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Interviewee: Vincent Astor

Interviewer: Dorothy Svgdik

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DOROTHY SVGDIK: Awesome, Well thank you so much Mr. Astor for coming and letting me talk to you and I thought I'd start just with when and where you were born.

ASTOR: I was born December 6, St. Nicholas day, in 1953, the same year that Elizabeth the second was crowned queen, I became queen, and I was born about three blocks from this college on the corner of, well I was born in a hospital, but my family home is three blocks from here on the corner of North Trezevant and North Parkway. So I'm a native Memphian.

SVGDIK: Cool, cool, cool and tell me some about your family.

ASTOR: I am descended from immigrants. I'm actually second generation. My father's parents were both German. Let's see no, one was German and one was a Swiss or half Swiss. His grandparents

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were both German. I knew my mother's father who was--full Italian and he and all the people he knew spoke with accents and her mother was from Whiteville, Tennessee, and never left the state of Tennessee for a long time until long after she was married. And her father was Irish so I've got a lot of that late 19th century immigrant in me, German, Italian, a little Swiss, a little Irish. My grandfather owned a grocery store which was in the north of where the skate shop is next to Dinos and that's how he found himself in this neighborhood. He was a butcher and owned a grocery store. My father was a locomotive engineer. My

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mother taught school and worked at the IRS and did several things and my parents traveled extensively. My father was raised in Fort Pickering which was a small town and became a suburb and now there's not much left of it except Desoto Park down or Native American Park down by the metal museum and mother was born and raised in Memphis. What else?

SVGDIK: Did you have any siblings?

ASTOR: Yes, I have one younger brother, and we have nothing in common but parents.

SVGDIK: How was it growing up? Or even your relationship with your sibling kind of building off of that or just in general.

ASTOR: I had a very good upbringing, and I brag about it often. Because we didn't have everything we wanted, but we had everything that we needed

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plus a little bit. My parents adored one another. They were married nearly 60 years when we lost daddy in 2000, and my Italian grandfather also adored my mother, but he died in '64 and life changed a lot after that and I became very close to my mother's mother but my mother and I have always been very close. They were married in '42, and they waited until '53 to have me. You know I didn't come until '53 so they waited a long time for me so my coming was an event of great joy especially to my Italian grandfather. My father's parents had both long been dead but, you know, the grandson was the big thing. He was (my Italian grandfather) ~~the youngest in his family.~~ I think he had, what, ~~four~~ five brothers

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and two sisters (one did not come to America) ~~one sister.~~ My father had three sisters and about five brothers. He came from a really big family, and he was the youngest. ~~So was my Italian grandfather, was the youngest in his family.~~

SVGDIK: Is a lot of your family still in Memphis? Did you grow up with any relatives around?

ASTOR: Yes I still have cousins. Mostly, not too many first cousins but a bunch of second cousins are still around and I don't know a lot of their children but we have pretty good family on both sides.

SVGDIK: So kind of switching gears, tell me about your education, how was, where did you go to school elementary, middle, high school?

ASTOR: I went to parochial schools in the years before there was a middle school I went four years to

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St. Dominic school for boys and four years along with my brother and my mother (who had gone into teaching) at Blessed Sacrament. I was in the parochial system, and then I went to Christian Brothers High School but I don't talk about it much.

SVGDIK: Why not?

ASTOR: Well.

SVGDIK: If you mind me asking...

ASTOR: I'm trying to think how to put this. If I had not seen it for sure for myself, I would have thought that the football was in the tabernacle and the sacrament was elsewhere. The jocks ruled, and I was not a jock and so I was very much on the fringe out there, it was just real real different. And of course I was coming to terms with myself and you know P.E. and the shower and all these young handsome athletes

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And we also went out of town every weekend so I did very little extra curricular activity. I didn't do any high school theater. One of my majors in college was theater. I went into theater after school and I was one of the founders of the Southwestern Renaissance Festival back in the '74, but the emphasis on sports was so radical it warped me. I am totally and utterly indifferent to any and all sporting events. I don't care. And people around me. I just don't understand how straight men can talk about which way a ball went last night, why, why it should've gone the other direction and why so and so should've caught it but he did and it's the same framework it's just a different ball and it goes on for hours

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just hours. That's one way that I'm pretty much a stereotype is totally and utterly indifferent, which is why Southwestern was a good place because athletics have their place but in my day in the early 70's they existed, they really weren't even as important as they are now. It just wasn't a big deal and everybody didn't go to every game.

Interviewer: It's the same right now, so strange, but so in high school, what did you kind of turn to or what were your interests?

