

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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STEVE COLEMAN

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2018**

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In this oral history, set designer and artist Steve Coleman discusses his life, work, and creative collaborations in Mill Valley. Though his parents were Mill Valley residents, Steve was born in Geneva, Switzerland. When he was small child, his father got a job with the United States Information Agency and moved the family to India for a few years. Steve and his family then returned to Mill Valley, where he primarily grew up. Steve reminisces about Mill Valley in the 1960s, recalling local personalities like Mama Gravander. He describes attending Old Mill, Edna Maguire, and Tamalpais High School. Steve recalls how the social conflicts of the 1960s played out at Tam High, and his own inner conflict about the Vietnam War. He discusses his work as a theater set designer and his creative collaboration with Lucy Mercer, founder of the Throckmorton Theatre. Throughout this oral history, Steve speaks of the rich inner worlds of the imagination.

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Oral History of Steve Coleman
January 8th, 2018

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Steve Coleman, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is January 8th, 2018. My name is Debra Schwartz, and I am sitting here on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, to talk with Steve Coleman, set designer, artist and long-time Mill Valley resident. Steve, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with me today. We're sitting in the Mill Valley Library — the bowels of the library really — in the soundproof room. And you came on a very rainy day. I see you've got your drawing material, so maybe we're going to get a little [chuckles] drawing while we're doing this interview. But I just want to say thank you for your time.

0:00:53 Steve Coleman: Well, thank you. It's very special to be here.

0:00:57 Debra Schwartz: Steve, I know your mother, Jean, because I used to see her walking a lot, so I know you've been here for quite a while. You're very much a presence in our community, sometimes indirectly because you're not seen, but the things that you do are seen, such as your beautiful set designs at the Throckmorton Theatre and the vivid, whimsical sometimes, and always transporting art or design that you create and that we all enjoy both at the art festival and in the theater. You bring a special color and flavor to our town, and I'm excited to speak with you today. I'd like to know a little bit more, to start, about your family. If you could tell me a little bit about, perhaps your grandparents, your great-grandparents, where they were born, where they came from, if you know, and how it is you came to live in Mill Valley.

0:02:01 Steve Coleman: Well, I probably know a tiny bit more about my mother's family than I do of my father's, but they both actually came here from the Midwest immediately before Mill Valley. I remember my mother's family came because her brother knew the Wickham family. They had come to Mill Valley first and apparently they said that it was a great place to come to.

0:02:34 Debra Schwartz: Where in the Midwest? And what were the names?

0:02:35 Steve Coleman: From Nebraska.

0:02:36 Debra Schwartz: Nebraska.

0:02:37 Steve Coleman: Yeah. So that was my great-grandparents, Louis Spangler and Louise, my mother's mother. They came to Mill Valley in the '30s. I never knew my mother's mother because she died in an incident during the war when she was spotting for planes up on the mountain someplace.

0:03:16 Debra Schwartz: Wait, wait, wait.

0:03:17 Steve Coleman: In World War II.

0:03:18 Debra Schwartz: So she was the eyes on the mountain looking out for aircraft and watercraft and something happened that she died?

0:03:27 Steve Coleman: It was just a big storm. The wind blew in the windows and then I guess she had a heart attack. It was just a very sudden thing.

0:03:35 Debra Schwartz: Do you know where on Mt. Tamalpais she was?

0:03:38 Steve Coleman: I think it was more towards the Headlands in some place. I've never been up there, but Margery Cope actually took my mother up to see the place because she was another spotter during that period and she knew where it was.

0:03:50 Debra Schwartz: So there were women sitting at the forts there?

0:03:52 Steve Coleman: Yeah. Civilians.

0:03:55 Debra Schwartz: At the batteries or —

0:03:56 Steve Coleman: I don't know. I think there were little hidden lookout things in the hills. But they were all civilians that did that. As far as I know, this is all history. That's what my mother said.

0:04:09 Debra Schwartz: So her mother died in a storm on the Marin Headlands, looking out into the ocean no doubt —

0:04:19 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I guess.

0:04:20 Debra Schwartz: And skies. That's interesting.

