

Interview with Eric Krebs

Krebs: You lead, I'll follow.

Berkhout: Yes, okay.

Krebs: We're assuming about 45 minutes maybe, half an hour?

Berkhout: You may assume that.

Listokin: It's. . .

Berkhout: John Heldrich was over two hours. (Laughter)

Krebs: He has a lot more history.

Berkhout: Kenneth Wheeler was maybe an hour and a half.

Krebs: Okay.

Berkhout: Ralph Voorhees apologized about couldn't always remember things, no he was maybe an hour-and-a-half, an hour and three-quarters or so. But if you talk fast, that's fine.
(Laughter)

Listokin: Well, first let me thank you for coming in. I think it's a nice opportunity to kind of look back and try to document things that happened and why and you know what can be transferred to other cities. If I could just start with, it's not our list, but we're finding. . .

Krebs: Just start.

Listokin: Okay. Maybe you can give us a thumbnail sketch about yourself.

Krebs: Myself?

Listokin: Because we're finding obviously the self and what happens are clearly linked.

Krebs: Knocking about as a youngster in Connecticut, New York, California and Maryland and coming to land in New Jersey at age 15. I graduated from Morris Hills Regional

High School in Rockaway, New Jersey, where I first got involved in theater, finding a community that seemed to offer some sense of sanity.

I applied to one college because I guess I thought maybe I should, I went to Rutgers. I got into Rutgers. I was a straight C student at Rutgers. I had a, I'd say a mixed-blessing time at Rutgers.

Listokin: What was your major?

Krebs: I majored in English and worked in the theater. And I didn't study theater or particularly think about theater as a career, except that while I was working in the theater, I again found a sense of community and a sense of the kind of interactions that in the arts make things seem to make sense, and said, "Oh. Instead of writing the poetry I've been writing, I'll write a play." So I wrote a play, then I wrote another play.

And after Rutgers I went briefly into. . . Oh no, I spent one year teaching prep school at Peddie at Hightstown, New Jersey, which absolutely convinced me that that was not something I would ever do again. (Laughter) But while at Peddie, I directed my first shows because not only was I a wrestling coach, I was a theater person. So I directed my first shows at Peddie School in 1966 and 67 and got hooked on the theater.

While there, I also wrote another play or two, which I knew were brilliant, innovative, interesting and deeply heart-felt and of utmost importance and started sending them out. And everybody said, "No, thanks." I said, "Oh, okay. Maybe I'll produce myself." Ah, I missed one step.

My junior year at Rutgers, after my junior year, I went up to Provincetown, Massachusetts, for the summer, since that was where Eugene O'Neil had started out with the Provincetown players many years ago, knowing that I was absolutely another Eugene O'Neil, at

that point I decided that's where I should be. So I spent the summer making 300 breakfasts a morning at the Provincetown Inn and finishing work by noon time and then going and spending the rest of the day at the theater, until midnight or one or two in the morning. So, I was really hooked on theater at that point.

A year later, I actually helped start a small coffee house theater – this actually is germane to New Brunswick, I'll get there in a minute – I started a small coffee house theater called the Act IV, with two somewhat skilled, totally crazy, impossibly difficult guys, and I spent the summer there watching how theater got produced. Among the people who came to the Act IV that summer were Al Pacino, Terrence McNally, Viveca Lindfors, and three or four others who you may have heard of. And I watched how to produce a theater and how not to produce a theater. But I did get the sense of how a small theater could be run.

That next winter after I graduated, I moved into New York and I worked at a very famous part of the experimental theater scene at a place called the Café Chino, which probably none of you have ever heard of, but it was the start of the off-off-Broadway theater in the sixties. Excuse me it started in the fifties and the late sixties I was there. I was 22 or 23 and I watched the operation. It was a 75-seat coffee-house theater which did a new play every two weeks, twice a night – they were about an hour long. And everybody in the world worked there, again, Terrence McNally, Sam Shepherd and on and on and on.

So watching that and watching the theater in Provincetown gave me an image of how to do theater. And I got accepted to graduate school in English, which I came out to in '68, I guess.

Listokin: And that was where?

Krebs: '67 I guess I started, part-time graduate school here in the Ph.D. English program at Rutgers, which I was oddly interested in and oddly able to get into. While I was

there, Richard Poirier, a name you may know, I believe he still teaches.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: Or at least he is alive.

Berkhout: Yes, he is.

Krebs: Richard Poirier took a real interest in me as a creative person. At the same time, I replicated the 75-seat coffee house theater with the espresso machine and the plays in a little storefront at 47 Easton Avenue known as College Pharmacy to your grandparents.

Participant: Oh yeah.

Krebs: And known now as a laundromat that I think has now gone out of business, it was a coin laundromat for a long time. But for one year, from 1969 to '70 I would have to say, I'll get this time sequence in a minute. I graduated in '66, taught '66 to '67, in New York from '67 to '68. The fall of '68 we started Brecht West. I was going to name it Stage Left and my older half-brother said "Why don't you be a little subtle, Ace, and call it something like Brecht West." So that's a good idea. (Laughter) Now have any of you ever heard of Brecht West?

Berkhout: I have.

Krebs: Okay. Brecht West functioned at 47 Easton Avenue for one season. It then moved down to 61 Albany Street, exactly where the entrance to the Johnson & Johnson headquarters is for Albany Street now and it lasted there about two or three years.

I think I ran it there two years and then I left and handed it over to a woman named Margaret Dawson, who I still see in New York. She was an older student who had returned to the very, very young Mason Gross School of the Arts, maybe its first year, and gotten a master's in theater. And I gave her Brecht West at the end of my three year whatever it was. She ran it

for another year or two and then it was passed on to Frank Giordano.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: No, Frank Girardeau, G-i-r-a-r-d-e-a-u. Girardeau, who I still see in New York and he's still an actor and here we are thirty-five years later and we still bump into Margaret Dawson on West 42nd Street; she lives in the Manhattan Plaza Housing there. Frank Girardeau lives in Manhattan Plaza. I wasn't smart enough to get an apartment there, so. . . (Laughter) I live in Highland Park. So Brecht West lasted about four years.

While at Brecht West, the first one at 47 Eastern Avenue, we had the consummate, wonderful, welcoming experience for the arts in New Brunswick. There was a building inspector named John Connelly and when I told him what we wanted to do, which wasn't just theater, it was poetry readings, music, Josh Rifkin, pianist, he played at Brecht West.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: Patty Smith, she played at Brecht West. This was that first year – '68-'69. The second production we ever did. . . The first production we hadn't quite finished the renovation, all of which we were doing ourselves, I used to be a great electrician. We did at McKinney Hall, which was at the corner of Eastern Avenue and Somerset Street.

Berkhout: Sure.

Krebs: The Music building. We did our first performances there; the two plays were Pirandello's "The Man with a Flower in His Mouth" and Langford Wilson's, the name of the play I can't remember. "The Man with a Flower in His Mouth" has a character who simply sits and listens the whole time. The one from Langford Wilson was called "The Madness of Lady Bright," a play which is still done around, one of the earliest gay exploration plays ever. Why would we start a new theater in a town with no theater support with

a gay play? I didn't know any better I guess. (Laughter)

In "The Man with a Flower in His Mouth". . .

Listokin: Can I interrupt this incredibly fascinating narrative? Where was Rutgers in all of this and Mason Gross?

Krebs: Mason Gross didn't exist yet, although Mason Gross did exist.

Berkhout: Yeah, he was having martinis at the. . .

Listokin: I mean was there any theater and the arts in Rutgers?

Krebs: Theater and the arts at Rutgers was strictly a modest undergraduate program, it had no graduate program in theater and there was no connection. If any connection was there with Rutgers, it was in fact through the English Department.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: And very modest support of Richard Poirier.

Berkhout: Richard Poirier was the Editor of the *Raritan Review* for many years.

Krebs: And before that, the *Partisan Review*?

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: But oddly enough at my second year at Brecht West, Livingston College was started, the alternative.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: And I looked exactly like a Livingston College wanna be, in that era of the late '60's. And George Levine, pre-eminent professor of English is still teaching probably, I guess.

Berkhout: He retired a few a years ago. He might teach occasionally.

Krebs: George Levine asked me if I would be interested in teaching at the brand

new Livingston College, which I think started maybe in '69. And I said, "Oh, I never thought about teaching. Sure, what do you want me to teach?" He said, "I'd like you to teach basic writing to incoming freshman." I got a graduate student teaching assistantship and taught my first class as Livingston College opened.

Berkhout: Um-hum.

