Which was the perfect thing to open that theatre. And so, at one time we had multiple theatres. We had the C. Walsh Theatre, and I sent you the article about the Europeans and the Ottomans, that concert.

THIAM: Yes.

KAUFMAN: So, we did a lot of big things in there, both academic scholarly events and public events. We would have civic debates in them. And we had many, many kinds of programs that involved the public in these theatres, the Modern and the C. Walsh and the Studio Theatre.

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Let me get back to the Theatre Department. So, what we staked our identity on was empowering students to create their own plays, to write them and direct them and design them, and to stage manage them. So that was powerful. Part of the Theatre Department's mission was enabling

students to really take on these leadership roles and to find ways to define themselves through the theatre. And that still goes on today. There is a lot of programming in the Theatre Department that's about student-created theatre. And new theatre, like developing new work was also a big thing that set us apart. So, we were operating these three theatres, and then historically what happened is that the university was still — they had built a new [building] — what's the building that's across from Sawyer?

THIAM: Samia Academic Center.

[00:26:04]

KAUFMAN: Yes. And so, they really looked at some of the buildings that they owned just a few blocks away on Beacon Street. They understood that they no longer worked as classroom spaces, as office spaces. As I mentioned, they were built over a period of years and kind of, they just weren't efficient anymore and so they decided to sell those buildings. That meant they sold the Studio Theatre, which was in the old Pallot Law Library. They sold the C. Walsh Theatre, which I regret that to this day. It was a classic old theatre that was nearly 100 years old and had a lot of great history, and really offered the university a lot of opportunities.

Anyway, so then we moved out of that building on Temple Street into the Sawyer Street building. And through a series of incredible — we had no Studio Theatre, and our large, large Theatre was gone, and then we had the Modern Theatre. So that left us without a studio, which is a primary place for students to learn and do their craft. It happened that the dean at the time, Kenneth Greenberg, who was a great supporter, he remembered that on the 12th floor of the Sawyer building used to be a men's dining club. I don't know, it was in the '20s and '30s, or something. And it had been broken up into little office and classroom spaces. Maybe it's on the 11th floor; I can't remember which floor it's on.

KAUFMAN: And when we found this out, we had been looking for alternate space that wasn't in a Suffolk building. When we found this out — and, once again, credit goes to Marilyn — she convinced the powers that be this is where we should have the studio theatre. And the university

got behind it, invested a lot of money and reassembled those rooms and that space into what is now the studio theatre in the Sawyer Building, which is a great, great space.

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So somewhere along the line my title changed and I became managing director; I went from general manager to managing director. And one other thing. There had always been professional connections to the Theatre Department, and they were in the C. Walsh Theatre. We had dance groups, we had music, we had theatre companies come, and our students would work with them. That continued in the Modern Theatre, and we had, and still have, many relationships with the non-profit Theatre community. And we have resident companies that come and perform in the Modern Theatre, which is a beautiful little [theatre]; it's perfectly sized for some groups. And so, through that initiative that's been going on for 50 years, really, 45 years, students have gotten to work with professionals. And that's a big part of our program, is to provide that kind of experience. Oh boy, that's a long monologue there.

THIAM: No, that's great. A lot of interesting points were raised. But I do want to get back to what you said about students collaborating with other theatres. So, I spoke to your colleague, Dr. Plotkins, and she shared that you really stressed the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinary learning. Why do you think that was really important for students to experience?

[00:31:23]

KAUFMAN: Why? Well, I'm kind of a — I didn't study theatre, per se. I kind of brought my life experiences to it and learned through doing. And maybe I projected onto the students that they should have this broad background, and one of the ways to do that would be through contact with different kinds of theatres that had different missions. Does that answer your question?

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So, I don't know, I mean, we had Shakespeare Company. We had an avant garde theatre company. We had a company that did adaptations of old classics. We had a German avant garde music ensemble. We had opera. I mean, really, lots of different kinds of ways of students

experiencing the relationship of people on the stage with people in the audience. Because it's endless.

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We also had several National Public Radio programs come in, and one of my favorites was a quiz show called, "*You're the Expert*," where usually a scientist or an expert drawn from the Suffolk University faculty was — a group of comedians had to figure out what this person did. Sometimes it was pretty obscure. But our students loved going to this because many of them were also interested in comedy. They were interested in all kinds of stage opportunities, not just, "I'm going to be in a play." So that was the idea, that they really get a wide range of experiences, and then do their own things. Does that help?