0:04:27 Steve Coleman: My grandfather later remarried and that was — I don't know.

0:04:45 Debra Schwartz: You don't have to be exactly accurate.

0:04:46 Steve Coleman: I'm just trying to remember. Anyway, my mother grew up here and then — I don't know. I can't even reconstruct it. [chuckles] I never thought of what happened in-between, to figure out how I got here.

0:05:03 Debra Schwartz: Well, that's alright. That's what brought your family here. Were you born here in Mill Valley?

0:05:14 Steve Coleman: No, I was born in Geneva, Switzerland.

0:05:17 Debra Schwartz: You were born in Geneva, Switzerland?

0:05:20 Steve Coleman: Yeah. My dad was on the G.I. Bill after the war and he was studying in Paris, I guess, or the two of them were there. And for some reason they decided to go to Switzerland when I was expected, because the hospitals were much better. [laughs] The time after the war, everything was just pretty sad in Paris. My mom did have some complications, so that was why I was —

0:05:55 Debra Schwartz: Do you have dual citizenship?

0:05:57 Steve Coleman: No. You can't unless your parents are from Switzerland. I guess maybe in France or someplace you could, but not in Switzerland.

0:06:07 Debra Schwartz: What is your father's name?

0:06:09 Steve Coleman: Bruce Coleman.

0:06:09 Debra Schwartz: Bruce Coleman.

0:06:10 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:06:11 Debra Schwartz: So Bruce and Jean Coleman. You were born in Switzerland. How old were you when you came back to Mill Valley?

0:06:17 Steve Coleman: Oh, they came back pretty directly after that. I think they went back to Paris for a while and then they came back to the Bay Area, San Francisco. They lived there for quite a while, and then my dad worked for the *Press Democrat* up in Santa Rosa. Then he came back and worked for the *Chronicle*. Then he applied for a job with the USIS and we went to India for two and a half years after that.

0:06:54 Debra Schwartz: USIS? What is —

0:06:55 Steve Coleman: USIS. The United States Information Service.¹ It was a branch of the government that, during the Cold War, was in a sense a little bit propaganda. But the Russians were doing it; everyone was doing the same thing. They had American libraries abroad and he worked on exhibits of American cultural things. And he actually brought the, worked on the Family of Man exhibit when it came to Madras and that was... I remember the Buckminster Fuller dome that traveled around the world and had this big exhibition of photography from all over.

0:07:38 Debra Schwartz: Was he a writer?

0:07:41 Steve Coleman: Yeah, actually he was trained in journalism. He worked for those different papers before —

0:07:50 Debra Schwartz: As a journalist?

¹ Steve intended to say the United States Information Agency (USIA).—Editor.

0:07:51 Steve Coleman: As a journalist. And then when they came back to the United States in the '60s, when I was growing up here, he worked for the *IJ*. He was a reporter and had a column, regular column, and stuff.

0:08:03 Debra Schwartz: Do you recall the name of his column? [chuckles] No, you do not.

0:08:08 Steve Coleman: I blanked out. We had copies of it all over the place, but —

0:08:13 Debra Schwartz: No problem.

0:08:13 Steve Coleman: It was “Reporter’s Notebook,” or something like that.

0:08:17 Debra Schwartz: And do you have any other siblings, Steve?

0:08:19 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I have a brother, Joe, who lives near North San Juan, California.

0:08:28 Debra Schwartz: Did you grow up in the same house that you still live in?

0:08:34 Steve Coleman: Yeah, when I was growing up we lived at the same address.

0:08:40 Debra Schwartz: Not far from the library, really.

0:08:41 Steve Coleman: Yeah. [laughs]

0:08:44 Debra Schwartz: How was it for you growing up in Mill Valley?

0:08:53 Steve Coleman: Well, I don’t know. I guess I’m kind of glad that we missed a couple of the years in the late '50s, years of this real extreme conformity and stuff like that before all the changes happened in the '60s. I think I’m sort of glad I missed some of that. I mean, it was just all over the country, not just in Mill Valley.

0:09:28 Debra Schwartz: That patriotism, that extreme patriotism.

