

This is the fourth interview between Alfred Skondovitch and Sharon Hollensbe on May 24th 2000. This took place at 202 Slater Street in Fairbanks, Alaska.

This was a bar; the Stone Mason's Pub, it was in Chelsea. (This is where Laurence Olivier and Valentine Dyal and a nucleus of actors in the first Henry the Fifth movie that was made, hung out).

It was a gathering place of artists, you know. I went into this pub when I was about 16 and a half or 17 years old with a fellow by the name of Oba Hassan, who introduced me to these people. That is the pub where he hung out and also the actors from the Unity Theatre. Alfie Bass and a fellow named Row Bothan were also regulars and also from the Unity Theatre.

In the last years of the war.

So in the midst of war, bombings and all you had these people working on projects of peace. The German drive was somewhat make peace in answer to this strange cultural war. Of course, Henry the Fifth was a great movie that emerged from this. The British dusted off artists who came from suspicious mid-European countries and who could only work in war factories, now they were being dusted off; given canvas and stuff like that and amongst these people was a great artist named Kokoscka. Now, with all; let me explain the cultural drive; money was assigned to it and it was a first class job done in England. They had confidence, you know, peace will come and we want to enjoy a good movie, we don't want to enjoy war movies anymore. And, amongst other people they dusted off Kokoscka and they gave him a project of the Magic Flute. Which is kind of an opera or a coalescence of all things within a Nation. It's marathon type singers who normally Wagnerian and stuff like that. The sets are a great challenge. Artists have tackled that in the past decade this Hockney guy did credible sets for the Magic Flute. (David Hockney) So all of these things going

on were kinds of surreal, an air raid siren would go off and there would be a flying bomb whizzing through the air, you know, I hated those things. Then the flying bombs were followed by rockets each weapon was to be more terrifying to our civilians but, people, oddly enough, accepted the rocket attacks. Meanwhile people are looking at theatrical plans and costumes. There was kind of a rupture in the materials that were needed so I became indispensable because of my father's ration which was still going merrily on until the end of time. I think (can't make out this name) took me there because they wanted me to meet Larry, they called him, he wasn't a Sir at that time; they called him Larry. We all got jobs in Henry the Fifth as extras, you see. (This was a movie, not a play). A great movie, of course, I have seen Kenneth Brannagh's but, it doesn't compare to Larry's production, it was just wonderful. The German Effort – Children of Paradise – Beauty and the Beast.

I want to explain; there was never ever hunger in England, like potatoes were unrationed, pork sausages, which is the staple of the British diet was never rationed. We called them, affectionately, Bangers. Candy was rationed, eggs were rationed; one fresh egg a month, a month now! But, you could get 4 ounces of powdered egg, you see. When the war ended the food situation in England got inexorably worse because the shipments that came to us, you see, when we were cut off from Europe; these shipments now went to Holland, France to Scandinavian Countries so all at once there were 80 million people to be fed so rationing became even stricter, this effected materials and I became indispensable because of what I could lay my hands on. When I say that I assisted with the Magic Flute, it's an exaggeration but what we worked on.....I brought him muslins and scrims where a bunch of figures are playing poker or disemboweling someone that they light up behind a scrim. I could attain these materials very handily. What Koskaschka was doing were mequettes; little maquettes of his figures and the design of costumes for the Magic Flute and I was