ASTOR: I took Latin for four years, I was interested in theater but couldn't come to rehearsal but the thing that changed my life happened while I was in high school. I fell in love with the Orpheum theater. I'm a keyboardist

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And the Orpheum theater has a three-manual Wurlitzer organ in it that was going through a revival at the time and I quit going out of town with my family on the weekends to hang out at the Orpheum which was named the Malco then and it culminated in my going to work there, being there when the Orpheum first became a stage theater being there during its first renovation, which was really a dream come true, but the first time I looked up, in the light of the projector, and saw how beautiful it was I was hooked. I couldn't believe. It was the most beautiful building I've ever seen and I'd been to Europe. No, I hadn't been to Europe yet I was still in high school. My graduation present from high school was a month in Europe, and I have been associated with that theater all my life in one way or another. I haven't worked there since '87 but I'm working on a book about Memphis movie theaters which is one of those

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Arcadia picture books which it hasn't been done before and it's been a lot of fun and the few people that are left that have all the old stories I've been meeting and talking to you know. I'm going to have to write another one just to collect all these.

SVGDIK: How were you first drawn to the Orpheum?

ASTOR: I was watching True Grit. I think it was the summer of, whenever it was, the old one with Kim Darby and John Wayne. It was '68 or '69, maybe it was '69, and I looked up and it's got some of the biggest chandeliers in West Tennessee, you know, I'm a big chandelier queen, and I have actually restored theater light fixtures. I've been bitten by every light fixture in the Orpheum theater.

SVGDIK: Speaking of light fixtures in the Orpheum Theatre...

[10:00]

Is that still rolling? So yes.

ASTOR: There's an outside switch. (re camcorder) And I've done that out of town and I've given, consulted, on some of that, but it was just the most beautiful place I'd ever seen and I wanted to hang around there and when the movie company Malco who still runs, you know, the Studio on the Square and a bunch of other theatres sold the building, I was the one they kept because I knew where the fuses and the skeletons were. So I have been in both kinds of ~~that~~ businesses so it was really a dream come true to see it renovated in the '82 and '83.

SVGDIK: So I assume you were or remained attached to the Orpheum while in college and you mentioned you went to Southwestern, could you tell me some more about your college experience.

[11:00]

ASTOR: I went to Southwestern at a very interesting period in its history. It was a very liberal and very open period because it was right before Jim Daughdrill came and it became much more conservative after that for a long while. That was the year of ***IR-RA IVY* was in a league** (“Our Ivy is in a League”) By Itself was the motto but I was in the theater department. Communication arts was the major, we all called it Commi Arts and the theater, I think the newspaper office is in the basement on Palmer hall in room 6 now, when I was here that was the theater. McCoy was a sorority house. We did theater in the basement which was better than doing it at Hardie where it had been done before that.

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It was very vibrant. ***Ray Hill*** was in that department, Betty ***Rufun*** (Ruffin) was in that department. She was a ***savoy yard***, (Savoyard) follower of Gilbert Sullivan and very Shakespearian and **Ray Hill** was much more contemporary theater and so forth although he had a long standing character on channel five on the children's show (Loony Zoo) Tiny the Clown. You see his portrait there's a picture of a black faced white eye clown. That was his character on channel five. And very interesting time to be here, what was it, is the Bellingrath six, eight, or twelve. The sit in that happened in Bellingrath hall because everyone was lobbying for coed dorms, and it was a little bit early for that, but there was a dorm swap.

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So there was a women's dorm which was Bellingrath in the men's quad and Voorhies Townsend was the men's dorm in the women's quad. Now I don't know what it is now, is it still pretty separated?

SVGDIK: It's funny cause we actually just I think last year had a big debate of having coed dorms and it was again kind of denied for us.

ASTOR: But are there still one of each on the opposite side of campus?

SVGDIK: Yeah some are more predominantly one rather than the other.

ASTOR: But there were women on that side, men on that side yes ok so that hasn't changed much.

SVGDIK: So what was it that drew you to kind of theater, how was acting for you or did you do more behind the scenes, what were you involved in?

[14:00]

ASTOR: Here, I was the front man and the stage manager. I didn't get on the stage much except for the renaissance festival which started in third term of '74 and lasted about ten years but I come by my drama naturally. My mother is very dramatic in a lot of ways and so legitimate drama as well as you know life drama, and I liked theater. I did a little bit in grammar school, but I didn't do any in high school because I was never around, but I was the one (of all those people who did theater in high school) who actually went into theater. There are pictures of me all over the Memphian room in various productions at Circuit and Playhouse on the Square and at Theater Works and I bartended at Playhouse on the Square for fourteen seasons

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so I was kind of a fixture during the 80's.

SVGDIK: So is that what you did when you graduated, what did you move into then?

ASTOR: I went to work for Malco. I was working for Malco, and then, down at the Orpheum. I was there oh at least 17 years with a short hiatus. In fact, one of my projects in theater arts well not theater arts, what was it, maybe it was theater arts. The very first class I took had a field trip down to the Malco, where I played the organ and showed them the old backdrops and demonstrated some things. So that was fun.

SVGDIK: I'm sorry I'm looking at my list of prompts. What was social life like for you, I'm trying to, I guess [16:00]

during college maybe post college?

ASTOR: Well that part of the 70's as far, you're talking about the gay and lesbian community?

SVGDIK: Yeah if that--

ASTOR: or just in general?

