

## **Al Carmines and the Judson Poets' Theater**

From the early sixties to the present, the Judson Poets' Theatre – true to its title – has showcased the plays of poets. The Judson has encouraged and produced the plays of such poetic talents as Paul Goodman, George Dennison, Rochelle Owens, Sam Shepard, and Lanford Wilson.

In addition, musicals have been a keystone of the Judson Poets' Theatre. And why not? For, musicals are a type of poetry, set to melody. Sometimes Judson's musicals have been part of double bills. Sometimes they comprise an entire evening of theatre. In any case, the Judson musicals have proved to be the most popular of all the Judson attractions. If one is to cite an autochthonous form of Off Off Broadway musical, this form is best exemplified by the Judson musicals. These musicals are secular, impudent mixtures of the nostalgic and avant garde, with a dash of social commentary. However, they are chiefly designed to entertain, not upheave the audience.

More than anyone else, Al Carmines perhaps has been the major guiding force behind these musicals, as presented at the Judson Memorial Church. Carmines has always been steeped in music, from his youth onwards. Yet his background hardly foreshadowed his present positions: as Reverend, songwriter, and backbone of the musicals at the Judson Church. Born in Hampton, VA., Carmines is the son of Kay, a school teacher, and Al Carmines Sr., a Chesapeake Bay fishing captain. Carmines' contributions to the history of the Judson Poets' Theatre are many. They are nicely summarized by Albert Poland and Bruce Mailman, in "The Off Off Broadway Book: The Play, People, Theatre"

The artists who have flourished since the early 1960s at the Judson Poets' and Dance Theatres and the Judson Gallery are America's equivalent to those of the Paris of Gertrude Stein.

The Judson Memorial Church, which faces Washington Square Park and sees the seasons change there, has served its community's needs, social and political, since Edward Judson first opened its doors in 1892. The church began to find its way into the arts when Robert Spike, minister from 1948 to 1955, arranged for sporadic presentations of plays, concerts and exhibitions.

The Judson Gallery was instituted by Dr. Howard Moody, the present minister, when he arrived in 1956 as it is probably that the early work of such artists as Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Tom Wesselman and Jim Dine set the tone for theatre and dance at Judson: The freewheeling evolution of

form, color and content that would later assimilate itself into *the Judson style*.

The gallery presented the first Happening in New York in 1958 (created by Allan Kaprow) and among its audience was a young theological student named Al Carmines, whose dynamic personality and puckish wit were destined to shape the theatre at Judson into "the Granddaddy of the Off Off Broadway theatre movement."

As a child of eight Al Carmines began to study the piano. At nine he played for revival meetings. At ten he could play, sing and tap-dance – simultaneously – and he listened to Bessie Smith recordings for hours.

Coming from a traditionally religious Methodist family in Virginia, he put aside his dreams of studying piano at Juilliard to pursue the ministry. He majored in English and philosophy at Swarthmore and developed an interest in theatre while attending Union Theological Seminary.

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When he answered Dr. Moody's invitation to initiate the theatre program at Judson, Carmines was uncertain of what he wanted, but with the help of Robert Nichols, an architect and playwright, he began.

"The two great doctrines of Christianity are salvation and creation," Carmines said. "There's been too much concern with the first. Judson wants to do more about the second." And the Judson Poets' Theatre was formed: the first to answer the need of area poets for a place to present their theatre works.

Avoiding the role of "patron of the arts" for the church, Carmines encouraged a *marriage*. Congregation members would work in the theatre and, in turn, Sunday services would find them collaborating with artists as they worshiped God through music, dance, Happenings, drama and prayer.

The marriage had an immediate test when it was discovered that *The Great American Desert.*, selected as have of the opening bill, contained a liberal sprinkling of four-letter words, Carmines put the matter before the congregation, which voted never to censor a play on the basis of language or content.

Lawrence Kornfeld, a young assistant from the Living Theatre, directed the cast, which included poets, artists, and at least one actor, and *The Great American Desert* officially opened the Judson Poets' Theatre. The play is interesting historically because several aspects of it are vividly indicative of what was to follow. It is a multileveled play, part poetry, part metaphysics, part put-on, and its prototypes are American cowboys. The play even talked about the drug problem in the military – as it related to the *Civil War*.

The play, on a bill with Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias*, was well received and well attended. The budget for the evening: \$37.50.

Al Carmines' composing began quite casually during a rehearsal for George Dennison's *Vaudeville Skit* in August 1962, when Kornfeld asked him to improvise some music behind the actors. The result was somewhat astounding and the music, in Kornfeld's words, "became the source for the style of the play" and was retained for the performances.

Carmines wrote his first actual song for Robert Nichols' *The Wax Engine*, part of a double bill that closed the second season.