Krebs: One semester later, I asked George if there was in any interest or if there was any plan to have a theater program. And he said, "Oh, why don't you start one?" So I then started teaching a basic theater course, which is how I got into teaching theater at Rutgers. So I've always had and now I'm talking about me, which was where we started, I have always had two careers. Parallel careers in academia and in professional theater, I still had the two four years later.

So I started teaching theater courses, loved teaching and responded well to it and I think students responded well to me. So I kept doing that course. A year later, I dropped out of graduate school, so they offered me a job because they could keep me as a Teaching Assistant anymore; I became Assistant Lecturer at Livingston College. Then over the years, I became a Lecturer, an Assistant, and eventually got tenure, Associate. That's a forty-year bio.

Anyway, the building at 47 Easton Avenue lasted one season. I have to tell you the image of the most welcoming event. The first show we did at 47 Easton Avenue was Samuel Beckett's *End Game*. I don't know if you know the play, but it's extremely static, nobody moves and not much happens.

The third night of our performances where we did have a pretty good audience, a 70-seat theater, if we had 35 we felt good. Just at curtain time, nine New Brunswick policemen showed up, the leader of whom said, "Can I see your certificate of occupancy?" You remember I

mentioned the building inspector, John Connelly?

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: He said because you want to do all of this stuff, don't get a theater permit, get a cultural center permit. Get a certificate of occupancy for cultural center, it sounded reasonable. So the cop that night asked for our certificate of occupancy, because we were 23-year-old long-hairs who obviously were bringing down America. (Laughter) And when we presented the certificate of occupancy for cultural center, he said "You can't do theater. It's not a certificate of occupancy for theater. It's only for a cultural center."

We allowed how we thought theater probably fell within the purview of a cultural center and they issued a summons for operating without a correct permit and left and said, "You cannot perform this play." So I asked "Could we do it as a reading? Would that be within the purview of a cultural center?" And the cop allowed as how he thought that would be okay. So we took a static play, put scripts in their hands and did a performance of *End Game* and had a summons that was ultimately dismissed. (Laughter)

And I have to bring in a wonderful New Brunswick person here, a lawyer named Edward Zuckerman. I don't know if you have ever heard of him. Ed Zuckerman, he was the youngest magistrate in New Jersey in the '60's in Franklin Township. Ed Zuckerman read in the *Home News* what had happened and he called me up and he said, "I want to represent you in front of these yo-yo's." (Laughter) And Ed became a thirty-year friend and represented not only Brecht West, but ultimately formed George Street Playhouse, went on the board and spent his life on the board. And if you look at the Honorary Board, he's on it. He died of a heart attack outside of his law office on Bayard Street or Paterson Street about ten years ago. Edward K. Zuckerman, never an artist, always, always a fabulous supporter of what went on here. So that is sort of the

Brecht West saga.

It then moved down to 61 Albany Street in its second year in a space that was 18 feet wide and 175 feet long. And in that space. . . Oh and the first space by the way, one of the people who worked in the first space was Al Pacino.

Berkhout: Hum.

Krebs: He directed a play called *Rats*, but his Israel Horowitz, about several rats about to bite a baby in a tenement flat. And Al Pacino got paid \$75 and bus fare to commute out from New York on suburban transit bus, walk up the hill at Easton Avenue, 47 Easton Avenue, to direct the play *Rats*, which would have been '69, probably.

Also in that theater we had John Casale, remember Fredo from the *Godfather*?

Thea: Uh hum.

Krebs: He was there. We had Sam Sheppard, not Sam Sheppard; Terrence McNally came out when we did a play of his called. . . Two plays, one act is called *Botticelli* and *Cuba Si!*, very strong anti-Vietnam plays. You can see the Brecht West name, meaning in the terms of the material that we were oriented towards, which wasn't exactly what New Brunswick was ready for.

Next door to 47 Easton Avenue, upstairs lived the grandmother of Joseph Benincasa, a New Brunswick boy who is now the President of the Actors, the Executive Director of the Actors Fund of America for New York; he's done a fabulous job. New Brunswick boy Joe, his grandmother lived next door and used to say to him – he was about four years younger than we were – “They are all hippies, but they are very nice,” because we had people coming and going and coming and going, and over that theater by the way, there was a five-bedroom apartment, which was perfect for parties, everybody just showed up every Friday and Saturday night. And

there was an odd connection there between the theater undergraduate program and Brecht West because they just sort of naturally were people that flowed together, so I won't go into all of the coming-of-age stories that took place in that apartment. (Laughter) We stayed there one year, the building was then sold to become a laundromat and we moved down to 61 Albany Street, where we were for about three years. I think I stayed a year.

At 61 Albany Street, we did the world premier of a very famous production that you all know about; it was called *Alice in Wonderland*, conceived and directed by Andre Gregory.

Andre Gregory, remember *My Dinner with Andre*?

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: That's Andre Gregory. Andre Gregory had the show in rehearsal in New York for a year-and-a-half and didn't know if it was any good. I happened to know the people involved from one of my Provincetown connections. I invited them to do the Show at Brecht West. They came down and they did three weeks, sell-out business, fabulous response, people coming out from New York to sort of look at this wonderful, creative *Alice in Wonderland*. And in the show were actors that you probably won't have heard of, **Gerry Bamman**, **Angela Paige Japinto**, who still teaches at NYU, **Jerry Mayor**, who is deceased and there was one other person, I can't remember. ???

So that was a wonderful experience. There I was, 24 years old, inviting to New Brunswick, New Jersey, for a 75-seat theater 18 feet wide and very long. . . It's just about this wide. And the audience sat two or three rows on the floor, followed by chairs behind it and *Alice* performed in a space about that big. It went on to become an internationally know, legendary production. If you look in American Theater Histories from the '70's and '80's, you will see the Andre Gregory *Alice in Wonderland* premier right here in New Brunswick.

What else? We had a show from La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, very famous early, off-off Broadway Company, still going, run by Ellen Stewart. And the production was called *The White Whore and the Bit Player* and we brought it out lock, stock and barrel, six-character piece about the Madonna whore complex and who was it written by but Ron Link, who went on to write *Dream Girls*, so he worked here. I think he wrote the libretto, the book. Not the libretto, the book before that. It's the same thing.

So that's Brecht West. I left it. . .

Listokin: Can I ask you just one quick question?

Krebs: Yes.

Listokin: I can think of logical reasons why you would be in New Brunswick, but can you just speak briefly about that?

Krebs: Sure, why was I in New Brunswick? Because I had seen the Whole Theater Company of Montclair, New Jersey, which was a small start-up professional theater company run by Olympia Dukakis. And I said, they can never flourish there, it needs an academic community. I was in graduate school. I had worked in and run two small coffee house theaters and I tried to emulate them here. And I thought with the academic base there would definitely be an audience to be found.

As it turns out, the greatest supporters were the East Brunswick professionals commuting to New York, doctors – and Rutgers took a long time to come around. Because academics are usually also into their own thing and it takes a lot of momentum to get them off their own track into something else. There were a few wonderful early supporters; one of whom is now spending life in prison for the murder of his wife. What was his name? Her name was Katia. He was a math professor who beat his wife to death with a hammer in North Brunswick about

ten years ago.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: He was a Russian immigrant. And as soon as we started the theater, he was there. He absolutely understood why it was important. What was his name, I can't remember.

By the way, a way that I. . . Oh no, he was an early Brecht West supporter. Jackie Rubel who I have mentioned to you as someone you should be in touch with, have you been in touch with her yet?

Berkhout: I haven't yet.

Krebs: She's great, she was an early supporter. She started the Middlesex County Culture and Heritage Commission. She run summer arts day camps out at Bridgetown. She lived in Highland Park; she was instrumental in everything that happened in the arts early on in New Brunswick.

So I decided since I was a graduate student here and probably going to live in the area and since I knew how to run a 75-seat theater and since I had written those plays that were brilliant but nobody knew it, I decided to present my own plays also and started doing that at Brecht West in about 1970. And that's how it kind of all joined, Rutgers was modestly supportive, it never got in the way. It was interesting; I would find pockets of support. For example, in order to get a theater license, we had to provide a certain amount of parking within a quarter of a mile. There is no parking on Eastern Avenue. But Rutgers' Director of Public Safety, a guy named Robert Ochs.

Berkhout: Oh yeah, Bob Ochs.

Krebs: Bob Ochs allowed us to present a letter to the city saying that people could

park in the parking lot after 6:00, by Kirkpatrick Chapel and that allowed us to actually get our permit. So there were a few of those personal connections of people who kind of understood. But there was absolutely no engagement whatsoever from the Rutgers undergraduate Theater Department, a situation that remained the same almost to this day.