SVGDIK: whatever you feel like--

ASTOR: Ok I had friends - you know I didn't make many friends. My-- German was my other major so I knew a lot of people in that department, but I didn't start making friends that I kept until I got into theater. You know we were all crazy and we were all doing stuff and it was... Oh, I don't know they were really very creative people, and we just got together, you know, and I made friends and there was a group that I ran in which were all in the theater department primarily.

SVGDIK: And what did you guys do hanging out? What, I guess, stands out as some of the--?

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ASTOR: Well, we had a favorite pizza parlor over on Jackson Avenue. It was the ancestor of Broadway Pizza which is on Broad St, it's the same family. And hung out around campus, you know, went to one another's rooms and people that lived off campus. I had a party for my theater arts class down at mother's. It was a ball, actually, we moved the dining room table off of the floor and danced and waltzed and **Betty *Ruffin*** came as, ***Ms. Talula Bank*** (Miss Tallulah Bankhead) came. Mostly we hung out together, because so many people lived on campus. So I hung out here a lot. Mostly here.

SVGDIK: Did you live on campus?

ASTOR: No, I even got out of the dorm requirement because I lived three blocks away. I mean, it was pretty silly. I was one of the few people that walked to college.

SVGDIK: And what was it like not living on campus for you?

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ASTOR: Well it was interesting. It wasn't far away, but it was sort of--I was at home. So I wasn't in an apartment or anything. It was a pretty different experience. I and my friends were having very different experiences although there were some townies here in that circle. But, you know, we'd hang out and go visit people in their dorm rooms. And it was a very... somewhat turbulent time. I went through three college presidents when I was here. I'm trying to think of them. Bowden was president and then, Daughdrill's first year he was president. And I forget who the third one was. One didn't stay but a couple

of years. Then Daughdrill stayed like forever. And the president that was here when I first came...I'm trying to remember who that was...

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ASTOR: It'll float to the top in a minute. But I was here for three presidents. So there was an awful lot...there were the three college presidents. There was a major civic episode when I was here. There were people being accosted and raped in Overton Park. Men. It was a guy who was termed the Midtown Molester. In those days there were very few street lines, no fence, and the campus was just wide open from Jackson to Parkway. Oddly enough it was the men that were violent. Security had beefed up everything. And it turned out when they caught him,

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the first article, the morning paper came out and the way they described him without giving his name I went, "Oh My God." And I got here and ran into another student who had also been at CBHS and I said "Did you read that?" The guy had been a substitute teacher at my high school. Nothing had transpired and we knew exactly who he was, how weird he was, he was fired after one semester and it was a mess. This was either my junior year or my sophomore year. Whichever one it was. But it was a very interesting time. It was not dull at all. And then, you know, we had the renaissance festival that lasted two years. That was a real driving force. It took a lot of organizing and people that were doing it. It was a brand new thing and they were real committed to it and so forth. We had a joust out on the North forty

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...for like three years running. That's...I don't know. There's some fields there now, but it's due North of McCoy. It used to all just be grass.

SVGDIK: So, how did you come to be involved in the renaissance?

ASTOR: It was the theater department that did it. A person who founded what was called the New Southwestern Players- that was the drama club. His name was George Edward Shaw, but everyone called him Punch. And he'd heard of the Renaissance Pleasure Fairs and rather than it being centered around arts and crafts, that sort of thing, this one was centered about theatrical cuttings and performances. We did Everyman (proper name of a medieval play) in the cloister and used one of the deep window sills for his tomb. We did cuttings from Shakespeare. We did a lot of it outdoors. And just using the campus, really, we did things in front of Burrow

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and had crafts people set up behind Palmer and we used Halliburton bell for the royal processions. We would peal the bell. In fact we broke it, not the bell itself, but the mechanism got broken so we didn't get it for graduation mine was a weird graduation. The bell wouldn't work because the queen was late. I told the guy, I said, "Keep it

ringing.” And something went wrong and it messed up. That was the year that it was raining so I didn’t graduate in the garden. I graduated in Mallory. So it was fine, but it was a different graduation.

SVGDIK: Did a lot of people from the Memphis community come out for that kind of thing do you remember?

ASTOR: In the beginning it was a small number and then it grew and it grew so much. That’s one of the reasons it ended

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because security got very, very antsy about that many off-campus people being on here. Because it was very, very successful. And always was centered around theatrical performances. The Frazier-Jelke amphitheater was another one we used quite often.

SVGDIK: I think- to kind of redirect the conversation I am interested in asking what the process of coming to terms with your sexuality was like and when you came out and that kind of thing. So anything you’re willing to kind of divulge.

ASTOR: Well, I came out to myself when I was in high school. You know, why I was admiring all these men, why I had this collection of

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movie stills and so forth of bare chested men and so on and so forth. And the Paris Adult Theater had opened during that time and so I had that outlet to go and cruise the magazines. And I looked in the mirror one day and said “Honey, you’re funny.” And it explained a lot of things. Well I actually came out more or less publicly. I started going...my first visits to the bars were when I was here at college and I met other gay people. I fell in love. My first love was here. But he was a switch hitter (bisexual). I don’t know why switch hitters are always attracted to me. But, that’s another whole story. There was somebody who wanted to freak out their roommate for some reason.