With music by Carmines and direction by Kornfeld (by then Judson's resident director), the Poets' Theatre joined the newly formed Judson Dance Theatre for the landmark success that opened the third season and moved the productions from the balcony into the church sanctuary. With Gertrude Stein's *What Happened* the collaboration of artists at Judson found a framework that was to be a hallmark of the Off Off Broadway theatre movement and a lasting influence on America's musical theatre: The Carmines and Kornfeld musicals.

*What Happened* was Judson's first successful abstract theatre work. Al Carmines found the technique of taking lines here and there from an existing straight play and giving them musical settings that he has used on a majority of his scores.

Another Judson Phenomenon, the Judson *superstars* (a group of regulars who have evolved over the years and whose appearances are adored by Judson audiences) became apparent with this production.

Michael Smith, whose columns in *The Village Voice* and subsequent books are among the best existing history of the Off Off Broadway theatre movement, wrote: "Everything that happens has the casual inevitability of great art."

*Home Movies*, which marked the play-writing debut of Rosalyn Dexter, was a madcap straight play musicalized to become the other highlight of the third season. It was, according to *Newsweek's* Richard Gilman, "the first musical of the absurd" the audiences were shocked enough at its openness about sex and ridicule of religion that it moved Off Broadway, where it enjoyed a six month run.

In the 1963-64 season Judson established its style, set a new high standard for itself and, in doing so, delighted its audiences and received a record five Obie awards.

Wisely, *Sing Ho for a Bear* (based on Winnie the Pooh) was selected as the next major musical effort and went on, despite the best efforts of Walt Disney, who owned the rights. *The String Game*, and auspicious debut for Rochelle Owens, revealed the phantasmagoric imagery of a new poet for the theatre in February 1965.

In the brilliant *Promenade* (April) Marie Irene Fornés provided a social commentary on the classes filled with bitter ironies in counterpoint to a setting of height style and grace. Carmines delivered his best score to date and *Promenade* is a landmark musical. An expanded version was presented Off Broadway in 1969 which opened to great critical acclaim and was recorded by RCA Victor.

The 1965-66 season was highlighted by Rochelle Owens' exotic religious play of the east, *Istanboul* (with a haunting performance by Florence Tarlow), Remy Charlip's Obie award-winning production of Ruth Krauss' poem play *A Beautiful Day* and Jacques Levy's production of Sam Shepard's *Red Cross*, which moved Off Broadway on a double bill with John Guare's *Muzeeka* to critical acclaim.

Helen Adam's collaboration with Carmines and Kornfeld, the opera epic *San Francisco's Burning*, had a daemonic, tragicomic quality com-parable of Offenbach's work. The production, which opened on New Year's Eve of 1966, revealed Judson's limitations as well as its virtues. It was the first full-length musical work (running nearly three hours) and had a cast of 27. As a result of Judson's failure to take anything very seriously for very long in its musicals, the more metaphysical aspects of the piece were not fully realized and by the end of the run had degenerated into *camp*.

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The Judson audience found itself split into two factions: one adored it and was in attendance repeatedly, shaping the performance by its screaming responses; the other left quietly knowing it had seen a near masterpiece, which by the end of its run had become somewhat of a shambles.

In a complete change of pace Carmines provided a score of quiet sensuality and rich opulence for *Song of Songs*, based on the Song of Solomon and gorgeously costumed by Nancy Christofferson. Carmines directed the piece as a Valentine's Day offering.

The production of Ronald Tavel's outrageous *Gorilla Queen* met the coterie head on. "Campy, hell!" Kornfeld scoffed. "It's downright homosexual!" and he went on to point out the playwright's intention to paint "The strongest possible travesty of a world intent on converting itself into a travesty of humanity."

In April a young actor apologetically bowed out of rehearsals for Maria Irene Fornés *Successful Life of 3* to work on a little show he was writing for production at the Public Theatre. His name: Jerome Ragni.

*In Circles* (October 1967) was a tribute to the collective artistic growth of the Judson. *Newseek's* Jack Knoll wrote: "The Judson Poets' Theatre performs Gertrude Stein the way the Moscow Art Theatre does Chekhov." The production had a lilting, witty score and interpolated Kornfeld's concepts of depth psychology. The well-disciplined players performed with agility and the production moved Off Broadway, where the audience either loved it or hated it and it won an Obie.

Carmines' one-act opera *The Sayings of Mao Tse-tung*, which created a furor from both right and left, and Rosalyn Drexler's play about a "groupie," *The Line of Least Existence*, were other highlights of the sixth season.

To further investigate Judson, Susan Condos and I interviewed Al Carmines, at the Judson Memorial Church. Before this, I'd researched and unearthed many other interesting facts about Carmines. In 1961, he became a Bachelor of Divinity, at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Then in 1965, he received a Master in Sacred Theology.