Berkhout: What about people like Dick Poirier and George Levine?

Krebs: George Levine was an academic dealing with Matthew Arnold and 19th century British and it wasn't really his thing what we were doing. His wife, Marge, was actually more engaged in the current art scene than he was. Who else did you mention?

Berkhout: Dick Poirier, Richard Poirier.

Krebs: Richard Poirier got it intellectually, but at that time he was totally oriented towards New York and again, his own career. So I don't know that he ever came to a production.

Berkhout: Hum.

Krebs: I'll tell you the other people who never came to a production of those years, the mayor, county freeholders, President of Rutgers – Ken Wheeler, whatever position he was in was supportive at that time, he always supported the arts. It was sort of like we were. . . and we were, I suppose, an oddball sort of radical seeming sort of counter-culture oriented group of folks who drifted in and out and never had any money and worked for free.

Berkhout: Now did you know Tony Nelessen then?

Krebs: Tony?

Berkhout: Nelessen.

Krebs: I know the name, but I can't place why.

Berkhout: Okay, he's an architect, he teaches here in planning, I think and had a

house in that area.

Listokin: He lived in New Brunswick for a while.

Berkhout: He lived in New Brunswick and had a loft in the Hiram area.

Krebs: He may have come; I mean there were, of course, audience members I didn't know.

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: So there may have been supporters or people who just attended who I would have no knowledge of.

Listokin: And was J&J or the other corporate entities, business. . ?

Krebs: J&J was completely uninvolved with Brecht West in any way; it was so counter to their image. But they did get involved at the start of the George Street Playhouse, which I'm happy to move on to now, forty minutes later.

Isenberg: Yeah, go ahead.

Yanni: Were there any other shops or commercial things on the block on Easton and then on. . ?

Krebs: Brecht West, Easton Avenue. Little Hungarian restaurants, there was a shoemaker, I believe somewhere. The hobby shop was there, it was there for many, many years.

Berkhout: There was Greasy Tony's.

Krebs: Greasy Tony's on the corner, where I never went. Greasy Tony's was. . .

Berkhout: It was one of those like '50's glass Dairy Queen-looking places.

Krebs: There was a Greasy Tony.

Berkhout: Where the Easton Avenue Apartments are now, the high rise.

Krebs: I never went there because there was a seeming criminal element in there

and I was too good a boy to go anywhere like that. (Laughter) Little did I know I should have gone and absorbed the culture. I don't really remember the other shops. For a very short time there was a New Jersey Peace Center there. There was a professor at Rutgers who married a student, Zenchelsky, Seymour Zenchelsky and his wife ran. . . Maybe before they were married even, the New Jersey Peace Center, which was next door to us two doors down.

Yanni: And on the J&J site. . ?

Krebs: J&J. . ?

Yanni: I mean on Albany Street.

Krebs: Albany Street?

Yanni: I know you had already moved on at that point.

Krebs: Oh, cleaners, Livingston Cleaners across the street.

Berkhout: There was a meat store.

Krebs: There was a meat store, that was actually. . .

Berkhout: That was . . .

Krebs: Well there was a wonderful meat store called the Pork Store up on George Street across from. . . Oh that was when we started George Street, that would have been in the early '70's. It was just community stores, clothing stores, nothing that would presage, is that the word, anything that was to come there. It was just a little working part of a little working town that had kind of gone to seed, which is why we could rent the Brecht West at lower Albany Street for \$150 a month.

Listokin: So if I can. . . Go ahead.

Isenberg: Were there any other organizations or businesses besides the Peace Center that you would say were kind of counter-cultural, you know supporting allies that were part of a

community that you were beginning to identify in the '60?

Krebs: Not. . . No, not that I can think of. This was a very working-class town with the remnants of the Hungarian influx, which, of course, was very conservative and very counter to our culture. And we were just beginning to understand how the '60's. . .

Listokin: I can tell you guys. . .

Krebs: You didn't ask a question about me, I failed my physical so I didn't get taken into the Army.

Berkhout: Oh, okay.

Listokin: So I can take you back to the narrative. You were, just take us a little. . .

Krebs: Okay, after a couple of years with Brecht West, I went into New York. I worked there as a playwright and a proof-reader or whatever and I recognized the possibility of a larger, regional theater in New Brunswick. Because New York is so difficult and so overwhelmed with small theaters and so I thought, "Well I know the New Brunswick community; I am commuting out to graduate school there. I know a lot of people there. Why don't I start a theater?"

And I saw a building for rent at 414 George Street, right across from the new J&J, the new J&J headquarters. And it was a carpet warehouse, it had been an Acme supermarket for many years, then it was a carpet warehouse. The first time I went in, there was a hand truck running around the old supermarket floor, which was a wooden floor, putting carpets up on racks. That went out of business and so I called up and met a marvelous man named Robert Boehm, B-o-e-h-m, who among other things founded a Center for Constitutional Rights. He was the son of a realtor/landlord person in New York. He took over that business; he worked out of New York. He had one building in New Brunswick, to my knowledge. And he was thrilled at

the thought that one of his buildings was going to be turned into a live theater, because it turned out he and his wife loved live theater. So we rented the building and it was \$450/month. It was 75 by 100.

Listokin: And this was what period?

Krebs: This would have been, I can give you the exact date. We rented the building in January 1974. We set to work renovating it again ourselves. Our first season, full season, opened on September 20, 1974, with the play *Arms and the Man*. I have the *Home News* article from the next day if anybody ever wants to see it. And we opened on Friday night, September 20th, 1974 at 414 George Street in the former Acme supermarket. The entire budget for our first year, which included the renovation of the space and six productions, was \$59,000.

We renovated the space for about \$15,000. A guy named Dan Lauria, the father from *The Wonder Years*, loved the idea so much he used to come out from New York on a bus and help us insulate the ceiling. He was – let's see, I was twenty-eight or nine at the time, so he would have been about twenty-five or six at the time. And people just gravitated towards it. I'm trying to think who else you might know that was involved.

Anyway, we opened with *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw. We used to pay \$15 a performance and bus fare and no rehearsal pay. But the agreement with the union was that we had to rehearse in New York, so they would have to commute for rehearsal. So that's how we got started. We used to play three times a week and we charged \$4 and \$2 for students.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: And we started with 110 subscribers. The way we started was. . . This was exactly, exactly during the gas crisis of 1974. The way we started was people that I knew, I asked to make a cocktail, coffee klatch kind of get together of their neighbors and friends and

whatever. And I would go and pitch the vision of a professional regional theater in New Brunswick, New Jersey. After the snickers stopped, you have to envision that in 1974, Downtown New Brunswick had nothing open at all throughout the entire downtown area except for one place called Gino's which was the equivalent of Greasy Tony's directly across the street from us. Actually the – was only the south side of George Street. I guess on the north side, there was the Pork Store and a Chicago Southside Haircutters; I think they still exist in New Brunswick. And then there was a walkway through where the entrance to the Rivoli Theater had been, which was demolished. But where the lobby had been leading back to the theater was now a walkway through to a lot and in it was Gino's greasy spoon. Not Gino's, which was the only thing open in New Brunswick after 6:00 for years, except the George Street Playhouse.

So we opened in 1974. I knew nothing about producing, really. But we started things, like we had giant rummage sale/auctions where we'd try to get people. . . We made like a country auction, my wife went out to the Catskills and had gone to some country auctions. We can raise some money doing that, so a couple of nights I was the auctioneer. A silly old klutz. The first year we did *Arms and the Man*, *Desire Under the Elms*, the third bill was a double bill of two one-act plays, one of which I wrote, called *Night of the Large Few Stars*. I can't remember the rest of the season after that. This was thirty-five years ago.

But we did six plays and we had 110 subscribers and over the years we grew into about 4,500 subscribers, which is still about the number that George Street has. We did ten seasons at 414 George Street. We had our ups and downs with the building's folks. For example, the supermarket you would recognize probably has one entrance and we had to create a second entrance, we didn't have access – There was a parking lot behind us at that point. So we got permission from the parking lot to put in a door. But it was raised up, so the wonderful Robert

Boehm said, “Why don’t you apply to my foundation for a grant. We can afford to put in your back staircase and doorway and fire exit.” And I said, “Oh.” That’s the first time I heard about grants.

We had seven what we called “charter supporters” who each gave a small amount of money towards renovation. One of them was Ralph Voorhees. He and Barbara were always involved, Barbara more than Ralph, by the way. She ultimately became our Board Chair. So there we are.

Listokin: And again, the city and Rutgers . . .