there bringing his stuff and I thought “my God, this guy’s incredible”. I never had seen any of his paintings, I’ve never appreciated the mid age of 16 or 17 when I encountered this fellow who needed something off of me. But, the sketches and his use of colors: there was a book published once of his maquettes of the Magic Flute; I don’t know where I saw it but, the colors and war time England it’s as if it was an out of body experience; to fly above it all and do these colors of that opera. I’ve never seen anything like those marvelous sketches that that man did. Many of his paintings would really describe a vortex; Lovers in a storm is his masterpiece. A masterpiece in as much as it pulls this idea together. You see two lovers beset by a storm, they are in a cloud, it’s as if they are in a flying saucer, that is his masterpiece and it is. But, he had the problem of handling the axis of a painting, the central mass. He had to be aware of the edge of a painting because this can offset this composition. Thus he has cities that seem to be floating in space. He did watercolors; paintings of London, and you have the core of the city coming towards you are “tumbrels” of color. They come meandering through all canvas. The canvas is employed as a color, you see, but nevertheless here is this ambient city floating in space. He did these things in London, or was trying to; there was difficulty getting canvas. And, of course, he did these things in Vienna, where he was from. It’s interesting because in Vienna, there was kind of a senior individual, like a Pissaro; an older painter to the young painters, people gathered around him, he could solve problems for them from a compositional matter to paying your rent or your thrown out then you can sleep on the floor. I mean the father figure like that and a father figure in Vienna was Max Brod, who wrote a number of novels. Max had a young fellow he was taking care of and that was Franz Kafka, a neurotic little man. Max was worried about Franz, he took him under his wing, and then he thought this guy draws the castle; this evanescent castle to which there is no seeming entrance, you know, to enter to talk to the people within this edifice seems to be impossible. It is

like a metaphor to modern man, you know, dealing with monolithic societies and what have you. Always there is this thing which when you read his books you have the same kind of structure written down. So Brod had the idea, or he felt that Kokaschka and Kafka, if only they would meet would become the fastest of friends and allies. So he took Kafka out to Kokaschka's studio and Kokaschka proudly showed him his work and Kafka said, "What the Hell is this? Where are the roads here? This is insane." And they were arguing about this and Kokaschka threw both of them out. So, here are men doing the same thing, you know, and yet there is no middle ground it seemed. It seems like I will meet people and they will talk about paintings and you seem to agree with them but when they look at your paintings you realize they were talking about something else; they could have written it down but, you're a chasm away from what they are talking about. But this is really crystallized in the matter of Franz Kafka; you read his books, you see this fellow's paintings, you know, what in God's name disagreement could there be?

The edge of Kokaschka's paintings would be worked so that the edge could support a central composition. Yellow was a color; he dreamt of it's youth. You see it in the book of maquettes, I have not seen this book in years, I figure maybe if I see it again; I figure what the Hell have I been fussing about? Are these colors terrible? I don't think so. I am gonna find that book. I think it was a picture of these works. Drawings For The Magic Flute. In the sketches there was an intuitive feeling for the edge of the paper, he would use yellow to correct a composition. Or, he would use yellow to expand the edge of the painting, of the little sketch; so, you know, the palette of an artist is always an indication: emotionally the palette indicates what the fellow is about. When you squeeze paints onto the palette, there are people who do it in signally different ways. There are people who will go by the primary code, you know, but there are others who do this kind of instinctively; they'll squeeze out the paint that they know they are going to use. And, then they

will mix the paint, and then they turn from the palette to the canvas and they paint. But, this movement: this simple movement is accomplished in a second; something happens to the painter, 'cause when u look here you see all of the unconscious things that he's doing, you'll see lyric lines and yet a lyric line doesn't appear in the work of the man. In others you'll see real drama that's painterly, you see. But, you don't see this transference; this is what people have to do when they are shown their palette and they are asked why the events that are happening here are not happening on your canvas. What happens to a person? All sorts of things happen, decades of training or inhibitions or what have you deter that person, they were doing that quite unconsciously and yet they would arrive at a color, sometimes an emotional color but, something is lost in the transference. It will take years for this thing to overcome this thing. It's either done immediately or it is a huge struggle. Kokoschka said with yellow he could do something around the edges, but he couldn't, you see. He would have to watch that core of the painting; if it came toward the edge of the painting then he would have to repaint the whole Goddamned thing. A millimeter could screw up the work on the painting. So, it was his dream that if he could only put a strip of yellow it would push this whole painting that way, or he could control it that way. But he never had that opportunity, but you would see it in his sketches. Yellow would appear; startling yellows, alizarin crimsons and stuff like that. The figures seemed to move, you know. I close my eyes and I pictured them; I'm sure if I saw the book...that is what turned me on. But, then another thing turned me on: apropos of being turned on by something; I went to the British Museum with a class of nine and ten year olds and there was a museum that was set aside for children. You pushed buttons and it would illuminate a stage; it was very interesting and you would also see the hanging of one of Britain's most notorious pickpockets: Charlie Peace, this man died in the 19th Century and he is still remembered as someone to be reviled, he came to a sad end did Charlie Peace. But