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So I turned up in drag at a dorm party one night. It was very early drag and I had been collecting things, a few things. So I raided my mother’s make up and ended up, you know, it became a pastime. Because I was not good looking when I was very young. I was real kinda dorky, all I was was young. I wanted to be pretty, so I took to doing drag thinking that I would be closer to being pretty. And the way I went out was always pretty flamboyant. And I said, “If they don’t look at me when I’m out of drag, they’ll look at least twice when I am.” And that was my whole philosophy. I wasn’t a regular performer. I was a performer at a lot of benefit shows. I organized the first AIDS benefit Memphis ever had.

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In 1983. That was sometime later. I also appeared in big drag shows for muscular dystrophy. And appeared on television. What year was that? I must have been out of college. Maybe it was in the mid-70s. Somebody, his name was **Buddy Haynes** and he was big and fat so he went by **Cas Michaels** (Cass Michaels after Cass Eliot). And decided he would do this big drag benefit for Jerry's kids, and the first year they raised several thousand dollars and people came from all over and went to this long, long show. Drag benefits start late and run too long. That's one thing they always do. The locals wouldn't take it on the telethon, so they called Las Vegas and they said if they don't take it, we will. And for several years running

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after that I was one of the people that would take the money- clean off my face, dress up, and take the money to the telethon on behalf of the Memphis gay community. At the time, the drags pretty much ruled because they were the out people, they were the attitude people, they were the ones that would get arrested because there was an ordinance against female impersonation in Memphis. Against crossdressing, excuse me, in Memphis. They were the ones, you know, that bore the brunt of a lot of things, a lot of the ridicule. But if you could talk a couple of drag queens into doing a benefit show ~~for~~ (you might raise) two or three thousand dollars. Part of it was a feel-good thing. For the community to be in our own space, raising money for some sort of a good cause. We were contributing it as ourselves

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and doing something unique to us. Memphis had Cotton Carnival, which was our version...it wasn't exactly like Mardi Gras it had a different purpose. But there were groups called Secret Societies in those days and they were all high society people that paraded around and just honored their own kings and queens in the parades. Well, there were three gay ~~clubs~~. ~~Two~~ gay ball clubs. And their sole purpose was to give a grand ball every year like the Mardi Gras krewes do. It was the biggest social event of the year. It was very much like a Mardi Gras ball with the big parade of costumes and dancing and they were hugely successful and usually it benefitted some charity.

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In those days, it was really something. It was. Like I said the drags ruled, and I had my place among them at the time.

SVGDIK: So were there specific locations that tended to have more drag or where these big benefits would be put on or certain clubs where people who enjoyed drag would go to?

ASTOR: Yes, there was usually a main drag bar. There were drag shows at a number of the bars. But the main drag bar was called George's. And it was on Madison right where the BBQ place is. Right there on Madison and Idlewild. You know where The Vine is?

SVGDIK: Yes.

ASTOR: That little row of storefronts there? That's where it was. It started out with one and it eventually took up the entire set

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of stores except for the laundry. And it has a long history. There is a history of George's. If you go on Facebook to a group called Friends of George's. I wrote it and it's published there. You can find it. That's the name of the entity on Facebook and you can get the whole history of that bar there. There were a number of bars in the 70s. There was the most popular disco and the big drag bar, a lot of little neighborhood type bars some mostly men some mostly women. An interesting thing about Memphis that people from out of town ~~never really~~, they always marvel at it, is that there is not a lot of separatism in Memphis. The gays and lesbians always got along very well with one another. They had their own spaces,

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but there wasn't a bar in Memphis that men weren't allowed. Although there was a men's bar for a long time where drag queens were not allowed and there were lots of back and forth and back and forth about that. I was in the thick of that as well because the owner was a good friend of mine. In fact, we actually chaired Pride together in 1995. But, these are all making a long story. Now the benefit shows could be anywhere. In fact, we did one year the muscular dystrophy benefit took place in two places. One of them was what's now Dru's on Madison and McNeal, which is right down from that big grocery store on Madison. And then it was at **The Front Page**, which didn't have a stage. It had a fair sized dance floor.

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It was in a building that's no longer there on Cleveland right next to one of the entrances to Crump Stadium. On the North side of Crump Stadium, there's (was) a row of stores that aren't there anymore. There were some... We had one big benefit in the gymnasium behind the dairy that's next to ~~Molly's~~. Molly's and Blue Monkey on Madison. Behind that dairy is what's left of the old Jewish Community Center. The only building there was a gym and it's been a disco and a bingo hall and a number of different things. We had a big, big benefit there. And then sometimes it was at bars. Sometimes it wasn't. So it just depended.

SVGDIK: And, what was it about drag as a way to fundraise? What's the connection there?

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ASTOR: At drag shows, the performers get tipped and they make most of their money in tips. And some of them can make quite a lot of money in tips. At the benefit shows there was usually a cover charge and then all the tips went to the fundraiser.