Krebs: Almost no engagement at all. When we renovated the George Street Playhouse, Johnson & Johnson gave us a \$4,500 grant to put in the plumbing for the restrooms, that was the biggest expense we had. Here we are thirty-five years later and the marvelous Joe Velli from South River is still plumbing. (Laughter) And that was a wonderful moment. They gave us \$4,500, therefore the bathrooms became known internally as the Johnson & Johnson shit houses. (Laughter)

Berkhout: So how . . . ?

Krebs: But we didn’t really ever get support, nobody was involved. It was John Heldrich; again we were counter to his culture in a way, so they weren’t particularly involved. New Brunswick Tomorrow, which was getting going then, was not involved at all, particularly through the person of Paul Abdala. I don’t know if you know the name, but he was the first Executive Director who had no concept of what we were doing. Then John Lynch was mayor, he never came.

Until about ’77 we had a benefit event and invited some biggies and lo and behold, Tom Kean came and sat in the front row. And then we started to sort of feel the ice breaking, that

people would pay. If the Governor would come, then there must be something . . . Like one of the few events the Governor came to in New Brunswick or whatever, so that was sort of fun. A wonderful image, he came in a horrible rainstorm. We were doing a benefit opening of something, I forget what. And we had a 7,500 old flat tarpaper room. Wouldn't you know that right behind the Governor, a leak opened up? During the performance, whatever it was, I can't remember what. There was Krebs in a tuxedo up on the roof in a rainstorm pushing a broom to brush the water away from over the spot where the Governor was sitting. My life in art.

(Laughter)

Listokin: A renaissance man.

Krebs: A good sweeper. What else can I answer?

Berkhout: So how long were you in that building before it came down?

Krebs: Ten seasons.

Berkhout: Ten seasons.

Krebs: About our third season, we bought the building for \$60,000 from Robert Boehm, who lent us the money to buy it. And at the closing, said "This is more fun than making money." He just loved the theater. I still remember, again another rainstorm. Zuckerman drove in to New York for the closing; he did it all for free. Robert Boehm was excited about making the theater. These are the people who along the way made all the difference, because I didn't know what I was doing and there was not legal support of any depth here. Then long around '77, '78, '79, we started to get some real support. Jocelyn Schwartzman, do you know her name?

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: 238-1356 is her phone number. I've got it because I used to be able to call her and say, "What do you think we ought to do about this or that?" She is still on the board of

George Street; she must be over 80 now.”

Berkhout: Doesn't she live in Florida now?

Krebs: She may, I haven't been in touch with her in a couple of years. But she was wonderful and she got it. There were three or four couples who “got” the arts.

Listokin: And these are couples mainly not living in New Brunswick?

Krebs: Tremaine, Laura Tremaine and Bill Tremaine who became the head of the -- Prudential Vice President. Schwartzman from East Brunswick, Voorhees from Highland Park, particularly Barbara. A wonderful guy named Anthony Marchetta, Tony Marchetta, who lives in Princeton.

Berkhout: Yeah, he's a graduate of ours.

Krebs: Yes he is.

Listokin: A former student of mine.

Berkhout: Tony Marchetta, he was with the Middlesex County Planning Board during that time.

Krebs: At that time he got involved with us and he ultimately became our Chairman while we got into the YMCA . . .

Berkhout: He worked with Matrix?

Krebs: Yeah.

Berkhout: Now he is with a firm. . .

Krebs: Elcore . . .

Listokin: He's in realty.

Berkhout: Which just doesn't have any business currently.

Listokin: In '79 there was this entity Arts Development Associates, it was some arts

consulting firm and I guess they recommended a cultural center?

Krebs: The way that New Brunswick Tomorrow and Johnson & Johnson got involved was not by dealing with our programming or supporting our programs particularly, although another great by the way at Johnson & Johnson who got it was their Director of Public Relations, Robert Andrews, Bob Andrews. Not the politician Bob Andrews, another good guy, I don't know if he is still alive or not. He got it and he tried to get Johnson & Johnson involved, for years.

Anyway, Jackie Rubel, again Jackie and Harry Rubel, great supporters throughout the years. Jackie had this vision for a cultural center in New Brunswick, for years. And in '79 is that the year?

Listokin: Yes. Yes.

Krebs: At some point we had a meeting which was hosted by Hugh Boyd of the *Home News* at the apartment of Rae and Morris Landis, Morris I guess was the brother of Sam Landis. Do you know the name Sam Landis?

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: We'll get back – up at 1050 George, and to that meeting came John Heldrich, Paul Abdala; I don't know if Ralph was there or not, three or four other people. And Jackie and I presented the vision for a cultural center in New Brunswick, largely Jackie's vision which she graciously got me into. I didn't realize at the time she couldn't do it without me, but it was okay. The cultural center she envisioned was the State Theater, the YMCA, the Elks building, new construction, a closed Livingston Avenue and this was all written out in stuff that she had put together.

As a result of that meeting, I believe Johnson & Johnson, but it might have been the

Home News sponsored a real study by experts, you know what the definition of expert is, somebody from out-of-town.

Krebs: Was this Leo Molinaro; was that part of his plan, from American Cities Corporation?

Krebs: American Cities, was that Rouse Corporation?

Berkhout: Rouse and then. . .

Listokin: Yeah.

Berkhout: I mean it included more than just the cultural center, it was. . ?

Krebs: I can't really remember. I was never deeply into the redevelopment of all the other stuff, housing, industry, and education.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: But I do remember one of the studies suggested that the new cultural center be built across from the train station where the parking deck is. There was a big plan done to put it there, I forget whose plan it was, it exists on somebody's shelf, probably. So totally misconceived when the cultural center actually sort of existed in place, well it didn't exist yet but it was about to. So anyway that would have been '79, I guess. And from that time on with New Brunswick Tomorrow and New Brunswick Development Corporation. . . I'm sorry; Abdala was the head of the New Brunswick Development Corporation, which was the real estate and profit-making arm of Devco.

There was a not-for-profit organization called New Brunswick. . .

Listokin: Tomorrow.

Krebs: New Brunswick Tomorrow, which was social issues and soft issues.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: A guy name Wallach was with that.

Berkhout: Yeah, who ended up in prison, I thought.

Krebs: Did he, child molestation or something?

Berkhout: I don't remember, somebody told us that . . .

Krebs: Buying and selling artworks that were fraudulent.

Berkhout: I think Kenneth Wheeler told us that.

Listokin: So it's around this late '70's that New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco began to see the cultural center as one . . .

Krebs: When Johnson & Johnson wanted to build its headquarters and wanted to buy everything around, they decided they wanted to buy the building that we had, even though it wasn't on their prime lot. And so they said, would we mind moving, they'd find us a home. The first place they found for us, and this was John Heldrich's suggestion, was the Davidson's Food Market which, you know the building I'm talking about?

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: It's right over here on George Street.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: It's right next to the liquor store.

Berkhout: The C-Town.

Krebs: The C-Town now, I'm sorry it was Davidson's then.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: That was the first place they were going to get for us. And Eric Krebs in 1980 or '81 said, I don't want to make waves. Okay that's what the city fathers want, I've always been very compliant, a good boy. And God bless her, Jocelyn Schwartzman, who'd

known John for years, I still remember she would say things like, “John, how can you expect that that’s going to be a step up for us, get your real estate gums off our building and give us something decent.” (Laughter) It’s ah, how can you say this?

And I would have settled for it, partly because I was getting a little tired of New Brunswick and I wanted to look. . . I thought, “Okay, they’ll move us there. They’ll pay for it.” God bless her, she got us the YMCA that George Street’s now in . . . because she wouldn’t take that. She said, “You’re not going to have people all dressed up going to benefits in that building.” (Laughter) She was great. So she was key to that.

Berkhout: So it went into the YMCA then already?

Krebs: Well we spent ten years at the old George Street, which was ’74 to ’84.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: Our last season, I think, ended in the spring of ’85.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: And I think we opened in the fall of ’85 in the YMCA, does that sound about right?

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: And, in fact, we ran out of money spring of 1985, so we didn’t do our last production. And in fact held it as the production in the new space, which was *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by me, which opened in October maybe of ’85. At the opening was Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Hermione Gingold, there’s a wonderful man named Milton Goldman, you probably never heard his name yet. Milton Goldman was from New Brunswick. He was found pumping gas by his lifelong partner, Arnold Weisberger, famous theatrical attorney. Arnold picked Milton up, he was a Highland Park kid working in New Brunswick, brought him into

New Work and got him into the theater business and Milton went on to become one of the legendary agents. He never lost his touch with New Brunswick and Highland Park. His mother lived here until she died at age 97 or something.