he seems like a figure of innocence though when you recount his deeds. Anyway, when I went there I got away from the main group of students and there was a staircase and at the bottom was a skull; they were exhibiting a skull: it was a silver skull, the top of it had been cut away and in it was jammed this crystalline rock. The rock was a crystal and when you looked at it it gave you the feeling of millions of stars. These were aberrations in the shiest or what have you. Here I was nine or ten years old and I thought man what a brilliant idea; you know the brain is an infinite thing we have a brain and we are linked to the cosmos; this is what I thought, you know. When I first went back to England I thought I have got to go and visit the British Museum and look at this thing that turned me on. I went down there and it wasn't there. I retraced my steps, I thought, "this is where the children's gallery is and it is still going strong, there were the mothers and fathers and there was the staircase". I walked down there again and I thought, "Well maybe this is a figment of your imagination." But, I kept looking and finally a curator came out of this little office and he wondered if he could help me. I said, "Yes, there was a wonderful piece of sculpture here", and I led him back to the staircase, I said, "It was silver, there was a rock in it, where is it?" He said, "We had to get rid of that because it was phony." Said he. He said "That someone had made it up and they had to get rid of it." I said, "I still love it, it was beautiful, I liked to see phony work like that." I was nine when I saw it and here I am 35 or 40 years old and I can still visualize it. He said "No, that was a fraud that was perpetrated on us and we had to get rid of it." So that was something that turned me on. There is kind of a law in museums that when the new incoming director comes before his board; people on the board who have brought money to the museum, like millions, matched by city funds, State funds and Federal funds this is no laughing matter. So, in New York, Henry McBride, had taken up this position as director of the Metropolitan Museum and he indicated that he was going to come back with great treasures for the museum and he came back

with a gigantic Etruscan statue of an Etruscan warrior and he also brought a Van Gogh which had never been seen before which was the size of this panel in the door and remember discussing these acquisitions with Meyer Schapiro when they arrived. And he said, "I'm not going up there to look at the Van Gogh, it's a phony." I said, "Well, you haven't examined it." He said, "Well, he painted with his right hand and the copy indicates that he painted with his left, it's a phony painting, but I'll have a look at it." Well the thing was the Etruscan warrior became where you would meet if you were dating a girl you would meet, this warrior had this miniscule penis, I don't know why people would meet beneath this thing. He had paid about a quarter of a million dollars to two cobblers in Sicily, who claimed that they had dug it up. They had fabricated the whole thing. They had made it themselves. It would only fool a museum director. We were in Fiesole where there were artifacts that were left to us by these people. And none of them were as horrific as this Goddamned thing. History tells us that the Etruscans were a bunch of lazy pigs who would loaf around but I don't know how you can do that when you conquer all the world around you. Their figurines had such elegance but this damn thing didn't. They had to keep these artifacts in place for a quarter of a century and then a minute after midnight they removed them after McBride left the Metropolitan to go to the Boston Museum. There were about a dozen fakes that cost the city about 2.5 million dollars. But, the problem there is that if they declared them fakes there would have been a run amongst the trustees. They would not have given money; it is like a panic in a bank. Meyer Schapiro said they were fakes Bernard Bernstein said, "This is a fake". He was headquartered in Italy. And, they were fakes but we had to live with these Goddamned fakes all this time. But, eventually they were all removed; the Van Gogh because it created controversy was removed. That was removed, you see. Anyway, that silver skull with that crystalline rock jammed into it was the real thing. I had a chat with the curator, he was interested that I had been to Mexico

and wondered if I could bring back artifacts for them but I said, “No, I don’t do that sort of thing.” Inadvertently, once I did that, but I don’t really do that. I leave things where they are.