SVGDIK: And the fundraisers who put this on, were they just, what types of charities would host, kind of, the...

ASTOR: Well it was hosted by individuals and the community. And the drags themselves. And then given to the charity. As the years grew on sometimes there would be some representative there. A very astonished representative and walk home with this pile of money. It was all sorts of charities. Mostly within the community. And we would do benefits for individuals too.

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If somebody had a big hospital bill, we bought headstones, we bought funeral arrangements, we bought...Muscular dystrophy was the biggest. We did a benefit for the animal shelter once, I remember. We did benefits to help found the Gay & Lesbian Community Center. But there's so many, you know. In the library and at the Gay Community Center in Cooper Young is a collection of periodicals that were published from December '79 until sometime in the early '90s and you just have to look through there and see what was being benefitted. Because there were hundreds.

SVGDIK: Yeah, and *Will Batts* has actually showed me some of their archives and it's just incredible what's over there. I was curious how you would characterize

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the gay and lesbian community in Memphis at this time.

ASTOR: It was very insular. There were a lot of little clubs and organizations and so forth. The only thing that...A big benefit would get a whole group of people together. It wasn't until we started fighting AIDS that it became really a community effort. People who wouldn't speak to one another at the bar were sitting next to one another stuffing envelopes for that cause. Now, the main thing that brings a huge number of people together is Pride. Because it's gotten...the gay and lesbian space is not what it once was because when you went to the bar you felt safe even during the years of the raids and the arrests and so forth.

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You need less of that now because you can take your partner and go out to dinner anywhere you want to and go to a play or go to a movie. There's no stigma. There's no

fear of being out there with a same sex partner. Back in the '70s and before that you had to go to gay space. In fact, it was called "Covergirls." A gay and a lesbian couple would double date so they would be two couples. Some men would invite women friends of theirs who may or may not have been lesbian when they went out as Covergirls. Men (gay men who escorted women) were "Beards." You can hear that in some of the Hollywood biographies and so forth about somebody needing an escort.

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Cesar Romero was one of them, you know, who was as queer as pink ink and he would escort Joan Crawford out and such like that. So it would be a nice looking man to escort someone and then they'd sort of go their separate ways. Starlets would get a little annoyed at this because they'd set them up an escort and they'd escort in and they'd be there for the pictures and then they'd run off with their own cronies and leave these starlets sitting at the table with one another. There's a lot of that in Hollywood biographies. Beards and Covergirls.

SVGDIK: Did you ever find any...I guess what I am trying to ask is...Within the larger gay and lesbian community, more about the sub part of it maybe the drag community? Did you ever feel a sense of community with other drag artists?

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ASTOR: It's a funny situation. You know, you're all in the same cramped, not very clean, below-par dressing room and you're doing the same thing and you sort of...I always got along with everybody. I think one of the reasons I did was because I didn't do pageants. There is a whole, in fact it's national, Miss Gay America is a big national deal now. But, there were Miss This and Miss That and they'd turn into Miss County and Miss State and Miss America. But they were competitions, which were just like the others, on costume, several different kinds of costume, but mostly on talent. I never did pageants and I never competed.

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I was Lady Astor, I didn't need to be Miss Anybody. While I'm on that subject I was reviewing it. One time I was over at somebody's house just playing around and I put on this blonde wig. The hair was just stuck up everywhere. And I said I look just like Endora, which is Samantha's mother on Bewitched, Agnes Moorehead. So now you remember. And I said well that'd be a good drag name for you. Well I wore a lot of evening gowns just out because I didn't perform regularly at any place. It was called street drag and I just wanted to be pretty and wear dresses. I owned several wedding dresses and I would go out in these pretty white satin things and one of the established performers, Michelle Marie Hayes, God rest her, said, "Oh, you look just like Lady Astor.

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That's what we'll call you!" And it stuck. My drag name was Lady Astor. Or Lady A when I wrote for the newspaper.

SVGDIK: That was something I wanted to ask you about too. You did a lot of contributing to publications in Memphis relating to the gay and lesbian community. Tell me some about that experience.

ASTOR: Well, it was a column called 'Quick Clips.' And it was little snippets of information or upcoming events. Something that ~~was not~~, needed be mentioned, but there wasn't enough about it to make an article about it. Announcing a benefit was just a blip. Now, covering it, what happened and who was in it, was an article. So, it was really sort of special events and what's going on around town

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and why people thought it was the gossip column, I'll never know. But, I started writing this special events column, and I was never home. I was always running around to all these places finding out what was going on because the bar community was very extensive. There were a number of- I was talking about it being insular- there were a number of clubs that did things, there were the three ball clubs. One of them was the Mystic Krewe of Apollo, which started in New Orleans, but it was all male. So in Memphis, the women founded the Mystic Krewe of Aphrodite. Aphrodite outlasted all the men's clubs because all they did was host different shows, raise money, and give it away. They lasted over 20 years. It was very much like a sorority. But, that's what they did. And they were very, very popular shows with some of the regular drags, but mostly it was the women doing lip syncing.