Yet despite Carmines' religious convictions, many of the plays he has helped create at Judson Church could be considered blasphemous. Strong language, daring issues, and nudity have become commonplace during the Judson presentations' Hardly what people expect to find in a church. Carmines defends this, stating:

--- the church exists to serve the community and, in that sense, the theatre here exists to serve the playwright. --- [We must] give our people an idea what was happening outside,

*Peace*, Tim Reynolds' hip adaptation from Aristophanes directed in the style of a minstrel show, opened in November 1968 to coincide with the Paris peace talks. The show was successfully moved Off Broadway, where it received the drama desk award. Carmines' rich and rangy score brought high critical acclaim and *New York Post* critic Jerry Tallmer, called him "the best living American composer." The score was recorded by Metromedia and released secretly.

If Judson had been the first to present "originals," it was by 1969 one of scores of Off Off Broadway theatres to do so. Carmines decided that the large space of the church would be perfect for massive oratorios, which he would compose and which were presented in 1969-71. They were always exuberant but sometimes sprawling and undisciplined in the writing and performance.

Two of them were exception. *Christmas Rappings* was an abstract serious piece that sought the meaning of a contemporary Christmas. *The Journey of Snow White* introduced some new twists into the perennial tale and was declared "an innocent hit" by Clive Barnes of *The New York Times*.

The cycle was notably interrupted on one occasion, for Leon Katz's eerie ritual, *Dracula: Sabbat*, winning an Obie for Lawrence Kornfeld as its director.

The salon atmosphere at Judson continues to attract artists of all kinds. They seem to work and play together with a spirit that appears to rival that of the gods themselves. And if Judson continues its fearless experimentation and growth, audiences will have many years of exciting theatre and the theatre will have a wealth of dramatic and musical material.

Should you drop in for an evening, you might find it sort of like diving headfirst into a vat of joy. You will be startled as the daemons come swimming toward you, and just as you become enchanted they will wink and disappear.

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to give them an opportunity of hearing an honest word from the world. --- I think that we're undergoing a revolution in what we feel about the church's task. We suddenly saw that the church was becoming more and more irrelevant. --- Some churches get involved in theatre essentially for propagandistic and evangelistic reasons. And I think that's a mistake. I mean a mistake in terms of theatre, and a mistake in terms of the church. I think you diminish theatre by any propaganda. Theatre has to be free, even to say things that you don't agree with, things that the opposite of what you feel. I think the greatest thing about the church being involved with theatre is that the church should be the place where the playwrights can be most free, because the church is not so vested with establishment interests that it's frightened of doing something far-out or that it's frightened of doing something new. It should be free enough, it should know where it is enough, so that it can afford to give the playwright real freedom and real response, honest response.<sup>1</sup>

Carmines has let his congregation decide whether plays should be censored. The congregation has always concluded that a play shouldn't be censored because of language or subject matter. Yet Carmines does not believe that plays should be topical for its own sake. He has said:

I think a playwright or theatre has a particular vision that it's very important for him to follow, even if it's not in the mode of what's happening right now. I think one of the great needs right now is for political and social theatre. Unfortunately, you don't get political and social plays because they think they should. They turn out to be mostly crap or pretentious or dishonest or spouting the point of view we all know and probably agree with, but not reaching beneath that.<sup>2</sup>

Carmines has flourished in the cooperative atmosphere at Judson. Everyone at Judson works for the theatre experience and fellowship, rather than for the non-existent cash. The lack of funds there has, if anything, given a sense of unity to the people working at Judson. According to one young actress there:

There is none of the frenzy of the professional theatre at Judson, and that is terribly relaxing. --- It's partly because we don't get paid, but mostly, I think, it comes from the tremendous loyalty which Larry {Kornfeld} and Al have to their actors. You can play all kinds of different parts at Judson. You can really grow as an actor.<sup>3</sup>

The Judson Church allots \$200 a year for productions. Supplementing these allotments have been audience contributions. Six to eight productions are presented each season. They are usually played for three weekends apiece. The productions used to average \$37.50 each to mount. But now they can cost over \$100. Some plays are staged in the church's sanctuary, which seats up to 300 persons. Other plays are presented in an upstairs room, which seats about 100 and where all plays were originally presented.

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The audience largely consists of the regular congregation at Judson, averaging just 28 years old. 50% of the Judson audiences see all the shows there. Customarily, attendance at each show is packed. During the first weekend when a Judson show is presented: the theatre and Greenwich Village communities attend. On the second week, persons who are not professionally involved with the theatre show up. Then, the third week, people from the suburbs and uptown symptomatically visit. The Judson Poets' Theater is a stimulating experience for all.

When Susan Condos and I spoke with Al Carmines, he was cordially talkative. Our conversation unfolded as follows:

MICHAEL – I read somewhere that the Judson Poets' Theatre is the great “Granddaddy” of Off Off Broadway theatre. Would you agree with that?