Berkhout: Hum.

Krebs: Milton used to come back every couple of weekends and shop for his mother. I used to take them shopping because he didn't have a car. And Milton Goldman got involved with the George Street Playhouse. He brought out Joan Fontaine, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Hermione Gingold, Jack Gilford and a list.

They would all come out because Milton would say, "We're going out, we've got to support this theater." And they came out and they did what they were told, because Milton was their agent. He also represented Sir John and Sir Ralph, Gielgud/Richardson. He was a major agent, never lost his touch in New Brunswick. Jocelyn Schwartzman adored him, they had a great relationship. So Milton Goldman was again key to bringing focus to the place.

So the opening night was '85, I guess October '85, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Then we did our first full season there. Then we almost went into bankruptcy because we fell into the edifice complex, which is a small organization, which is exactly what happened to Crossroads, by the way. A small organization gets built a big building and can't support it, doesn't know how to support it, doesn't know how to find support. And we almost fell into that and it became very rough financially.

So I stayed about three seasons, but I didn't want to run a theater company that was about a building. And I got tired of being Mr. Smiley Good Guy, knowing every subscriber by name. So I bailed out after '87, I think. So I was in the new space about three years.

Berkhout: And when did Crossroads start and what was your involvement in that?

Krebs: In 19 . . . , they just celebrated 30 so what was that, it was '79.

Berkhout: '79.

Krebs: In 1979 there was a federal jobs program called CETA, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. George Street Playhouse put in for ten projects, one of which was the Kids from Jersey, a full-time young audiences touring professional theater company. All of a sudden, all of Eric's unemployed actor friends from New York were moving to New Brunswick to establish residency. (Laughter) So they could apply for Middlesex County Comprehensive Employment Act funds. Guess who the Chairman of that board was?

Berkhout: Ralph.

Krebs: Ralph Voorhees, who totally understood that the arts were important. And we funded the Kids from Jersey, with about 16 or 18 employees all making \$8,000, \$9,000, \$10,000 a year, one of whom was Maureen Heffernan, do you know her name?

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: Maureen graduated in Mason Gross and does a lot of stuff with the New Jersey Teen Arts and lives in Trenton.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: She's still around and does all the kind of state stuff. Maureen Heffernan, so we did a Kids from Jersey. And just after we established that, Rick Kahn and Lee Richardson came into my office and said, "Would you help us start a black theater company?" And I said, "Yes" in about two seconds. And so Crossroads became a project of the George Street Playhouse, under the CETA program. We put in an application, which got approved, and Crossroads started with about 16 full-time employees. I rented their first space, which was a walk-up industrial loft down on Ward Parkway; do you remember going there up the stairs?

Berkhout: I remember that, yes.

Krebs: They were most successful there because again, they were not supporting a huge building with all of the staff positions that were required and everything else. There was a little building and they had a vision, it was a great vision. So I was actually the first Executive Director of Crossroads because it was a program of the George Street Playhouse. And I think we held onto that program about two years. Oh by the way, another person key to this is a retired Rutgers professor, Todd Hunt.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: Todd Hunt was our Board Chair. And I said to Todd, "I think we should sponsor this black theater company, they want to call Crossroads." And Todd said, "Good idea" and he was behind it totally. I think it was maybe his last year as Board Chair, but he stayed right with it, another good guy.

So Crossroads started in '79 in that little walk-up space. And one of its first productions, if not it's first production was George C. Wolf directing *The Colored Museum*, George C. Wolf who ran the public theater in New York for twelve years or fifteen years, one of the best known black directors in America. They had the great good fortune of bringing George C. Wolf out with his production called, *Colored Museum*, which is still being done.

So Crossroads took on a life of its own, as it should have. It did reasonably well. It became a little bitter pill when it started getting far greater grants than the George Street Playhouse did from the state, from the feds, from. . . But I understood that, it was the temper of the times. And they really produced beyond their means, which was good. They had the money to do it; they were getting major grants, which we never got at George Street. So, does that answer it?

Listokin: Let's talk about the other side, on the State Theater.

Krebs: The State Theater used to be owned by a guy named Gersten, Jeff Gersten. He bought it for \$55,000 or something when it went out of business as a porno house and he sat on it for a while. I always viewed the State Theater as a monumental resource, but nobody else could really see it or understand how to raise the money for it. But slowly Jackie Rubel and Eric Krebs and the activities we had and Jocelyn Schwartzman and Ralph Voorhees and Ken Wheeler and eventually John Heldrich, who started to get it partly because his wonderful wife loved the arts. Is she still with us?

Berkhout: Yes. Regina.

Krebs: Regina. And that group began to look at the State Theater of the anchor of what could be the cultural center that Jackie Rubel had outlined ten years before. The New Brunswick Development Corporation got on board around 1984 because the Y was going out of business. They wanted our building. Jocelyn Schwartzman wouldn't let them us to the C-Town.

So they found the alternative of the Y, which had a gym – a track on the second floor I used to run around. And they figured out a whole program for about \$2 million, knock out the back wall of the gym, build a whole stage house, which is now currently still in use and the redid the whole first two floors of the building into theater. It was a great choice, it was a great design and it worked very well as a theater and it was one of the lynch pin moments when the cultural center really happened. Once they saw what George Street could do in terms of bringing people downtown, restaurants started to happen around a bit. They then took interest in the State Theater.

There was also a movement in our country about the preservation of historic facilities, quite a national movement. And Bill Wright got involved, I've . .

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: Bill Wright got involved and in some ways on a national level. He was hired by New Brunswick Tomorrow or Development Corporation, to come on and do a plan and then became the President of. . . Bill had no background in the arts at all. He was. . .

Berkhout: By the way, Bill Wright was in facilities, he was a planner in facilities at Rutgers and eventually became the head of the Cultural Center for a while. We're going to interview him in the fall, he's coming. . . He lives in Maryland or someplace. He works with Ginny Record.

Krebs: Oh yeah?

Berkhout: She has a kind of a consulting firm down there.

Krebs: Yeah, she just "Linked-in" me.

Listokin: If you can just take your personal and then we can go back to, you know your personal journey and then if we can go back to New Brunswick. After a few years you said it was now time to pass it on to others.

Berkhout: 1987.

Krebs: I got extremely frustrated at the fundraising necessities that the new building demanded. Not only that, the programming necessities. While we were a scruffy little organization, although I didn't consider it a little, in a former supermarket with manageable expenses, we could do a more provocative. . . We could do a more provocative, more new work oriented sort of season, although we still did classics along the way.

Listokin: Because you can work with a smaller audience.

Krebs: A smaller audience and we didn't have to get. . .

Berkhout: You didn't have the overhead either.

Krebs: And we didn't have to get all the good wishes all the time of all the power brokers. But I remember a particularly poignant moment when the AIDS crisis was just coming on us; the first major AIDS play was called *As Is*. And *As Is* was a play about discovering what AIDS was and I said, "Okay, we've got to put this as the first show in our season because that's the show that gets the most attention and sets the tone for the season." Several of the Board members said, "Well, why do you have to put it there when we financial issues? Can't you put it in the middle of the season?" And I said, "Exactly for the reason you are suggesting, that a different show would get more attention at the top of the year, that's why we have to do it first."

And I still remember we did *As Is*. By the way, in *As Is*, was the marvelous singer Ronnie who was a member of the original Weavers.

Berkhout: Oh.

Krebs: So Ronnie, he just died a couple of years ago. Anyway she was in it and she was important. This woman Maureen Heffernan I mentioned, directed it, had brought Ronnie in. I mean it was really a very exciting, very provoking moment. And I still remember we were in the new building at the bottom of the staircase as you face the staircase on the left-hand side, leaning on the polished railing, a gentleman came up and said, "Mr. Krebs, why don't you just do pedestrian plays that audiences can enjoy?" (Laughter)

I think it was from that moment that I started my alienation from George Street and the process. And to some degree that tension, well it's in every regional theater.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: We like the tried-and-true, entertaining easily toothsome, I should have said loathsome, toothsome as Harold Clurman says, "Stuff that audiences don't have to really . . ." And I always wanted to do a different program than that. So that was the start. So between

the money and the realizing that this audience wanted to get what it wanted to get to support a theater, that it wasn't the place for me to stay long-term. Also New Brunswick is a little town.

Berkhout: So that's when you started in New York?