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One of their most famous numbers was a woman- I'll think of Carol's (Heinrich) last name in a minute- who could impersonate Dolly Parton and she would do Dolly Parton and they would do Lil' Bitty Pissant Country Place from Best Little Whorehouse in Texas with women playing all the roles, and it was a lot of fun. That made a lot of money and my big number, it was Bette Midler's Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy from Divine Madness. We would go into the chapel and I would come out in this outrageous hoop wedding gown. On the album or in the video, there's a bride in which they're changing clothes. Well, we did, too. And the first time we did it, we were in three lime *green and black* (green WAC) uniforms. And the thing was

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choreographed. A lot of drag back then and I think still is. It's called the drag queen two-step. You lip sync and you shake your finger and you do a lot of this and stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp to the other end of the stage and do it again. Stomp, stomp, stomp to the middle and do it again. That's what was referred to as the drag queen two-step. It was

running around, but it wasn't really choreography. And a lot of people were really admired and later on it was the people who won pageants who were actually choreographed. This was choreographed by a theater person. It was really wonderful. It raised thousands of dollars because they always wanted an encore. We would never do it unless we got one dollar for each star in the flag. We would not do the encore until we got fifty dollars. Upfront.

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And the encore was always different from the number before. We would do something special. A lot of times I would do it. There's pictures in here I think. I would run offstage and drop my skirt so I would be in hose and pants and a coat and I usually did it with two men in camis. But we were all wearing heels. And so they would run off and take off the camis and we would all come back and we'd be doing the same choreography in hose and heels. With no bottoms on. We varied it a lot. We would do propellers. That was my immortal drag number. It is on tape.

SVGDIK: Oh my gosh. That's so exciting! Based on my understanding,

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drag and the pageants were a big deal in and for Memphis. Why do you think it was here, or why did it take off so well?

ASTOR: Memphis was a real drag town. You know, like I said drag ruled back then. People liked it. Men and women would like to see the drags because the drags were trying to be beautiful. Lesbians are after beautiful women. They're watching the show and of course a lot of the most popular singers at the time were being lip synced to. So it was music that you really liked and these people trying very hard to be feminine and beautiful, so it was very popular. Memphis was one of those towns that liked to watch drag shows. Some towns are less and some more. Memphis was one of the ones that was an entertainment that was generally enjoyed by all--

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All across the board in the community.

SVGDIK: Why do you think that is?

ASTOR: Don't know. Well, the very first public drag pageant in Memphis took place at what is now the Evergreen Theater on Halloween night of 1969, you know, coincidentally, you know, less than six months after the Stonewall rebellion. Well, they had had a Miss Memphis pageant at a Halloween party the night before--year before. The manager of the theater, which was called The Guild, it was a foreign theater- foreign films and art films, his name was **Bill Kendall**, he's still alive. (died since the interview)

He decided to hold Miss Memphis at The Guild. They got around the crossdressing ordinance because it was Halloween

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and the room was peppered with RGs. Real Girls. The cops came, but no one was arrested and after that it started getting better. It wasn't any gay activism that changed the ordinance. It was the advent of the pantsuit for women. When women began to wear and be allowed to wear pantsuits in the workplace, to church, and cocktail level dress, you couldn't enforce it! The women were technically crossdressing. I mean a pantsuit looked very much like a leisure suit. And they were all polyester. All of them. So the ordinances kind of fell off the books. There was one famous trial

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when five people- six people- were arrested for being in drag. They took it to court and the judge threw it out because the ordinance was no longer enforced. This was after '75, I think. I'm trying to remember. Right around '75, which was the year I graduated.

SVGDIK: That's such a crazy story of how that kind of got reversed...

ASTOR: It's the truth. In Memphis, at least, it's the truth. Most of the activism by the drags was attitude.

SVGDIK: That was something that I was curious about, too, is, for you at least, how political were you? Or was, in some way,

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drag a political thing for you?

ASTOR: I was one of the participants in the political activism who happened to do drag. Of course we did benefit shows for the Memphis Gay Coalition, which was the political activist group who did benefit shows and where a lot of people in drag were involved. I just happened to be...In fact there were some times, especially when the first AIDS service organization was founded, that there was some amount of prejudice against me as being a spokesperson because I did drag and it was so much a part of my life. It went the other direction a time or two, like in the early marches and so forth. I may or may not have been...if you go to a march in drag you're really committed

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because it's hot and it's uncomfortable and you're usually in some costume or some formal wear and piles of heavy jewelry and all painted like a Comanche, as they used to say. It's not fun. It's not fun under some kind of a God awful wig, maybe on your shoulders and it's June in Memphis. I was politically active partly because when the

coalition formed I wanted to make friends that weren't at the bar. I figured I would have stronger friendships if I was outside the bar. Because of the way things were in those days, you might speak to someone in the bar who wouldn't speak to you on the street. Last names you seldom knew, which is why I got accustomed to introducing myself with both names. I put both names on church

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nametags and so forth because I wanted to be my whole self. That political activism really bolstered me up about that. Of course, another thing it did was made me very hypersensitive to the way I'm treated. In the workplace and everywhere else. But, that's just the way I am. That was what the movement was all about was how we were treated. First class or second class. Ridiculous or serious. That's the whole point. Here's a bunch of strange looking drag queens doing these lip sync numbers and here's three thousand dollars for muscular dystrophy that we raised. What was said is that one year the only entity that raised

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more was the fire department. One of the telethons. That's what was said. The person who said it tended to exaggerate. We came close. We came among the top five for the first few years we did it. And then we started having our own concerns in our own community. And then, you know, shied away from muscular dystrophy because of the things we had to raise money for. Money wasn't coming from anywhere.