0:09:30 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I mean, I was so little but I remember getting in fights in the playground at Old Mill School when I was just a little kid. And it was just not my personality. But I think something really changed when we went to India and I got a different perspective or something. In the '60s, I think it was a very sweet town. It was just a little — more like a village, really. I don’t know what to say about it. There seemed to be a lot of European families here for one thing, or people that had immigrated. And one of the influences on me was the circle of people that was around Mama Gravander. I don’t know what her real name was, but she lived way up on Summit. Actually, we rented one of her cottages on her property. She was a Swedish weaver and she —

0:10:49 Debra Schwartz: What was her name again?

0:10:50 Steve Coleman: Well, I think her real name was Balborg or something, but they called her Mama Gravander. She was from Sweden and she taught weaving. She had a big beautiful house that was built like a Swedish hall or something with a downstairs that had dozens of looms. Actually, in San Francisco, she had kind of a boarding house where people could come and stay, and they had Swedish events and dances and all kinds of cultural activities and stuff. And then she kind of brought that to Mill Valley later, when I was growing up, that's when I knew her. But there was a whole sort of a Bohemian circle of friends that she had around her, that kind of influenced my growing up a lot, 'cause we'd go up there for a lot of things. And we lived up there, too.

0:11:48 Debra Schwartz: So, at an early age, you were feeling the spark of creativity flourishing within?

0:11:54 Steve Coleman: That's one of the people that really must have touched me. I mean, when you're a kid you just think this is the way it should be, that people are like this. My parents knew a lot of people that had independent presses or they did their own typesetting and made beautiful, hand-done books and stuff. There were maybe five presses in Mill Valley at that point, and I guess my parents knew a fair number of artists. We didn't know that many musicians. I can't remember. [chuckles] So all those people had a wonderful influence, as a child, on me.

0:12:42 Debra Schwartz: When you were in Old Mill School, and you would get into the scuffles — even though you're not the kind to get into a fight — I must ask, what side of the conversation were you on? [chuckles] Do you remember what were the things that upset you?

0:12:56 Steve Coleman: No. I'm beginning to think I was just — temporary insanity or something. There's no reason for it. I don't remember. It wasn't anything political or anything like somebody insulted my family or something like that. It wasn't anything like that. It was just some arbitrary thing. [chuckles] But I just know that my whole personality went through a huge change after India. That was different.

0:13:20 Debra Schwartz: Going to India, what happened in India? What was that like for you and how old were you when you were there?

0:13:26 Steve Coleman: Well, I was in third grade when we came back, so that's all I can figure out. I was taken out of kindergarten when we left here.

0:13:35 Debra Schwartz: So five, six years old?

0:13:38 Steve Coleman: Yeah. We went and lived in Washington for awhile before, while my dad was training, and then we just went to India from there. But what was the question again? [chuckles]

0:13:50 Debra Schwartz: The question was: do you remember India? Your experiences there somehow affected you in some way. Certainly, you don't sound like you were in the schoolyard, cuff-to-cuff with anyone.

0:14:10 Steve Coleman: No, never. It was very, very different. Well, for one thing there was only one English-speaking school in Madras at that time, so all the kids went there. Some of the kids were Jewish, and some of them — we were supposedly Catholic. It was a Catholic school, so we got kind of a strict catechism and all that stuff, and the other kids didn't have to go to that. But something from that really permanently — I don't want to say scarred my life, but the fact that you're learning these stories in the catechism class, and these ideas about — I don't know. All the things I have developed about this guilt and punishment and all these things like that came from that because the background was that people were — in India, they don't cover up death. You'd see people dead in the streets and they'd have funerals for children that had died.

0:15:38: And sometimes they would kill themselves because they knew that families couldn't support them or something. They would throw themselves down wells or — There were all these stories about things that were happening in the neighborhood. All that was out in the open. In America everything was kind of covered up, and so to me that was kind of like, "This is kind of scary." There's such a presence of that. And I didn't have a Buddhist understanding of it, or any conceptual thing. I was just observing what happens out there, and the sort of sadness connected with it, because things were hard — lots and lots of beggars, and people that have been mutilated, and all that kind of stuff that makes you really think about your own perspective. I mean, having come from a culture where everything was so — well, America in the '50s, [chuckles] it was kind of an artificial reality or something.