The school I went to: people came up with a, not so much a scholarship for me; you don’t need a scholarship to go to a settlement house. I notice they have settlement houses in New York, some of them became quite famous because of the actor who went there. They actually had dormitories in these places where we could sleep, you know, if you were impoverished but you were doing something. But, they all joined in this mob of people who said, “You mustn’t box anymore, that’s ridiculous and blah, blah, blah.” It’s kind of difficult for me to go back to that time.

Notwithstanding these aspirations that I had; I had this contradictory thing that was physical and mental. With people on one side of the fence and other people on the other side of the fence, and definitely superior looking people on the right side of the fence. The settlement house was also where Michael Caine did some acting; learned to act. But, I said, “I never met him, I never went to school with him, I don’t know him.” Lee Montague was a Shakespearean actor who went to Toynbee Hall, the settlement house, when I went there. There were other people, but I don’t remember any Michael Caine. But, it’s a fact that Michael Caine was south of the river and in a gang. And we were pledged to slash them with razors; I don’t like to tell that to people but it is quite true. So, because he is from Southal we did not talk to these people and they did not talk to us. Anyway, about ten years ago there was a little bulletin that we received from New York and in it there was a telephone number to call Michael Caine and Harold Pinter who were having a party. And, here I am, living up here with my children and I thought, “There’s been a truce declared at long last.” Harold Pinter was from the East End of London, north of the river and that’s all that that meant to me. They were up to some sort of cultural skullduggery. He did Pinter’s play with Laurence Olivier, you know, they made a film out of that; The Rascals, you know. I thought, “My

God these people get on with one another!". And then I saw Michael Caine in a movie about his life and he was walking down the main street of his borough; it might not be Southal but it was near Southal. And it is an unmistakable fact that he is describing things that did not jive with the environment, you see. There was a Gay looking gentleman at a hair dressing shop with his hand on his hip watching, there were coach lamps that I had never seen before and finally Michael, who is a movie star, directed movies. And then he had to say: "You know this was once a dreadful place, where we would fight and blood would flow but it's kind of hard to believe right now, isn't it folks?" Because here he is in this pleasant neighborhood, you see. I understand exactly how he felt; that he was kind of embarrassed and assured us that this was a battleground during his youth, you see. And that doesn't seem believable. I remember George Orwell saying that he insulted working class youth and that they stank like cattle and the liberals demanded an explanation of this. He said, "Well what's younger or more handsome or healthier than a young soldier; a young British soldier who has been drafted into the Army?" He said, "Have you ever walked behind a battallion of these people, and how they smell like Hell?" They don't wear underwear! And it's a fact, we never wore underwear; pretty soon your pants would become permiated with urine and other deficants, you see. And these people stank, but now you see little boys running around the gutter in Gucci shoes and Italian cravats; life has changed.

Charles Armstrong Littler came from Steamboat Springs in Colorado.

(By the way it is the 24th of May, 2000.)