Krebs: Well I actually started in New York about '84. I took a lease on a space on West 42nd Street that was to become the Douglas Fairbanks Theater, off-Broadway. which ran for twenty-eight years, I think. A 199-seat theater. It was a shell that was being built and I took the lease and installed the theater there and rented it out and became much more "commercial" than my orientation, at least as a theater operator.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: And from that point on, I grew more and more involved with the off-Broadway theater scene than the New York theater scene. My children were growing and the reason I moved from New York to New Brunswick originally was to see them as they grew up. Because when I was commuting out to start the theater, I just never did that. So that's how we came to land in Highland Park, where we still live, except I'm always in New York. But it was that tension between the audience expectation of what they wanted and what I wanted to do.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: As an artistic director, and so it was time. I ran it, I ran it fourteen seasons and that was enough.

Listokin: You just mentioned Highland Park. We've observed some of the people involved in the redevelopment of New Brunswick live in Highland Park or have had Highland Park roots. And in part, we're thinking that may have been the closeness of Highland Park and New Brunswick. It's not that people moved out of New Brunswick and had no connection back to New Brunswick.

Krebs: No, Highland Park and New Brunswick were always one community. Through the '50's, they were really one community. In the '50's, things changed with the influx of the Hungarian immigrant population, the Latino population, with the loss of business to the malls and the core of New Brunswick went kind of dead. With the crime and the drugs which came to New Brunswick but not Highland Park, it just sort of evolved into two very different worlds. But for many decades, they were really one world.

Listokin: But even when they separated, you had people who had lived in New Brunswick or worked in New Brunswick or. . .

Krebs: Or still worked in New Brunswick.

Listokin: But then also they moved to Highland Park, but kept the connection back to New Brunswick.

Krebs: Yeah, Jack Wysocker, an attorney, whose office is still on George Street. He's dead, but it's Wysocker.

Listokin: John Heldrich.

Krebs: John Heldrich.

Krebs: I don't think he ever lived in New Brunswick, nor did Ralph Voorhees, they grew up in Highland Park.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: But their connection was to New Brunswick because that's where they hung out as teenagers. Yeah, Highland Park was just a little, a little suburban suburb of New Brunswick.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: Which was the engine.

Listokin: If you look at other communities in New Jersey, like Red Bank and Englewood that developed regional theaters, etc, is the experience much different or was this part of a larger . . ?

Krebs: I must admit that having left George Street approximately twenty-two years ago, George Street Playhouse, that I haven't played close attention of the evolution of arts institutions in New Jersey. So I haven't been to Red Bank probably in twenty years.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: I know Englewood has the John Harms Theater which has been out of business and in business for all the reasons that institutions do that. But I don't really know about it. I mean I'm a New Brunswick/Highland Park boy, Rutgers.

Listokin: Where was the local community in all of this, you know the Mexican population, the black population . . .

Krebs: Well you say the local community, but there are many local communities.

Listokin: Yes.

Krebs: The old Italian people, the Mexicans, the Hungarians, the old Jewish population. For example, I think of the family known as Milton, Gertrude . . . Hum . . . Kleinman. They lived in a house over on Llewellyn Street, extremely active leftist liberal anti-war political activists raising their kids there and stayed there for many years after New Brunswick seemed to have changed, because New Brunswick was their home. They then moved, when they sold that house, right down by the Hyatt to those new townhouses.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: The kids moved to Highland Park, in fact their daughter is a two-door-down neighbor from me. But the Kleinman's stayed here. So, where was the community? There

were many communities. The struggling immigrant, many illegals community never paid any attention to us. While we tried to do some outreach, it was really impossible. We tried to get the arts into the schools in New Brunswick, that was fairly impossible except for Penny Latimer.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: You also have spoken to her, you must.

Berkhout: We haven't, no. Penny Latimer was the assistant superintendent of school.

Krebs: Of school and Director of State Arts Council.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: And she was on the Board of Crossroads and lives down in that little circle by the Hyatt.

Berkhout: Oh does she now?

Krebs: By the circle there is one house left, that's Penny Latimer's.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: And you should speak with her.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: So I can't answer where was the community in all of this. The community is that there really wasn't a New Brunswick community. It was Highland Park, East Brunswick, Somerset, Franklin, even Princeton community that supported what was evolving in the arts here. There was the redevelopment community of people with money and real estate power and Johnson and Johnson power. There was the Rutgers community which stayed at the fringes for decades. Nicholas Music Center over at Douglass, I pleaded with them to not build it over there but to build it in Downtown New Brunswick.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: What a great facility that would have been to sit next door to the Mason Gross School of the Arts Office, next to the Cultural Center. That building, 800 beautiful seats would have been a perfect concert hall size and space to add to the cultural center. But Jack Bonttenbender, even though he did marvelous things for the arts within Rutgers, never got involved in the greater New Brunswick community, never. So while his legacy is sacred within Rutgers and Mason Gross, his legacy in terms of the redevelopment, there was never any participation. I don't think he ever came to the George Street Playhouse.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: I tried, by the way, to establish the George Street Playhouse as a part of Rutgers, because I was teaching at that time full-time at Rutgers. I tried to make it a professional company and I'm afraid that infringed on what was seen as "the turf" of the theater program.

Berkhout: Right, that's a shame.

Krebs: If I weren't on tape, I'd tell you a marvelous sideline.

Listokin: If you accept the arts as one means to revitalize an older community like New Brunswick, how transferable is this model?

Krebs: Absolutely transferable, absolutely transferable. It happens, it has happened in many other communities. I'm not that conversant in the specific arts as redevelopment tools, but I know that for example, in Cleveland there is a thing called Playhouse Square. In West 42nd Street where I founded the Douglas Fairbanks Theater and then next door to it, a couple of years later, the John Houseman Theater. I don't know if you remember that twenty-five or thirty years ago, it was peep shows and porno parlors.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: In fact, that was the fringes of polite society when I started the theaters there. It is now high-rise, brand new, spiffy, condo residences, and all of the theaters have been turned into theater palaces, most of them rebuilt, totally rebuilt. Playwrights Arises is there. They had an old building that was a porno parlor now has a brand-new \$7 million or \$15 million dollar facility on that. So the arts coming to that block made it acceptable to spend time there and I spent twenty-five years there. So it's totally replicable.

Listokin: With I guess the same tensions that you refer to as in New Brunswick, that as it gets bigger as it is viewed more as. . . We don't have a downtown department store, but we have a downtown theater, that means scale and commodification rather than some of the spark of individuality and experiments.

Krebs: Well one of the achievements of the cultural movement in New Brunswick is that there are fifteen or twenty lovely restaurants within five blocks of here. That's a direct result. But the people going to those restaurants want a certain kind of entertainment and a certain kind of non-demanding sort of material. So it's a mixed blessing when it grows bigger and more accepted in the community, it's a mixed blessing.

There are certain theaters like Theater for the New City of New Work or the La MaMa Experimental Theater Club – LaMaMa ETC – they have never gone towards any commercial sort of orientation. And they are still doing what I did forty years ago, scruffy little productions for no money with brilliant, young up-and-coming struggling artists. By the way, one of my legacies is that my son, who is now 31, started a group called The Tank, which is now a 75-seat scruff, multi-purpose theater space in New York that does sixty or seventy performances every month.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: Of spoken-word, hip-hop theater, electronic music made on children's toys rewired, it's called the Bent Festival, the Bent Movement. Video things, aerial, I mean it's a wonderful place which makes no money whatsoever, but it is totally. . . But if they ever get a real arts center, their heart will go out of it. . . And at some point they have to stop because they have to make a living or have a family or make a life. So these things sort of naturally tend to peter out. They either grow much bigger as Crossroads did and then fell into trouble or they just peter out for lack of being able to stick with it.

But the ones that seem to stick, like the model in New Brunswick, become very sort of mainstream, acceptable, safe organizations.

Berkhout: Okay.

David: If I can get your perspective, going beyond the immediate culture and art, looking at how New Brunswick redeveloped. You know with J&J, and we have the mall, and I guess ultimately housing, you know, being built, etc. Your perspective on that, I mean. . ?

Krebs: I'm not in any way a professional redeveloper. I have never been able to pursue so many of the other areas and missions that I would have loved to pursue like the educational system in New Brunswick – like starting a community arts program that would include a community theater where all the people here in New Brunswick could come and have more or less the community theater experience I had in high school and college, because I know how important that is.

I think that real estate has driven New Brunswick. I think that's a natural extension of where the money is in New Brunswick. The power of New Brunswick has to do with buildings, so Johnson & Johnson and Rutgers, which have enormous power bases both money and personnel and so on, obviously become the parts of what happens here. And to Rutgers' credit,

it's now come downtown in a big way. Twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago, there was no presence of Rutgers between Somerset Street to Commercial Avenue, none, but now there is. So Rutgers had to grow, it had to. It has done it reasonably well and continues to even get better. But real estate and the power needs of those two institutions have obviously driven New Brunswick.