THIAM: Yeah, yeah, of course. That's great. So just give me one second. So apart from Dr. Plotkins, who do you think, who are some faculty that you also think contributed to the Theatre Department's growth?

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KAUFMAN: Oh boy. Well you can't, I mean, there are some people, amazing people. Wes Savick, who's a director of playwriting and the primary director, has put his stamp on a lot of what we do. And because he's ambitious, we've taken on these really big projects; for example, *Car Talk: The Musical!!!*. I don't know if Marilyn talked about that, but *Car Talk* was a very, very popular show about car repair, and much more. And fortunately, one of the *Car Talk* guys, one of the hosts, was a lecturer at Suffolk, and he was also close to, I think, one of our engineering professors at the time. So, we were able to get them on board with us creating this play, which was a spoof of Broadway musicals and also car repair shows. So, it was really hilarious.

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KAUFMAN: Wes conceived of this in every way. I mean, he wrote the music, he wrote and directed; it was just great. And then there's several other projects that he's created. One, I think I sent you the article where we did — he loves Thornton Wilder, this great American playwright

and sort of public intellectual. Wilder had written this group of one-act plays called, *The Seven Deadly Sins*," which had never been — several of them were unfinished. I mean, nobody considered taking this on, seven one-act plays, in one sitting. And he said, "We're going to do this. And we contacted the Wilder estate, and they were thrilled. So, we did the world premiere of this great work, which involved some alumni, as well as a student director. So that's one of his projects. And oh boy, so many. Here's another one that was — oh, geez, I can't remember the title of it. I could probably try and find it.

THIAM: *The Skin of Our Teeth*, maybe?

[00:37:13]

JAMES KAUFMAN: That one was great. But the one I was thinking of was — Sophocles has seven remaining plays, and this great theatre company and this really wonderful theatre writer/director, he adapted them so that you could do them all in one sitting. Four hours long. This was a big, big deal. I mean, who wants to go to four-hour-long plays? So, what we arranged to do was, when the audience came, during intermission, the actors provided them with box lunches. We really made it this community event that was pretty unforgettable. That was in 2015. Anyway, so Wes, he's been a powerful leader and with a vision that's really special.

[00:38:16]

And then, Richard Chambers, who's the current chair. Richard, he's a great artist, he's a great set designer. He designed the set for *Car Talk* and many others. But he's also a great teacher, and he brought a certain gravitas into the equation, and an administrative know-how that was really, really valuable. And so, I mean, I think that's partly why he's chair. But he and Marilyn, I would say, were very instrumental in the Creativity and Innovation Initiative, which is part of the undergraduate program. It was anyway when I was there three years ago. Did you take a Creativity and Innovation class?

THIAM: No, I transferred in this semester.

[00:39:26]

KAUFMAN: Oh, you did? Okay. Anyway, it's sort of a class where, it takes you beyond your boundaries, where you explore creating something. And Richard said, "Let's do this." It's called STEAM, rather than STEM, because you have the arts as part of the equation. And then, Marilyn really organized it so that — she sold it and was the leader of it for many years. I think she stepped away a few years ago. So, Richard's a great educator, as well as an excellent artist.

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And then I think when we hired — on his advice — we hired Jim Bernhardt, who's the current general manager. And Jim was the production manager for many years. Just super organized, rational. He knows how to do things both on a micro and macro level. And I think he's made a really profound — he really moved us toward a very professional model of getting the production end of our program together so that it was smooth. Art is very messy; it's very, very messy, and you need to have systems in place to deal with the mess and make things work efficiently. And Jim really, he tackled that and created that kind of efficiency that we were looking for.

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I mean, he wasn't the only one. There was also Stephanie. Richard was a big part of that. It was a group effort, but these folks really know how to do it. And there are other people I could talk about. I mean the whole team. Heather is a wonderful spirit and also a great professor of practice in stage management and arts administration. And then, we've had a lot of working artists come and be with us over the years who lent so much in their specialization. So yeah, guest directors, guest designers who really— and the students really benefited from that kind of experience working with these people outside the department.

THIAM: That's great. So, to get back to what you were saying about the Modern Theatre, when it reopened, it was greeted with a variety of performances, such as *Car Talk*, as you mentioned. So how did it feel to get all this new attention surrounding the theatre? And did it make major changes in the Theatre Department?