0:16:51 Debra Schwartz: And then you're in a Catholic school with the dogma and —

0:17:01 Steve Coleman: Exactly. But I don't know. I've never been able to really analyze how it really affected me, but I know that it overshadowed a lot of the years later — how I observed life. It was just different then.

0:17:18 Debra Schwartz: Well, you come back to Mill Valley then, and it's a safe enclave. Things like death are not obvious. There are places for that. The day-to-day doesn't include those kinds of realities generally. Personally, of course, everybody must face it; but generally, not so much. So now you're a boy with a certain kind of life experience, coming back to this bucolic idyllic kind of existence. I guess you were a little altered.

0:18:02 Steve Coleman: Well, the experience in India, of course, was just immeasurable for the color, the life, the culture, the music, everything about it. And the architecture was — everything was pretty spectacular, especially to the eyes of someone that young. I was just a little kid. And that really did permeate me forever. I'm still attracted to the same colors that are just way out there. I don't have any restraint in that. I guess it has given me a little bit of perspective on the world, 'cause when we went there,

we stopped in Copenhagen and we stopped in Switzerland. We stayed a week or so in each one and got some little bit of experience of Europe, and worlds outside of here. So even though Mill Valley did feel like a village, it didn't have that foreign aspect to it. Anyway, I didn't want to give the impression that I didn't really treasure the experience of being abroad. We even went to Japan on the way home. So it was just getting to go around the world at that age, whatever it was, that really permanently changed my perspective.

0:19:43 Debra Schwartz: It does provide a little clarity, because when I even think about your art display at the Mill Valley Fall Arts Festival last fall, and the colors of the world that you create, there's a lot of saffron and — [chuckles] What are the impressions that inspire a person's work? It's helpful to know this about you. It seems as if you were a very sensitive child to begin with, so obviously you were absorbing and receptive to the visuals around you, as well as the culture.

0:20:25 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:20:26 Debra Schwartz: So when you came back to Mill Valley — is this where you've stayed since?

0:20:34 Steve Coleman: Well, off and on. When my mother was kind of ailing and stuff, I was staying with her. After my dad died, I've been living here. I've lived in other parts of the Bay Area and traveled and stayed out of the country for periods of time, but this has been my home most of my life.

0:21:13 Debra Schwartz: What middle school did you go to?

0:21:17 Steve Coleman: It used to be Edna Maguire, where they just recently rebuilt that new school. That was a pretty scary time, [chuckles] probably the worst part of growing up in that age.

0:21:36 Debra Schwartz: You mean junior high school?

0:21:36 Steve Coleman: Oh God, it was horrible. Everything was so completely confused inside. And in those days, it was seventh [grade] and eighth only. It wasn't sixth, because sixth was beautiful. I was still here at Old Mill School — and fantastic teachers, I mean, really, they were always really fantastic. It seems like all my life I really lucked out with the teachers. But it was that world, that time period with all the conformity — you really had to fit into a certain slot, especially at that age. And if you didn't fit in, you were going to be ostracized somehow, even if it's only your own psychology that gets affected. I had some experiences that were pretty awful.

0:22:42 Debra Schwartz: It's hard for people today, I think, to understand truly how ubiquitous that theme of conformity was, even in California, that there were some things that were acceptable and some things that were not, and you could be very easily mocked or intimidated by anyone who may have felt justified in pointing out differences. I recall

that well from childhood. And sometimes people were hurt. There was a time, even in California, when if you had long hair, and you went to the wrong place, you could get beat up.

0:23:29 Steve Coleman: Sure, yeah.

0:23:31 Debra Schwartz: And if you were gay, even in the '60s and '70s, that could be a problem in the wrong place. You had to be very aware of where you were.

0:23:43 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:23:46 Debra Schwartz: Nowadays it may be difficult for younger people to understand that things were, not so long ago, very different.

0:24:04 Steve Coleman: Yeah. It's funny because I have these shadowy memories of my parents always going to the Tides Bookstore in Sausalito, and hanging out with people that they knew over there that were artists, people like that, their own Bohemian community. But at school it was this real different thing. I think it was still coming out of the '60s — I mean out of the '50s. And then, of course, by the time I got to high school, it started to just break up and then everything changed.