CARMINES – Wee. Let's see. In the beginning [he chuckled], the first year of Off Off Broadway, which was really 1961, was a theatre as a movement. There was already existing one Off Off Broadway theatre, which was the Caffe Cino. Now, Caffe Cino, however, was not an Off Off Broadway theatre in the sense that we now know them. Because at that time, what the Cino was doing was revivals. That is, they were not doing new plays by new playwrights. They were doing Oscar Wilde plays, Edward Albee plays, things that had been done. So in a sense, the Judson was the first Off Off Broadway theatre to do new plays by new playwrights: yes. That is, we were the first ones. Six months later, La Mama began. And for about a couple of years, there were just the three: the Caffe Cino, the Judson, and La Mama. That alone covers it. That's in the sense of the legalistic definition of Off Off Broadway. We and La Mama – and later the Open Theatre – are all indebted theatrically to the Living Theatre: which was an Off Broadway theatre, but nevertheless had a lot of Off Off Broadway elements in it, like experimentation.

MICHAEL – That's where many of Judson's talents came.

CARMINES – We were kind of a child of the Living Theatre. Our first directors came from there. Our first actors came from there. Our first playwrights, really, partly came from there. Some of our scenery came from there [chuckled]. And a lot of our technical help came from there. So we were, in some ways, a kind of child of the Living Theatre. And we were the first Off Off Broadway theatre to do new plays.

MICHAEL – Let's talk a bit about your life. I've read, from different sources, that when you were about eight or nine, your father played the harmonica and sang rag and blues while

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shaving on the back porch. And then you picked up and were playing the piano at around eight or nine. Then you were playing at congregational meetings and [Larry] Kornfeld said that you were a regular Marjoe.

CARMINES – Uhh. That's a grim remark. I was very involved with religion in high school, junior high. And a kind of evangelist. Yes. I went around the state [Virginia] preaching and singing and playing.

MICHAEL – At what age was that?

CARMINES – Oh, I played from the time I was eight. That is, I started taking lessons, but I also played by ear. So, by the time I was nine, I was playing and singing. And I used to have numbers I did, where I tap-danced, played, and sang at the same time; and things like that.

MICHAEL – This was in church.

CARMINES – Well, not only in church. There were two army bases near home. They had shows for the officers: I would go and play and tap-dance for them. And local television. Local radio. And Lions' Clubs, Elks' clubs, Eastern Star, the Masons. Everything! It's like a small town where they always have a program for their meetings. So I would go and play piano for them.

MICHAEL – Well, would you consider that you did just that of a child talent, or was it religious in any way?

CARMINES – it was religious when it was at church, I guess. It wasn't religious specifically in the beginning. No. It was just music, you know. Then, when I got to be about thirteen or fourteen, that's when I got heavily involved in the whole religious professionalism. And I have up playing and tap-dancing for secular things, and would only play at religious things.

MICHAEL – In college, you went in the direction of a liberal arts study program. It was during your last year at Swarthmore, you met Paul Tillich.

CARMINES – Right.

MICHAEL – And from what I've read, it seemed to change your direction.

CARMINES – Yes. Well, I went off to Swarthmore. I'm a terribly religious person, but by my third year there, say, I was becoming an atheist. And I had decided to give up the idea of the ministry to, I don't know, become a poet, or a writer, or something. I met Tillich in my senior year. We talked. I was terribly impressed with his writing, particularly his

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philosophy of religion. He convinced me to go to Union Seminary – try it for one year – to see if I like it, which I did.

MICHAEL – Skipping to the Judson, what was the Happening you saw that Allan Kaprow did at Judson?

CARMINES – It was called “Apple Shrine.” And it was one of the first happenings. It was supposed to be conceived and done by Allan. But a lot of artists took part in it: Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselman, people like that were all around the Gallery [the Judson Gallery]. The church began the Gallery in the fifties. The avant garde Gallery, for years, is where a lot of those artists began. So that was the first foray of this church into the arts as a programmatic thing. It started with the Gallery.

MICHAEL – Has Judson changed much since then? Do you see any great differences, past and present?

CARMINES – Well, Judson has changed. But only insofar as community has changed. That is, Judson has always – from 1892 on – been a church that was very much attuned to what was happening in the city and the community; and always considered part of its responsibility as a church to respond to the needs of the temper of the times. So that, in 1892, that meant having language classes for immigrants, for jobs. Things like that. Then during the Depression, it meant letting people sleep in the church on the pews. Which they did during the thirties. With the renaissance of the Arts, coming in the late forties and fifties in the Village, Judson became very involved in the Arts. And so, it has swung with the times in that sense.

MICHAEL – When you say it “swung with the times,” can you give me different stages of Judson development in accordance with movements, other movements of the time?