[00:42:59]

KAUFMAN: Well, it was very exciting. It opened around the same time that the Paramount Theatre opened, that Emerson owns. I mean, Washington Street in downtown Boston's changed so much. And so, it was really exciting to be in the center of Boston in that way. And I think it still is. You have the Opera House which also — these three theatres had been essentially abandoned. And it was the political; we had an enlightened mayor, Thomas Menino, who said, "We're not going to tear them down. We're not going to turn them into malls. We need this kind of activity in the center of Boston." And he was the one who — he wasn't the one, I'm sure he had a whole crew, but his administration negotiated with Emerson and Suffolk to open their theatres. And with Broadway in Boston, I think, rehabbed the Opera House. So those three theatres right next to each other, it's great, because it really brings people downtown again, which you don't see in a lot of American cities.

And how did it change the department? Well it put us — you know Beacon Hill, it was great. I mean, the C. Walsh Theatre, I don't know if Marilyn talked about that, but it was great to have that venue. And it was a big loss when it was sold. But still, it was on Beacon Hill. It's beautiful, but it's not right in the heart of Boston where there's so much activity. So, we started doing student shows there. It's really a little, gorgeous, little theatre that is a wonderful place to do shows. It's very intimate, yet it has a lot of great bells and whistles, like great sound and lighting systems. And we could show movies there, have concerts, really do a lot of different kinds of things. So, it helped us expand our identity in a major way.

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And I think for the students, when they did shows there, maybe there was more — since it was downtown on Washington Street, near Downtown Crossing, it gave them more exposure to a different kind of audience than was going to the C. Walsh Theatre on Beacon Hill. I don't know, I don't have the data to support that, but I think that's true.

THIAM: Yeah, I would agree with that. I feel like it's a very dazzling part of Boston now. I'm not too sure what it looked like before, but it's pretty lively down there.

[00:46:27]

KAUFMAN: Yeah, oh you wouldn't. It was kind of a deserted, depressing place; a lot of Boston was years ago when I first arrived. Anyway, yeah, go ahead.

THIAM: So, over the years the Theatre Department has put on a variety of performances that have touched on interesting political subjects, such as *Assassins*, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and, *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Why do you think it's important for plays to make social commentary or political commentary?

[00:47:04]

KAUFMAN: Oh boy. I'm not saying that entertainment. I love entertainment, I love it. And so, I think that's got to be part of the equation. But I also think that, I'm not sure if I can say anything eloquently enough. I mean, for me, personally, it was always — the reason I got into theatre, the motivation, it was partly to find my own self-creativity, but it was also a way of joining with people to have a kind of dialogue about what I thought was important in society, what we were experiencing in the moment, and to reflect on that together and to share ideas about it and experience it together. And so, really great, great theatre, I think, can do that.

[00:48:28]

Now, I love entertainment, too. By the way, there's a really great play called, *The Play That Goes Wrong* at the Lyric Stage, which is hilarious. I can't imagine they're doing it, but it's just — if you want to be entertained and just laugh for an hour-and-a-half, that's a good one. And that's important, that release; it's an emotional experience. Theatre can be a very emotional experience, which I think is good. It takes us out of the everyday ordinary, if it works.

THIAM: Yeah, I would agree with that. I feel like it's just easier to connect sometimes with theatre than to actually sit down and have these difficult conversations sometimes.

[00:49:24]

KAUFMAN: Yeah. And to be in a room with other people, it's different from TV and going to the movies because it's all live. So, you actually see the actors on stage, and you're breathing

together, and laughing together, and crying together. So, it's this communal — it can be a wonderful communal experience.

THIAM: Yeah, for sure. And I also think, on the artist's part, it's also pretty cathartic as well, to be a part of this experience and to be able to put your thoughts—

[00:50:05]

KAUFMAN: Have you done theatre yourself? Music?

THIAM: No. [laughter] I'm a psychology major. But I am interested in art therapy; that's what I'm thinking of pursuing.

[00:50:22]

KAUFMAN: Wow. What area of psychology are you interested in? Art therapy and—

THIAM: Art therapy. Mostly counseling and helping therapies.

[00:50:31]

KAUFMAN: Okay. Wow. That's necessary nowadays, more, I think, more than ever, it feels like people are very stressed out.

THIAM: Yeah, for sure. And there are just a variety of ways for people to express, I guess, their pain, especially after the pandemic. Or more for nonverbal people, or children who just can't really say it out loud.

[00:50:58]

KAUFMAN: Yeah, yeah.

THIAM: Do you have an unforgettable experience that has really shaped your time at Suffolk that you can remember?

[00:51:15]

KAUFMAN: Oh boy. Bad ones and good ones. Can I tell you about a couple?

THIAM: Yeah of course, go ahead.