I don't think the needs of the poor, the immigrant, the fringe people, the housekeepers and burger-servers who live here have ever been addressed nor can they be addressed in the current structure of how America functions. We need those people to flip our hamburgers and they've got to live somewhere. So the problems are so great that I'm not sure any city can address them, but I don't think New Brunswick has particularly made much progress in addressing those kinds of core issues of what it means to be poor and pretty much disenfranchised in a world of real estate, money and powerful organizations.

Berkhout: Now John Heldrich told us sort of the initiation of this whole process started with LBJ in 1968 convening CEO's of major corporations in cities where there was a lot of unemployment. And so the then-chairman of J&J was at this meeting and put John Heldrich in charge of the unemployment issues, which I guess was where CETA eventually came from, too.

Krebs: To his credit, John who was a very staid Republican conservative, has come around and funded a room in the State Theater and sat on this board and that board for the arts and done the jobs training center and, you know, he's turned out to be a great guy in an area that one wouldn't expect him to come into, except that he grew up here.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: He and Ralph. By the way, the threesome – I mentioned the other name

before, Ralph Voorhees, John Heldrich, and Sam Landis. Sam Landis was the tough-talking harsh Jewish guy who had Landis Ford on the circle and really in the business. But the three of them were inseparable as teenagers growing up.

Berkhout: I see.

Krebs: Sam Landis has had a stroke; he lives in Plainsboro in one of those communities. But he was the third member of that team. Sam supported the George Street Playhouse. In fact, Sam co-produced with me a play, a musical on Broadway and brought all the people that he knew through all of his connections, a great public servant, the best fundraiser ever for Middlesex County College.

Berkhout: Hum.

Krebs: One he retired from the car franchising business, he became a director of development of Middlesex County College. But he used the same people across the street when they see me coming down the block.

Berkhout: But did you see any . . ? I mean you were talking about the fact that this redevelopment really didn't help the needs of the poor or the fringe people. Did you see anything happen when this emphasis on unemployment issues began?

Krebs: I haven't stayed in touch with New Brunswick social issues for many years, so I couldn't really speak to that.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: I mean my complete focus twenty years ago moved to New York, except for my teaching, which I was at Rutgers, until six years ago. And I used to continue to teach 1,800 students a year. I had a very large class. The course, by the way, was Theater Appreciation, which has been my mantra for life. I introduced 30,000 to 40,000 Rutgers students

over the years to going to live theater, that was my mission. You know Scott Hall 135?

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: I used to fill that auditorium twice, back-to-back, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:50 to 4:10 and 4:30 to 5:50, 450 kids back-to-back. You can come to either section; you've just got to be there. And I did that, that's legendary, 30,000 to 40,000 students. What's my point? I stayed involved, very involved with Rutgers in education but I drifted totally away from social action and everything that that meant in New Brunswick. It's not me.

Berkhout: What about anything related to the neighborhood where the theater was, and the Hiram District beyond it?

Krebs: The neighborhood where the old theater was?

Berkhout: Yeah, there were people who were very upset about the demolition of those buildings. Did you have any involvement in any of this?

Krebs: Half of me understands totally why people would get upset about demolition of old buildings and half of me knows that you've got to demolish old buildings to make new ones. Do you remember what was on this block right here?

Berkhout: Arnold Constable.

Krebs: Arnold Constable, owned by Harold Bruskin, Highland Parker, New Brunswicker, totally engaged in all of those elements, Anshe Emeth Temple, the Y in Highland Park and the redevelopment of New Brunswick. Rutgers came to him and they made a deal, I think he made \$1 on it, but he had it for years. A lot of people said "Arnold Constable, no that's a great building. That should be a huge gallery building."

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: Fortunately it was not allowed to stand. It was a one-story building that

was 60 or 70 years old. So you have to demolish the old stuff to make the new stuff. What were you going to do, leave one beautiful 1840's townhouse building where the Johnson & Johnson tower is? You know it would have been a nice gesture to leave it as a gate house or something, but nobody really had that vision. So you know, the Robert Moses syndrome, "You've got to demolish to build up." People complained bitterly when Lincoln Center went in.

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: And what has Lincoln center done but made that the most desirable neighborhood in America, except for the 40,000 people who moved out and lost their neighborhood because you've always got to weigh one against the other.

Berkhout: Right.

Listokin: Where can we go for more information about George Street and . . . ?

Krebs: I have, over the years, given a lot of materials to George Street from my paper clipping file.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: I would just talk to their public relations person or maybe the person who has been at George Street absolutely the longest in Karen Price, who is their . . . What does she call herself? Just ask for Karen Price, she's been at the George Street and the State Theatre for about like twenty years. I believe I turned over several boxes of archival materials to George Street – because I didn't want them lost. I hope they did something nice with them. By the way, I have a marvelous photo of the play *Sleuth* at the old George Street Playhouse, a two-character play with George Taylor playing the older character and a 23-year old Kevin Spacey playing the younger character.

Berkhout: Hum.

Krebs: A lovely old photo. I have, and you may or may not remember his name, Emily Williams was a playwright/actor. He came to New Brunswick and performed a show for four weeks that he had been touring the world for many years and it was *The World of Charles Dickens*, a one-person show. It was wonderful. He stayed down at the Hyatt, this is '77, '78, '79, walked up the street and he did Charles Dickenson.

Isenberg: Did you. . ? Were you a part of any outdoor theater or street performances? Was there any, did any such non-building tradition involving public spaces. . ?

Krebs: Not really. When New Brunswick Tomorrow started a series at Buccleuch Park or do we say Buccleuch Park? There was, it was nicely successful. They used to have a summer series where they would do outdoor concerts and I don't know, 1,500 to 2,000 people would show up and it was really nice. They did that for a couple of summers, but I never had any part of that.

Berkhout: They had jazz and then they brought in the Metropolitan Opera for a while.

Krebs: Amazing, wonderful stuff.

Isenberg: So there wasn't anything on the scruffy side in terms of outdoor, street theater?

Krebs: Well, unless you want to consider the 24-year-old Eric Krebs with his first- year college students, first-year Livingston College experience in a course called "Making Theater," lying in front of the old Rutgers Gymnasium on the side walk, with fake blood and signs, anti-Vietnam war signs, as the Board of Governors convened a meeting to talk about Rutgers' investments in various questionable companies and enterprises. But that was sort of a personal street scene statement. It certainly wasn't any part of the organized arts. That's my

history.

Listokin: So, if I can ask what may very well be a silly question? With the benefit of hindsight, things you would have done differently?

Krebs: With the benefit of hindsight, I would never have gone into the theater.

(Laughter) It's true. I've been thinking about it.

Berkhout: Really?

Krebs: Yes.

Listokin: Could you talk a little about that?

Krebs: Well, it's a very personal journey. (Laughter) But I don't mind sharing it. I set out to be a poet and playwright, responding to the world in which I grew up and the world I saw around me. I got sidetracked for about forty years by producing, because I could produce well. Producing is a very tough thing; you have to weigh everything against everything. You have to know about artistic and financial personnel and deal with problems and not fly off the handle and as we say around my office in New York, "It's a no-drama Obama approach to producing," and I did that well.

I've come to recognize my, if I may take a moment of self-adulation here. I have come to recognize my abilities as being beyond what I have chosen to do in life. And while what I have done is really important and my son points out that the teaching that I've done, even though it started out as a secondary thought, has become in some ways my most important achievement.

With hindsight, I would have set out to probably do something very different, but I didn't. It's probably too late now. I'll be 65 this year. But the teaching legacy is terrific. The Downtown New Brunswick change is terrific. The theater legacy – if you ask anybody in the theater about Krebs, they say, "Oh yes." The legacy is always happy and willing to help a young

person coming into the field. “Oh no, use the space. I know you don’t have any money to pay for it. You know, do your work.” That’s a marvelous legacy and I value it.

But our world is in desperate, desperate shape in so many ways that I, in hindsight, wish I had taken some other path and I don’t know what that would have been, but I didn’t, and so here we are. Sad, isn’t it to realize that?

Berkhout: There was someone who I think worked at George Street with you by the name of Herocik?

Krebs: John Herocik, yes.

Berkhout: Do you know what happened to. . ? Or what did he do there, was he a director or. . ?

Krebs: John Herocik was a Livingston student, a couple of years older. I think he had been in the Marines.

Berkhout: Really?