CARMINES – Well, when I first came to Judson in '61, we were in the beatnik era. So, we were involved in poetry meetings; which I why we called our theatre the Poets' Theatre when we began. Because the big thing in the Village during the late fifties and early sixties was not rock ... or theatre. But was folk singing and poetry. Every café had their resident folk singer and their resident poet who read on weekends to the masses from Scarsdale. So we began our theatre, using the work of poets for the first few years almost totally.

MICHAEL – Just recitals?

CARMINES – Well, no. We asked poets to write plays. We were interested to see what kinds of plays poets would write. That's what we did. And in that sense, it was kind of “burlap

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era” – I call it. You know. Everybody used to want burlap in their apartments. It was very Ginsberg. You know. Kerouac. that kind of thing. And then, actually Judson was terribly important in that sense because we were the first pistil of theatre and dance. That is, we had a dance theatre and we had a drama theatre. And I was a composer. What happened was we combined a lot of these elements to do one of probably the first abstract theatre pieces ever done in New York. Which was Gertrude Stein’s play called *What Happened*. Music, dance, abstract words: all coming together in a kind of magic. So, in that sense, we began to exert influence, as well as be influenced by other things. By the mid-sixties, Off Off Broadway will be a very big theatre, in all the slick churches, coffee houses, lofts.

MICHAEL – during your earlier years here, you worked side by side with Robert Nichols. What did that entail?

CARMINES – Well, when I first came to the church here, I was hired to be an assistant minister and to begin a theatre program. Bob Nichols was a layman in the church, an active person in the congregation, and was a poet. He had been around the Living Theatre and around various: the Poets’ Theatre in Cambridge and theatres like that. And, he and I together began the theatre. He had all the contacts, knew all the people, and so forth. He was the one who first got Larry here to direct. He introduced me to the first playwrights we did. He himself wrote a couple of the first plays we did. He was a very good playwright. And, that’s kind of what it involved. The first year, he and I would read scripts and settle what we were going to do. The n, by the next year, he had kind of gotten more into his own writing, rather than producing. So, the theatre really began to be my baby.

SUSAN – can you recall what things were on your mind at that time? in the sense of what you were reading, thinking, the people. Whatever it was, generating in you, at that time.

CARMINES – Uh huh. Well, the first year here was really a year of learning for me. That is, I had gotten some technical theatre courses in the seminary, But, I mean, I really didn’t know much.

MICHAEL – That is, as far as the theatre is concerned.

CARMINES – Yes. [chuckled] As far as I was concerned. But the first year was learning a lot of technical things for me. You know. Learning about lights, scenery, costumes, directing. And I had to do everything. Because the director would get sick and I had to direct. Or an actor would get sick and I had to act. Or, you know, a lighting designer



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would get sick and I had to design. So, it was a year of learning in that respect.

Intellectually speaking, we began the theatre very self- consciously, I think. With the congregation not to be evangelists for any point of view. That is, we did not want to be simply a political theatre. Or simply a rebel theatre. Or just a classical theatre. We wanted to be open to absolutely everything. An we were, in those first few years – in terms of the work we did. We simply wanted to give ...

MICHAEL – You were interested more in “creation than salvation.”

CARMINES – Yes, that’s right. We wanted to give new playwrights a chance to really have their works done. It was a simple as that. And, you know, we would argue over which was the script we should do and so forth. And when we decided, that’ what we did.

SUSAN – Were you prepared?

CARMINES – Um. I had a kind of classical training, as did Larry. In terms of our Background. We both were, for instance, in classical music and in classical literature. Proust. Shakespeare. That is, we were not totally part of the beat generation. Because we had this feeling for the past tradition of the classics. So, it influenced us a lot.

SUSAN – I’m very interested in the [Judson] Dance Workshop. Which was essentially two year. Right? ’62 to ’64. And out of that, I think a lot of things were generated. How was it, as you were there?

CARMINES – Well. I think that our primary function for the Dance Theatre was, number one, as a place. That is, there was always talent, interest, verve – choreography-wise – going around. There was no one central place where this was being seen. So our primary function was as a place where this could happen. That is, none of us were dancers. They [eventual members of the Dance Workshop] came in. They got interested, through seeing the theatre work we did; came to see me and said, “We’d like to establish a Judson Dance Theatre,” in addition to the Judson Poets’ Theatre. I asked them to give a series of trial concerts ...

MICHAEL – I thought it was a matter where they were left homeless, due to other circumstances, and they needed a new home, so they cam here.

CARMINES – That’s partly what happened. But, you see, there were more stands in it than that. There was a couple who’d been working in a group workshop. That was Judith and Robert Dunn. But there were other people who came from other areas. It began quite casually. It was simply an idea. They gave trial concerts in the gymnasium. About a

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week of them. To which the congregation came and I came. --- I was terribly turned off by the first two or three. I found them very threatening, very intimidating ...