SVGDIK: Well, very cool! At this point I would like to- I understand you brought some things so in the last few minutes I was wondering what you would like to share.

ASTOR: Well...

SVGDIK: I'm so excited!

ASTOR: This was my trademark and I made lots of friends at the disco because I always had fans. Discos are real hot and sweaty and I always had a fan. Lots of people would gravitate

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towards me once I got off the dance floor. And you can't have a fairy without a wand. I identify a lot with the Radical Faerie movement, which is an alternative movement of men who frequently live in community and many of them are rural. There's a publication called RFD, Radical Faerie Digest, that's been going on for well over 20 years. These are like the fringe people. One of the better known ones at the one in Tennessee is Sister Missionary Delite, one of the original Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence from San Francisco. I wouldn't be worth my salt, wouldn't be worth my powder if I didn't bring my tiara. Is it right?

[54:00]

SVGDIK: A little that way. Beautiful.

ASTOR: The community center has started doing a prom every year. The prom you can take to whoever you want to or the prom that you missed when you were in high school. And, you know, it's a prom! So I wore a tiara.

SVGDIK: Of course, yay!

ASTOR: And this was one of my treasures. This was made for Cass Michaels by a costumer for Opera Memphis who was a dear friend of mine. He had a heart condition and died in the '90s. This is all sewn together. It's not a lot of glue and stuff. It's a neck piece. It was made for Cass and I ended up with it. And I wore it. And this is my fairy star. It's a lucky crystal star that goes with the...and I have marched in Washington in wings. I have fairy wings.

[55:00]

One of the benefits was a Mardi Gras ball at which this set of jewels was made for me, and I have the bracelets with me.

SVGDIK: Oh, wow.

ASTOR: And there is a diadem that goes with it.

SVGDIK: Oh my gosh.

ASTOR: If you looked in the library in the community center, there was a shadow box...

SVGDIK: I was gonna ask if that was the same- yeah!

ASTOR: That's the **stomacher** that went with the **sack** (set) and there was something about one of the anniversaries at the community center. I showed them that because I never could find another place to really wear it. It was made for one gown. They put it in that shadow box and they couldn't light it and so they had these little **phoneme lights** (votive lights) in front of it. There's me in that picture and this sequined thing. They made me into a shrine!

SVGDIK: Oh no!

ASTOR: I mean there was a shrine to Lady A. You've seen my picture over the door of the library. That's the best picture.

[56:00]

Oh and I don't know if I found that or not. That was the best picture ever taken of Lady A.

SVGDIK: Oh, wow.

ASTOR: That was from on one of the Gay River Cruises that was a big deal in the 1970s. That lasted for 20 years, too. Here's me in a kind of a Dolly Parton moment.

SVGDIK: Yeah!

ASTOR: Without the boobs. What else is in here? I did drag on stage actually. I did it a couple of times at Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square. There was a memorable production of *Cabaret* that was directed by a man named Mark Martinez. That's in front of my face. That's not good. That's not good.

[57:00]

It was a very dark production of cabaret and Fraulien Kost, if you're familiar with the character- she's the one that causes a lot of trouble- was done by Mark Chambers in drag. He's still an actor he lives in San Francisco with his partner of many, many, many, many years. He was a hairdresser so his drag name was (Henna Rintz) **Henaritz**. * They were frequently very clever names. Kitty Litter and Lily White. ***Suffonda*** **Peters**. (Sofonda Peters a play on the words "so fond of") Trixie Thunderpussy. Suffonda just died, but Trixie is still around. Suffonda was a florist. **And Barry Wardina**. (Barry Guarino) He could look, like, Divine in drag. Big and fat and he wasn't good looking at all. So he went the other direction. He was this big fat ugly drag and he used to do Rocky Top

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in a big wig with a little child's cowboy hat perched on top and a skirt made of red checker tablecloths. That's the kind of comedy we did. It must not have been in here...there's another one in an album somewhere of me doing Ado Annie and I Cain't Say No. (from "Oklahoma") I had this red velvet dress with lots of little white lace ruffles and I'd stand up there, "It ain't so much a question, of, not knowing what to do..." I wasn't really beautiful in drag. So it worked. That was another one that I did a lot. This is probably one of my better costumes. It was made by the same costumer, Chris Hanley. This is a duplicate of a Walter Plunkett design

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that was designed for *Gone with the Wind*. It's now in the permanent collection of the Memphis Pink Palace, you see.