I am looking at the list of names of Hoffman students when I was studying there. Actually there are a lot of names that are really missing. Virginia was then the wife of Robert DeNiro (Sr). She was a student and actually a wonderful artist, she was good and God only knows why she gave that up, she was good. Miriam Schapiro, studied there, her husband's name was Paul Brack.. Meyer

Shapiro's wife had a medical practice, she was a doctor. She was a doctor of surgery and she had her practice in their home. Fay Lansner was a student and her husband Kermit Lansner was an editor for News Week. Also, the criticisms which were a weekly affair were of oil paintings. During the week you worked in charcoal on paper and it was understood that when the Master approached your work he could tear it in two or cut it with a knife or what have you: rearrange it. This was not minded. He would also draw on the work and sometimes you would get a very good drawing all in charcoal with the materials that you had on hand. These were rolled up as paintings of Hoffman. Anyway, the end of every week there was a criticism of work you were doing at home of oil paintings, this reminds me of a physician in a hospital, I don't know whether they still do it, I am sure they still do, where he will gather a bunch of interns who follow the surgeon and they will discuss the diagnosis made and so on and so forth. This was always the drama of the Hoffman School. You never knew who would come to the criticism; you would get reviewers there, critics there, people like Jacqueline Bouvier before she became the first lady. She also went to the summer school, sneaking out of Hyannis to study with Hoffman. But, you would never know who would be there to listen to criticism. At school once, I used to cut through this gate on Nickerson Lane and run a diagonal into the barn where we worked and I had a painting there and on the path was a lady and it was Marlene Deitrich: she had a puzzled look on her face and I ran into the the barn and they had they had all the expatriates from the "UFA". This was a German film company that produced all of these films. I don't know what it stands for, it stands for something in German. I was punished for that, I was advised never to enter the garden again. Some of these people would drift into the criticisms. This was in the summer time and I also attended the Hoffman school in Manhattan. Just before I went there, Jo Haines was a student there and we studied together and her husband was John and one day her husband drove by the school an

she said, “This is my last day here and we are heading for Alaska, do you wanna go?” And indeed they came to Alaska. So you meet all sorts of people, people who came from all over the place; all over the world who studied there. You don’t really see yourself studying with him, although I was with him for three winters and I think three summers. I would work in the garment industry during the winter and then go to night school and then the work season would end and then I would head for Provincetown. When I lived in Manhattan, while I was going to school I did my painting, I lived in a number of places. There were desirable places on Thompson Street, called cold-water flats. I don’t know what it meant because they were steam heated and you would get hot water from the faucet and they are called cold-water flats, so figure that out! The rents were around fifteen or seventeen dollars a month. I shared a place with my cousin. Then the next most desirable thing was when the city had condemned a building, the artists would move in. That’s where I found Robert DeNiro once, he lived in a condemned building, and these were really the most splendid places. I was very proud once when I found a building that had been condemned and I convinced DeKooning to move in there and painters like that. Then there was another condemned building on Second Avenue, just across from the Cooper Union, in what they now call the West Village. However, the building that we occupied was near the Brooklyn Bridge, the one that I discovered that was near Delancey Street. I went down there looking for kosher food to eat, you know, I had a craving for that and I discovered this condemned building. It is quite easy to live in a condemned building: if it was zoned industrial, you were home free. You could go in there; these were not condemned apartment buildings or slums, these were invariably industrial type buildings: lofts. Artists discovered that under the law the city can not cut off fuel to these buildings because this means that people are thrown out of work. So the only thing that you had to fear was people who wore these hats with Con Edison on them, who would arrive very dutifully at

8 in the morning and pound on the door. So the first floor was never really occupied because of this incessant banging. Believe it or not if the man was very conscientious he would quit banging on the door at noon. And if you had to do anything or go anywhere you would leave during his lunch break or people who wanted to get into the building would enter during the lunch break and then would be trapped for the rest of the day. We would lock it from the inside. We had everything: we had electricity and water 'cause these items could not be cut off because of the law. So these were the most desirable places to get into. I remember once on Second Avenue the people came from the utility company and there was a little cafeteria on the corner and when the man would stop banging on the door he would head for that cafeteria and we suspect during the morning he would go in there and at noon we would all come piling out and we would go into the cafeteria and we would eat and we would watch this fellow and the minute he started cleaning up we would all run back into the building. Those were the most desirable buildings. We were living there, painting there, doing all sorts of things there. Once again there were people from all over the place.