MICHAEL – In what ways?

CARMINES – Well, the kind of experimentation they were into – that is, the majority of them, not all of the – was, I'd say, heavily influenced by Merce Cunningham. This was threatening because I couldn't fit into a narrative structure or even into an emotional structure. Which was precisely what they wanted to happen. They wanted to take dance and purify it. They, I suppose, considered themselves kind of a purifying force in dance. That is, to redeem dance from the Martha Graham kind of psychological interpretations; from Ballet's rigidity and form; from other modern dancers' emotional and narrative implications. They wanted to take movement and make it absolutely what it was. And not allow you, as much as possible, to fit that into an intellectual or a narrative framework. They wanted you to look at dance the way you would look at an abstract painting; rather than the way you would look at a play. And this I found frightening; because I felt then – and I still feel finally – that every aesthetic act has implications that go beyond the simple movement of the moment.

MICHAEL – Yes. But an abstract painting is frozen; and you can study it for a long time in the same position. You can't do that with dancing. And that's why you didn't like it?

CARMINES – It wasn't that I didn't like it. I like it enormously. I was just frightened of it, you know. It's like when you go to a group therapy session for the first time, or when you first fall inlove, or anything else. You may like it. But at the same time, you want to run away from it. That was my experience with these dancers. By the third time, I was hooked. I loved it. It was totally a new world to watch. And dance has in some ways influenced me, theologically and aesthetically, more than anything else around. Because you begin to see what they were doing. You begin to be able to appreciate things on a more concrete level. It was very important. --- The Dance Theatre lasted more than two years. What really happened was it was a democratic league, an organized workshop. There would be twenty or twenty-five people working out conceptions, movements, and so forth – once, twice, three times a week. Then, around once every two months, they would perform the works they had worked on. There were natural leaders, but it was the kind of situation where no one wanted to say they were a leader. For instance, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, the Dunns; were in a way leaders that emerged. But they didn't want the responsibility of saying that “We head this dance theatre.” They want to leave

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that essentially to me. Well, the first two years, that was all right. Because they were producing the dances, and I simply did the production work, or, you know, got the place ready and took care of the publicity. Things like that. But then, they began to get opportunities to leave. To go teach at the University of Illinois, or perform in a tour, or something like that. And it became crucial that we have somebody as an arbiter. I mean, who would say, "Yes, you can give a concert ... No, you can't." Because when we gave concerts, we might not have had the time or the space. I asked them to set up a committed who would do that. They refused to do that. They did not want to be in the position to effect other people's work. So, consequently, it was left to me. And at that time particularly and even now, I'm not a dance expert. I'm not that equipped to do that. So, their students begin to perform here then. That is, people who have worked with them: a second generation of Judson Dance students. And, by 1966 or '67, it became obvious to me that the originators were not coming back to dance here; that they had found other spaces and other ways of life. And that we had performed our function in the dance world.

MICHAEL – Now let's discuss the Judson musical. In quotes, the Judson musical has been described as something on its own, an anomaly. What would you say the Judson musical is?

CARMINES – Well. Um. I don't know how to answer that.

MICHAEL – Because there are so many different types of musicals here?

CARMINES – Yes. I think one of the things that distinguished Judson musicals in the early days, when Larry and I first began doing them was this. --- You have to remember that in the late fifties and early sixties there had been no *HAIR*; there had been none of these musicals. What you had on Broadway were standard musicals. Which frequently involved a rather flimsy book and songs that could be taken from the musicals and made hit songs of; and were written as set pieces. --- My recollection, at least, of fifties musicals was that they were formula, for the most part.

MICHAEL – So how did the Judson musical break away from that?

CARMINES – Well, for one thing: our songs, instead of being written as songs, would be dialogue that I would set to music. --- I'm not saying that it wasn't done before. I'm saying that in terms of New York musical theatre: a lot of people felt it was the first time that they had seen a musical play – it wasn't an opera – move in such a way that you didn't stop everything, have an introduction, do a song, have applause. And then go on to

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the next bit of dialogue, stop everything, have an introduction & song, and so on.<sup>4</sup> At Judson our early musicals would go in and out of music with no break. There wasn't the sense of stop and go. The second thing was that the topics of the songs & the musicals – and the language of them – was somewhat different.

MICHAEL – Daring.

CARMINES – Daring. Yes. Not only daring, though, in terms of dirty words or something. But daring in terms of topics and songs. Or language, pedestrian language – that's se to music – suddenly took an incredible satirical edge to it, or nostalgic edge to it, or something like that. Rather than moon and June and Balloon and all of that it would be the story of counting potatoes and hoping that none of them are rotten. It would be that kind of ordinary dialogue song.