[00:51:33]

KAUFMAN: So, 9/11. I was in my office, and there was work going on in the Studio Theatre; I think the floor was being repaired, or something. And one of the workmen was listening to the radio, and I overheard that something bad had happened. And so, I walked over to the lounge where there was a TV set and I saw that one of the Twin Towers had been hit by an airplane and was burning. And there were several other people with me, and we thought, "What? Was there some horrible accident that this plane did this?" And we were discussing this, and then, all of a sudden, we saw a plane hit the other Tower. And I'm choked up just thinking about it. By this time, the university was alerted to what was going on and we were told to leave and go home. And so, I made my way out of the building, and there were huge crowds of people walking on the street to go to the subways and to get home. We had no idea what was happening. And I remember passing Wes [Savik]; he was going the opposite direction from me. And he said, as we were walking past each other, we stopped and chatted and he said, "Do you know that a plane just flew into the Pentagon?"

[00:53:52]

And that was one experience outside of the university. But within the university, oh boy, there's so many wonderful moments where students rose to a creative ability, where I just said, wow. And you mentioned some of the shows, like *Car Talk*, *Seven Deadly Sins*. I would say that was true about the show, *Cabaret*, that Marilyn directed when I first came. Do you know *Cabaret*?

THIAM: I'm not too familiar with it.

[00:54:58]

KAUFMAN: Yeah, it's wonderful musical. But it's set in the — it's about the coming of the Nazis, essentially, that's what it's about. It's in the canon of the great musicals. And there were

just many, many experiences where students, their creativity and their ability just were so — it was unleashed and really a wonder to behold, as writers, as directors, as designers, as actors.

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And I would say that during the pandemic, we couldn't do a show in-person. So, we hired one of our alumni, Nael Nacer. You should interview him, too. He's a really distinguished actor in the Boston area now. We asked him to direct the show, but via Zoom and video; so, a combination of live and Zoom. And he was able to create, devise this play with our students about life essentially within the context of the pandemic that was just profoundly moving; extremely well-done. So that was another triumph I would say, to be able to find that way to be creative despite the fact that everybody was in their own little pods or whatever, to bring them together in a convincing way so that an audience could connect. Yeah, so those are a few. If I can think of some more, I'll email them to you.

THIAM: Yes, of course. But to get back to what you said about 9/11, I think it's a pretty impactful moment for a lot of people. And would you say that —

[00:57:30]

KAUFMAN: Changed the world, it really changed the world.

THIAM: Yeah, it really did in many ways. I was born only a couple months before that, so I can't really say. But how do you think that really affected the morale of the school in general, or you even, in your work?

KAUFMAN: I mean, what you have to realize is, we had no information. What did it mean? Like, was that going to happen again? And I think it brought people together in a way. If you weren't — I think some people really, really suffered because of prejudice and racism. But I think the school, the university and the Theatre Department was very special, focusing on being welcoming and a positive safe place.

[00:58:43]

And so, I admire how the leaders at Suffolk brought us to that place. And also prepared us; they really realized that there's so many dangers in the world now. And so, they started creating a structure for people to make sure that all the students and faculty and staff were safe. I was part of a team that was made up of people from across the university to respond to emergencies, to respond to issues that might come up that, that might be harmful. So, I think that was part of the modernization process of the university that came about because of 9/11 in part.

THIAM: I do think it's been a pretty turbulent couple of years since, or two decades, I believe.

[01:00:04]

KAUFMAN: Well, there's been a couple of other landmarks, like when Trump was elected, I would say. That had a really profound, profound impact on our faculty, staff, and students; especially many of our students who maybe that was their first encounter with a world that they — well, it was very, very upsetting. That was another turning point, I would say. And then the pandemic. But there's resilience. Everybody has been so resilient, and they've been committed to figuring out ways to make something out of these negativities, to be productive and positive.

THIAM: Yeah, I definitely think it drew people together.

[01:01:21]

KAUFMAN: Yeah, yeah.

THIAM: So, were there any other difficulties that you encountered in your career or your time in Suffolk?

KAUFMAN: Difficulties. No, I feel like, these things aside — 9/11, what happened in the election in 2016, and what ensued after that, and then the pandemic — it was really great. It never felt stagnant. It always felt like it was moving forward, like we could always figure out solutions, we could always innovate, we could always move things in a positive way. And that was partly because it wasn't just the faculty and the staff; it was partly because the students were inspiring. And I felt I was learning all along from them and from my colleagues; I was always

learning. And not just in the Theatre Department, but from the History [Department] – people like Pat and people from across the university. There's generally an incredible commitment to learning and finding solutions for things. Never a sense of falling backwards, always moving forward. And that was really inspiring in my 20-odd years at Suffolk. That's what I would say.