0:24:39 Debra Schwartz: What high school did you go to?

0:24:40 Steve Coleman: Tam.

0:24:40 Debra Schwartz: You went to Tam High?

0:24:42 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:24:42 Debra Schwartz: What year did you graduate?

0:24:43 Steve Coleman: '69.

0:24:44 Debra Schwartz: Oh my goodness. '69, Tam High. So talk about how things changed at that time. What do you recall about being in high school then? And how would you explain how things were changing?

0:25:05 Steve Coleman: Oh God. Well, the two biggest things that were happening in the country were the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement and they were simultaneously bursting out. Probably for the first time, things made me at least look my place and context in the world a little differently than still being in the village or whatever it was before that. I was developing some kind of social conscience, going to the peace marches and all the things. My friends were all very involved in the — what was it called? [chuckles] The farm workers and stuff.

0:26:23 Debra Schwartz: Oh right, the migrant workers, with Cesar Chavez.

0:26:27 Steve Coleman: There were a number of conflicts in Tam at that time. When things were really heating up in the country, and the riots were breaking out in different cities, it somehow really impacted the two communities at Tam, which of course were the kids from Marin City and the ones that were from the other neighborhoods here. So a lot of that was kind of being acted out, and there were some really bad frictions. I mean not everybody, but it was just this weird thing 'cause everybody was kind of holding it in and it was kind of bursting out in different ways.

0:27:23: During the period I was at Tam, there was a group of students that got together and decided they were going to do something called "Breakthrough" at Tamalpais High, and they wanted to stop all the classes — it was just for one or two days or something — and have everybody mix the groups of the classes together. They would just have all-day discussions, like seminars or something, and they invited the media to come in — CBS or something. They just brought in all these cameras and documented the whole thing, so it put it in a spotlight. Somehow the level of seriousness kind of rose. It had more impact in the moment.

0:28:18 Debra Schwartz: You mean the seriousness of being in school and having a voice?

0:28:21 Steve Coleman: Yes exactly. It's just a faint memory what they did, but at the time I thought it was a really wonderful way of getting people to actually confront each other directly with what was disturbing them, and say it right out and in a form that was not violent or whatever.

0:28:54 Debra Schwartz: So, youth conference.

0:28:55 Steve Coleman: Yeah, something like that. Anyway, it was a beautiful thing that they did. I don't know what it produced in the end. But I think it took a lot of the friction out of the situation. There was some violence before at the school.

0:29:16 Debra Schwartz: You mean violence in Tam High between people with varying perspectives about what was going on?

0:29:23 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:29:25 Debra Schwartz: In what way? Were there fights?

0:29:28 Steve Coleman: No. There were just incidents, things would happen. I don't really remember that much more about it. But I would just hear the stories of things that had gone down. It was a very mixed demographic too because in those days, there were a lot of families here that were white collar — what do you call it? Not white collar.

0:29:55 Debra Schwartz: Blue collar.

0:29:56 Steve Coleman: They'd come from other parts of the country and they were a little more, maybe, racially intolerant, or they were just different. Certainly, with the Vietnam issue, it was really polarized down the middle. There were the people that really thought it was a good idea that we were there, and the other ones that were thinking it was just the worst thing that we could possibly do.

0:30:26 Debra Schwartz: Well you graduated in '69, which means there was the draft then.

0:30:32 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:30:32 Debra Schwartz: And as I recall, the draft was this looming axe over many people's consciousness, for males mostly. It really galvanized resistance, the thought that you would be shipped off against your will to go fight a war that you may not believe in. Were you drafted? Did you go to Vietnam?

0:31:01 Steve Coleman: I was. Well, I went through the whole process of induction and everything. I had a mildly low number. It wasn't the lowest group. I can't remember the number anymore, but I did have to go to the Oakland Induction Center and everything was kind of set. I had tried to be conscientious objector originally, but I didn't have the religious background or whatever, 'cause they sort of turned me down on that. I wanted to try to do alternative service or something, 'cause I really didn't believe in the war at all. But then somehow I kind of just lasted it out. I didn't have a student deferment after that. I was in college and I dropped out a few times, was back and forth, and finally the war ended.