MICHAEL – It would be common talk set to music.

CARMINES – Uh-huh.

MICHAEL – Tell me about the early years when this was all starting when you sat down at the piano, and Kornfeld told you, “We need some rehearsal music for *Vaudeville Skit*.”

CARMINES – What used to happen was we did plays here the first year, no musicals. And we would have cast parties after the plays. And I would play the piano and sing, sometimes improvise. We would sit around and improvise. When George Dennison wrote *Vaudeville Skit*, Larry and I talked about it. And Larry said it would be interesting to have a kind of incidental, improvisatory music in that show. Plus the fact that it would give the actors a sort of skeleton. Plus the fact that it would put them in the mood. The mood of the play was a very Beckett kind of mood. It needed the music. So I came up with four ...

MICHAEL – You had never wanted to write songs before.

CARMINES - ... I had never done that before, no. Came up with four themes that we used all through the play. Hurdy-gurdy kinds of things, but poignant. And bittersweet. Varied between major and minor all the time.

MICHAEL – You're going to open at a nightclub, Reno Sweeney's. Playing half your own songs and half other people's. And I want to know what other composers and trends of music have influenced you.

CARMINES – Blues, gospel music, Kurt Weill, and classical music. I'd say they're my influences, as far as I know. I like a lot of other things. I like Kern, Gershwin or course, Rodgers. I like a lot of the composers of the firties and the fifties and the thirties. But the

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haven't influenced me. I think Kurt Weill was a big influence on my life. And I think gospel music was.

MICHAEL – At what age?

CARMINES – Not until I was an adult, before I came here. Though I was nurtured on Bessie Smith, Mozart, Bach. And I had a teacher who was totally classically trained.

SUSAN – some of the pieces that were done here were, in fact, religious services. They really have a fusion of ritual and theatre. How do you feel that works as a religious entity?

CARMINES – well, I think it's something you have to be very careful about. When we first began the theatre here, we had a very traditional worship service. The theatre and the worship had very little to do with each other. I would say that was true for about two or three years. The link between them was simply myself. I was preaching and, at the same time, conducting this theatre. But there was no interpollination. After about two or three years, our congregation had been very supportive of the Art Program but not particularly involved. That is, not in the plays: except maybe they would usher or help build the scenery. After the Dance and Poets' Theatres began the congregation began to feel a certain dissatisfaction with the worship service. Partly because they were opened up to a lot of things in theatre and dance. And they felt that the same impulses of openness and contact were not present at the religious services. So we decided to make changes: instead of the traditional thing. We spent a year discussing how to change our worship to be more meaningful. And, we invited to be on this committee to discuss worship, not just people from the church. But we invited artists of all kinds. Dancers, choreographers, directors, actors, painters, sculptors, composers. And after a year, we changed our worship service radically – because of the insights of a lot of these artists. We began to use dance in the service. We began to use drama in the service. We began to structure our ritual, somewhat influenced by improvisation techniques. And I began to be interested in doing worship services, mostly for celebrator occasions: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, the Fourth of July. That used a lot of theatrical elements. We began very simply. I remember writing a very simple kind of pageant for Thanksgiving, very early. Joe Chaikin was there and a lot of people. And the religious thing worked. And began to grow. And the congregation began to get very active in the Arts Program. Particularly when I started writing oratorios, which needed eighty or ninety people. And a lot of the theatre people got interested in coming to the church because of what I did. Over these several years, this built up a trust between the church and the theatre people.

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They blended and could work well together. It's a terribly exciting, unique thing. The element of ritual in both theatre and worship have a lot to contribute to one another.

MICHAEL – Have there been any advancements in the way Judson shows have been presented over the years? Have economics hindered the type of shows you put on?

CARMINES – Well, in the beginning, we had no money at all. The budget for each show was \$37.50 for about three years. And that had to include everything; because we didn't charge to see the shows. And we took contributions at the end. But we made do. As we began to prosper, we began to spend more in costumes and sets. Lights, for instance. Our first light board was a rickety affair. It was given to us by the Living Theater. Then we got a grant for a light board of our own. We have never been in the position to pay people who are working here. And we now ask for contributions of \$2. When a person can't give it, we let them in anyhow.

MICHAEL – It used to be 35¢.

CARMINES – That used to be the average contribution, yes. But still we find ourselves uptight in terms of economics. In terms of just being able to pay for costumes. In one show, we had numerous different costumes. It's expensive when we ask the kids to pay for them.

MICHAEL – Do the actors bring their own costumes?

CARMINES – Some of them. They bring about half their own. And we give them the other half.

MICHAEL – You have done several Gertrude Stein musicals. Do you think they have mared social directions at Judson?