Krebs: Came back to Livingston when he was about 24.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: And he and I actually looked at each other one day and said, “Why don’t we start a theater in New Brunswick?” And he said, “Great, good idea.” And for about four or five years, he was my partner and I would refer to him as the co-founder by way of wanting to give him a sense of entry and he had never worked in the arts at all.

Berkhout: So this was with Brecht West?

Krebs: No, no this was with George Street Playhouse.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: But he was just a great partner for the first four or five years. I don’t know

that his heart was truly into the artistic side of theater, but he loved the community and he loved working hard and he loved making something happen. In fact, when you said “What about the buildings that were demolished?”

Berkhout: Right.

Krebs: He used to live there. I had his residence in my mind when I said that townhouse, the 1850’s townhouse. He used to live in that building and it was a great little building. And I loved it, because he was across the street from the playhouse, so I could call him up at 3 in the morning and say, “The burglar alarm went off, go see what happened.” (Laughter)

And John worked, I didn’t take any pay for the first twelve years of the George Street Playhouse, zero because I lived on what I made teaching, always have. I still don’t take a salary for my theater work, I live from teaching. John used to get, I think \$100 a week, maybe it went up to \$150 and several months every year, he had to go on unemployment. He kept working full-time, but he went on unemployment. Terrific, he was just absolutely the perfect foil for me at that time. He ultimately, he married Shelly. . .

Berkhout: Shelley.

Krebs: Shelley Glatzer.

Berkhout: I worked with her for a while, in fact at Transaction with Irving Horowitz.

Krebs: We won’t go into that discussion.

Berkhout: Okay.

Krebs: So I have . . . We won’t go into that discussion.

Berkhout: (Laughter)

Krebs: She was my Public Relations Director at George Street Playhouse, I hired her to do press and they got together and got married.

Berkhout: I see.

Krebs: She was tough.

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: I believe they moved to Washington State and he became the administrator of a children's theater, this is about fifteen or eighteen years ago. I tried to stay in touch, but Shelley always felt that John hadn't been given a fair shake at George Street.

Berkhout: I see.

Krebs: And they moved away. That's enough of that, but he was great. Just terrific.

Listokin: Okay.

Krebs: Had enough?

Isenberg: I just, just a couple of other questions about Brecht West, if you don't mind. I'm kind of curious about the kind of transition away from the kind of coffee house theater model into the more, you know, the transition into the more mainstream, fundable. . .

Krebs: As I have implied, scruffy little 74-seat houses with hippie-looking people can't support themselves long-term.

Isenberg: Okay.

Krebs: So as I talked about with The Tank, most of them evolve into other things, either bigger and more mainstream organizations or people drift away because they can't live that way forever.

Isenberg: What about the audiences? Were those first audiences that sustained through the first five to ten transitional years, what did . . ? Do you think that audience stayed with you, who were they?

Krebs: Oh yes.

Isenberg: Who were they? Was it really most the East Brunswick professional crowd and a few students or . . ? Who made this happen?

Krebs: Bear in mind, in the first three or four years, Brecht West only had 74 seats and we only ran a couple of times on the weekend for the theater. So we used to do a Tuesday night poetry readings with nine people, and Wednesday night Patty Smith concerts with fourteen people. So that was never part of the mainstream energy at Brecht West. But on the weekends, if we had fifty people at a performance, we considered it a great success. That's only twenty-five couples, so that's three Rutgers professors and four East Brunswick people and six students who wanted in and three graduate students that we invited. It didn't take much to make an audience, so there wasn't like a core audience that drove the thing. Seventy seats is a great space to do your work in. And we had New York theater people coming out to see their buddies in shows and so forth.

Crossroads followed that model also, when it was very small, with seventy-five seats. It was almost always a sell-out and it was a great cause celebre. When it moved into 250 seats in a \$7 million dollar building that it couldn't support, that audience couldn't relate to that level of demand of the organization.

Now the arts-supportive audience – I almost said the white audience because so much of it was white – the arts-supportive audience – the Jocelyn Schwartzmans and the Ralph Voorhees – immediately got on board with Crossroads. But Crossroads unfortunately came to depend on those large grants and when they started to dry up, they got into debt. And also there were some rough times when they went towards, much more towards a board of African-American people who didn't always engage and embrace the long-term white supporters on the board. And it

became a bit of a cultural divide of which I was one of the people who fell away from Crossroads during that process.

And also the society has changed. Well, thinking of Crossroads specifically, the society has changed so that Crossroads isn't required anymore, not in the way that it was. That sort of answers your question?

Good-bye. Call me if you need me. (Laughter)

Berkhout: Thank you very much.

Listokin: Well, let me thank you, really this has been fascinating.

Isenberg: It's great.

David: I can see why you could have hundreds of people coming to your classes.

Berkhout: Carla and Alison, Alison is in history, in art history taught a course about the history of the Livingston campus, yeah, a few years ago.

Krebs: Rennie Davis was there the first year as a teacher, remember him?

Isenberg: Rennie Davis?

Krebs: You don't know that and you're teaching a course on the history of Livingston? Rennie Davis of the Chicago Seven.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: Or was it Chicago Eight.

Isenberg: Chicago. . ?

Krebs: It started out as eight and then Bobby Seale was separated from the others.

Berkhout: Right, wow.

Listokin: I know when Ed Bloustein was President, we did a little survey at George Street, where the audience was coming from and then we did a survey of people shopping in

Downtown New Brunswick.

Krebs: As part of the redevelopment energies?

Listokin: And we looked at the zip codes where people were coming from and clearly the Downtown New Brunswick shopper was all containerized local and you were drawing from this huge region.

Berkhout: Right.

Listokin: And it was like the one thing that would draw people at that time to New Brunswick.

Krebs: I could have told you that before the survey. (Laughter) But we had cross-tabulations by zip code, you know how many live in X distance of New Brunswick, etc. You did mention Bloustein.

Listokin: That's mostly social science, by the way.

Berkhout: According to Kenneth Wheeler, he had – Kenneth was like the main active person in this.

Krebs: Yes.

Berkhout: And Bloustein wasn't all that terribly involved.

Krebs: Bloustein was also distant like Abdalla and John Lynch. And to their credit, they came around eventually to understanding the place of the arts. But I've got to tell you, one of the – one of the bitterness's of my legacy, my time here, was that John Lynch, for example, who was also now in prison, I guess.

Berkhout: He's out.

Krebs: Is he out? Never, ever, ever came to the George Street Playhouse until the night the Governor came.

Berkhout: Oh.

Krebs: That's the first time he ever came to George Street, because he was all about political expediency in New Brunswick.

Berkhout: Yeah.

Krebs: And I understand politicians are about political expediency, but they weren't about rebuilding the city through other means other than real estate and money.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Krebs: And without those other means, there is no city. Good-bye. (Laughter)

Listokin: Alright.

Krebs: Feel free to call anytime.

Listokin: Thank you.

Berkhout: What happened to your daughter who worked with Hilary Clinton?

Krebs: My son who worked with Hilary Clinton.

Berkhout: Oh your son did, I'm sorry.

Krebs: My son, Justin, who is 31, founded something called Living Liberally. Living Liberally is an umbrella organization, now quite national and even international, that is essentially a social networking set of initiatives to bring liberal and progressive ideas into general public dialog in social circumstances. So, for example, he founded Drinking Liberally, and Laughing Liberally, and Screaming Liberally, Reading Liberally, Eating Liberally, Shooting Liberally, which has not been much of a success. Drinking Liberally has 330 branches around the country.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: In fact, he's out in Portland, Oregon, right now, and the Portland chapter

has invited all of the other chapters in the Pacific Northwest to come in to meet Justin Krebs.

Berkhout: Wow.

Krebs: It's amazing, so not only did he found The Tank, which he remains actively involved in.

Berkhout: Yes.

Krebs: Because lives right across the street, practically, and takes the garbage out, but he has done this Liberally stuff. He just got a contract for his first book from – I forgot the name of—it's a liberal book publisher. It's a book about what it means to live liberally in America in 2010. So it's definitely . . .

Berkhout: That's great.

Krebs: My daughter who is 33 is kind of floating and lost – who used to slide down the banisters at George Street Playhouse – founded something called Get in the Game, a non-partisan voter registration at professional sporting events—which she has been pursuing assiduously for five years. It hasn't really taken off because there are so many voting organizations, but that's what she's been doing. And she floats.

Berkhout: Okay, great.

Isenberg: Thank you.

Listokin: Thank you.

Isenberg: Thank you so much.

Berkhout: I'll turn these off.

[end of recording]