SVGDIK: This dress?

ASTOR: This dress.

SVGDIK: Oh my gosh.

ASTOR: And this is me in it before it faded. There's a photograph in the book called Scarlet Fever that has all the costume stills from the picture. It was supposed to be the ball gown for India Wilkes and it wasn't used because it made her look too pretty. But there is a picture of Alicia Rhett in this same dress. Here are the bracelets.

SVGDIK: Oh, for the...

ASTOR: They go with the collar

SVGDIK: Oh, wow.

ASTOR: There's a whole set. These are the matching ones that match the stomacher that you saw at the community center. I left it over there. I had no use for it. I said, "Oh, why not?" The picture of me wearing it on the

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Mardi Gras costume is the one that's in there, which was sort of semi-semi. It wasn't serious drag. It was Mardi Gras drag. Let me see what's in here.

SVGDIK: So what was getting the costumes for it like? It seems like they were so intricate. Were there people who specifically made these?

ASTOR: They were made. There were seamstresses who would make dresses that would fit and look well on performers. Some of them could go in and buy them right off the rack. We always hated those bitches. It was a lot more costume. There was a lot more made stuff in the early days. I got a lot of my things at the

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second-hand stores. You could sort of go in there and do it and people thought...they didn't say anything. It was all second-hand anyway. The people in pageants, though, would spend lots of money. It depends on the time too. During the era of those evening dresses which were all beads and sequins, you remember that, they had big shows, the early dynasty...Every drag queen in a pageant had to have one of those dresses and they cost tens of thousands of dollars. Of course the prize money is good too. You'll get engagements that pay you pretty well. Drag is not a real good living for 90% of people that do it. But it's something that you sort of need to do and it's a little extra change. There's status in the community, too. Especially in the old days when the drags ruled.

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That's one of the reasons that...I wanted to be important as well as be pretty and so I started doing these benefits. And I was in theater. See, I was in theater school, I worked at the Orpheum so I got away with a lot.

SVGDIK: Well, I don't have any more questions for you really. I would like to know if...this project started I was given three names to kind of talk to. And if you had to give me the next three people I should talk to, who would you suggest?

ASTOR: Well, who have you talked to so far?

SVGDIK: I've spoken with you, and I've spoken with Mr. Solomon, Steven Solomon and I believe I'll speak with Audrey May as well. So those are the three I was told to start with.

ASTOR: Tommy Stewart. You know, he was the one I was going to give my place to

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because he's kind of on the edge. He owned a bar. He owned the dive bar. He was also the first President of the AIDS Service Organization in Memphis. Now, this is what's interesting- and I don't know how much of this you're going to show- but Tommy Stewart is over six feet. A redneck Republican. Redneck Republican. Was very racist. Racially, it was very strange in Memphis because the bars were all integrated, but due to the atmosphere at the time there were percentages. There were a few black people who were always hooty and a lot of fun, but if it started getting to be a lot of black people, white people would quit coming

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because they would see it as a takeover. Of course the culture of black clubs is much different than the culture of white clubs and white drag bars. He was a big one on percentages. Even when he owned discos. He got into trouble for it too. But, he was the perfect first President of what's now Friends for Life because people quite bluntly couldn't imagine that this six foot redneck Republican was a cocksucker in a long term relationship and ran the dive bar. Tommy Stewart ran one of the bars—one of the ones that ran the longest. Sharon Wray, who lives right around the corner from the community center, was- W, R, A, Y is her last name- owned a women's bar for many, many, many years,

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which did drag shows. They go way, way back. Back as far as Steve. They were on the other side of the bar. I was thinking of somebody who...a name popped up the other day. Somebody that needs to be interviewed.

SVGDIK: Not to put you on the spot!

ASTOR: I thought about this, about who would come next. Anyway we'll figure it out later because a lot of these people are no longer really active. They're pretty quiet lives. But, oh the tales. Oh, yes. Wayne Newsom. He never was a drag queen particularly, but something about his hair was a mess one time and they called him Phyllis Diller. So he

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ended up going by Phyllis every year. He works at The Brown Jug down the street. Phyllis will talk for several hours. He was real big in the ball clubs and he goes way, way back as well. I've got to get...three of the people who were in on this arrest, this famous arrest that resulted in the crossdressing ordinance being thrown out were interviewed at the community center on an anniversary of that. We took a picture of three of them and so forth. There's a videotape of that. It's mostly Phyllis talking, but I've got to get that for the community center. It was supposed to be the start of this whole program, but since it's mostly a monologue there wasn't much we could do to edit it and you just have to listen to Phyllis drone on. The other two don't have

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too much to say. He's another one worth interviewing.

SVGDIK: Ok, well thank you for sharing names and for all of your stories and your items you brought in. I just really appreciate you taking some time to answer my questions.

ASTOR: Certainly. I was happy to.

SVGDIK: Thank you.

ASTOR: Tah tah!

[1:07:15]

[END]

Note: Both Wayne Newsome and Tommy Stewart died after this interview. That info can be found at OUTMemphis.