CARMINES – In many ways. She's kind of an index for us. That is, *What Happened* was one kind of thing that used the insights of dance and certain kind of humor that was very much tied to the beatnik movement. It was a way of liberation from the beatnik movement. It was saying, "It's not enough to drink wine, say poetry, be depressed and live on the edges." *What Happened* was an attempt to take some of those insights and fit them into the texture of life. And help. *In Circles*, which happened in '67 and '68, did the same thing to the flower children. That is, it enlarged our liberation from the flower children/hippie movement influences. We tried to take the insights of that movement – which had to do with impersonal contact, certain kinds of mood experiences – and say, "This has to go a step beyond. It has to be integrated into equal lives. What doesn't work has to be shed." Well, *In Circles* was that. Now, I think with *Listen to Me* [Judson's upcoming Gertrude Stein musical] we're going to be in the same position. It's

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going to be a watershed production, marking our aesthetic entrance into the seventies. We're going to try to take the despair, disillusionment, and hopelessness of the post-hippie era; where peace didn't come as we thought it was. Where a lot of things didn't happen as we thought. And lift this up to a kind of nobility. A kind of statement that says that losing can be a way of gaining; if that makes any sense. I mean, I see it as a third step.

MICHAEL – You're up 'til three o'clock, four o'clock, writing music. You get up again at seven o'clock in the morning and start writing music. You walk down the street with a pad and a pencil while writing music. I've got the impression that if you put a coin in your ear, your mouth would open and music would come out. Also, you've written lyrics and musical books. Have you found differences, while working in different capacities?

CARMINES – Well, I think that each stage for me has been a kind of assimilation process. Writing music was a transition from performing – which was what I did originally – into creating. And it took me years to really feel like a composer. I felt like a minister who composed, or an actor who composed, for years. When I began to write some lyrics, I felt I'm basically a composer, but I write some lyrics, you see. Then after about three years, I began to feel like a lyricist. And it's been this way with each step.

MICHAEL – Do you have any ideas that are taking root in your mind or that you've had for a long time which you'd like to realize at Judson?

CARMINES – Well, yes. I'm very interested in American opera. And if I have any direction or goal ... It's to move in that direction.

[At this time, we heard music playing outside, during a demonstration.]

MICHAEL – How fitting we should get music during an interview with you!

CARMINES – Yes. [chuckled]

SUSAN – I'm just going to go off on a completely different track. a quick question on social consciousness, political consciousness. Your theater has not take a stand, would you say?

CARMINES – No.

SUSAN – And is there a reason for that? Or is it not necessarily something that you chose not to do?

CARMINES – Well, I think it's several things. If you've been involved – as I was before I came here – in religious drama, you realize how finally incompatible any propaganda is with theatrical freedom, theatrical laws. So when I began this theater, this congregation and myself were terribly careful to avoid become a church theatre that would do church

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dramas to convert people, or to say, "Think about God." I feel the same way about politics. I feel that finally the artistic impulse cuts through causes and creates chaos. Because I think it's a basically impersonal, individualistic impulse. I don't think you can create Art within the limits of a cause. Because, finally, you're forced to lie. You're forced to say something "Is" when you really don't think it "Is" because your cause says it has to be that way. So, I see art as a real champion of the personal and individualistic.

SUSAN – Yes. It boils down to two ways of thinking in this past decade. One has to do with class consciousness, a political consciousness. And the other which is individual participation and appreciation. But both may have value.

MICHAEL – One final question. Has your experience as a performer, an actor, given you a greater understanding of theatre? You are the definitive Winnie the Pooh, let's face it [Carmines played this role in *Sing Ho for a Bear* at Judson].

CARMINES – A greater understanding of theatre maybe. But I don't think it influences me very much when I write. No. I would think it would. Because I'd think that I would write with more sympathy for the performers; but I don't. ... As for our Judson casts: we chose for our people to be in plays not necessarily people either who had gorgeous voices or who had a gorgeous look. We chose the kind of person who either was ordinary looking or bizarre looking, I would say. They were cast for the musicals. And they would give a kind of humor and a kind of touching quality to a lot of it that you wouldn't get in a slick Off Broadway or Broadway who. That is, our people were much more normal in one sense and, in another sense, much more abnormal than most people. That was part of the Judson style.

by Michael E. Colby  
June 22, 1974

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<sup>1</sup> from the articles "Judson's Where it's Happening" by Catherine Hughes in *After Dark* (July, 1969)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> From "Beatitudes at Judson Memorial Church" by Sally Kempton in *Esquire* (March 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Carmines and some of his audience are obviously not aficionados of the musicals of such song writers as Rodgers & Hart. For Rodgers & Hart devised non-stop, rhythmic dialogue musical works like the Broadway show *CHEE-CHEE* (1928) and *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* (1933). What's more, even in such familiar films as the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) there are non-stop musical sequences similar in construction to those in Judson musicals, as described by Carmines.



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