THIAM: Yeah, that's great. I really do think that these major turning points do foster a lot of creativity and encourage people to be more expressive with themselves, and really make a mark in the world, I think.

[01:03:38]

KAUFMAN: Yeah.

THIAM: When did you first consider retirement, and why?

KAUFMAN: I was thinking about it before the pandemic. Our children are adults, so I didn't feel financially that it was necessary to work on their behalf. And then, I think the pandemic, we weren't going in, everything was operating via Zoom, and it wasn't something that I enjoyed, that kind of change. I didn't particularly enjoy the shifting to this remote stuff because I wanted to be with people.

And so then, at a certain point, the university offered a buyout to people, older employees. And I said, “Well, okay, I'm going to do that. The timing, it's the right time to do that.” So that's how I decided. And I'm very happy about it, and I'm happy that the younger people are moving up, have moved up, and now are the leaders. I think that's the way it should be. I did well when I was there, and I'm glad that I had that time. And now I'm happy for what's going on there.

THIAM: How do you spend your time now?

[01:05:49]

KAUFMAN: I'm a volunteer. Well, there was the year I retired and that we were at home, and what I did was, I really got outside a lot, and I was going on long hikes, really trying to spend time in nature. And so, that was a big commitment. And then, trying to connect with people and

really align with my friends and with my family. And then another thing that happened is that during the pandemic, we adopted two cats, a mother and a daughter cat, and I became the primary caregiver in terms of — because I was at home and my wife was working, so I became the primary caregiver for the cats.

What else have I been doing? One of the really interesting things I did was — I live in Cambridge and Cambridge has a strong city manager type of government, so the city council is elected, and the mayor is one of the city council people. And they set policy, and then the city manager, that person is the one who really runs the city. So, I was selected to be on this committee that would review all of the résumés of people all across the country that wanted to be the city manager of Cambridge. And then, we interviewed the candidates and we got the list down to the four top candidates. And this took a couple weeks. Eventually, those folks were interviewed by the city council, and finally the council made the decision about who they wanted to hire.

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So that experience was really eye-opening and fascinating. And so, I've been participating in more of those kinds of committees and trying to really contribute on a local level to where I live.

[01:09:03]

And then since we're living in Raleigh, North Carolina while my wife is on sabbatical at North Carolina State University here, one of the most interesting things I've done here is I volunteer for the Wake County Democratic Party. So, I've been volunteering for them, and one of the things I've been doing — well, during the election period, the early election period, I was a poll greeter. Do you know what a poll greeter is?

THIAM: No, tell us about it.

KAUFMAN: They're the people who, at early voting sites and on the day of the election, they're the ones who say, "Fatou, would you be interested in discussing or seeing the slate of candidates that are supported by the Wake County Democratic Committee? I'd be happy to talk to you to let

you know about these important races." So, I did that a number of times while I was volunteering, and that was really, really interesting to do, and hard work, actually. So those are some of the things I've enjoyed.

THIAM: That's great, especially working during the voting period is pretty intense. I do think this year there was much more importance placed on it.

[01:10:34]

KAUFMAN: It was very important. And coming from a state like Massachusetts where the Democratic Party, the liberals, or whatever, they're always going to have a really strong chance to win. And then coming to North Carolina, which is purple, more of a purple place, rather than a blue place, that was really interesting.

It's been interesting culturally here, just to live in a graduate school dorm again. And also, to see how people live in different places, and that's been really great. And then, this tutoring thing with middle school students has been really interesting too.

THIAM: Has it been any different than working with college students? Or is it about the same?

[01:11:42]

KAUFMAN: You know, it depends on the person, I think. Some people are really eager. Everybody comes with their own needs and, yeah, so some people are really curious, and some aren't so much. What else can I do for you?

THIAM: Yeah, that was it. Is there anything else that you would like to share that I didn't mention?

[01:12:22]

KAUFMAN: I think what I really appreciated was learning from all of the people around me at Suffolk while I was there, I mean, from my close colleagues who, sometimes we didn't agree, but I was always in a learning situation. And then, also just generally from people across the

university, the students, and staff. Those interactions were just really, really wonderful. And also, being able to be a part of a larger Boston area community in a meaningful way felt rewarding, very rewarding. So, I'm very thankful for having been part of the Suffolk University community. Honestly, very, very thankful. Great, great time there.

THIAM: Awesome, thank you so much for your participation.

END OF INTERVIEW