0:32:06: I think the biggest conflict in me was the fact that my dad had been in the Navy. Of course, my dad was completely against the war too, but the feeling that the country — you had to kind of accept two beliefs at once that weren't compatible: one was defending democracy and the other was being an aggressor [chuckles] basically. But what you were taught was right, or what you thought you'd been indoctrinated all your life to believe was the right thing to do, is do what your government tells you to do, basically. I was in opposition to everything that was sort of the way you're supposed to respect the law. Basically, I was really in conflict. It sort of tears you apart. Who am I inside? Where's my true allegiance? And as a young person, I wasn't that [chuckles] reflective about who I was in the first place. I didn't know.

0:33:40 Debra Schwartz: Yes, it creates a schism for young people who feel, but can't necessarily describe why they feel what they feel. I was unfortunate that there wasn't at that time a place for people that were conscientious objectors that still wanted to be there for their for their country. There were some groups you could get involved with like the Red Cross —

0:34:06 Steve Coleman: You're right.

0:34:07 Debra Schwartz: Or some of these other agencies.

0:34:12 Steve Coleman: The thing was, actually, when you got drafted and sent to Vietnam, it could be a death sentence, because the casualties were so high. Looking at people that did go from Mill Valley and didn't make it back, I thought, "What makes me better that I could get out of this obligation and be exempt from it? Why did they have to go and I didn't?" And so, I again felt guilty about that too.

0:34:48 Debra Schwartz: That created a dichotomy.

0:34:49 Steve Coleman: Right.

0:34:50 Debra Schwartz: How about the people that went and came back?

0:34:53 Steve Coleman: I don't really know. I didn't know that many people myself, 'cause I had a very small circle of friends here. I mean the ones that were sort of activists and whatever, none of them went, so I knew the names of people, but —

0:35:23 Debra Schwartz: Well, I think you do a very good job of describing the dichotomy of the time for young people, for young men in particular, where you were kind of forced to be polarized.

0:35:37 Steve Coleman: There was some colonel that kept coming to the house and trying to get me to sign up, and it was like he was using all the isms and all the things to convince me this was absolutely the right thing to do, all the belief systems that I was no longer really connected to. I just kept resisting it, but I was saying, "Am I wrong or is this? I don't know." [chuckles]

0:36:17 Debra Schwartz: How about your brother? Did he go?

0:36:19 Steve Coleman: He was younger. Either he had a really low number when he got to that age or it was over by that time.

0:36:28 Debra Schwartz: Something that young people now may not be able to appreciate is the importance of the number. If you had a high number, if you were —

0:36:36 Steve Coleman: I can't remember whether it was high or low now.

0:36:38 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, I know, but I mean the fact that when people were given their draft numbers, the draft number could literally tell you in a sense if you were going to make it or not — as in live.

0:36:49 Steve Coleman: Yeah.

0:36:51 Debra Schwartz: Because if you had a low number — 10, 20, 50 — there was a fairly good chance you'd be drafted.

0:37:00 Steve Coleman: Absolutely, yeah.

0:37:01 Debra Schwartz: And a high number, not so much. So, waiting to get that number was a harrowing time to see where you stood, and then after you'd have to decide how you'd handle it. There was a tremendous amount of pressure for very young people at that time, and the number sort of exemplified it.

0:37:19 Steve Coleman: You're absolutely right. It's interesting to me right now looking back to see how much of it I think I blocked out too, because it was so painful being between these two systems. The rest of my family that were in other parts of the country, I know they were politically way more conservative than my parents, and probably thought I was doing a really bad thing by not serving and being there. It sort of immobilized me too, in terms of my own creativity, and even of continuing school. I had a personal breakdown when I was in college, so that was something else. But it all kind of connected into that same picture, you know, what was really going on, on paper.

0:38:24 Debra Schwartz: Which colleges?

0:38:26 Steve Coleman: I just went to San Francisco State, but then I never — I didn't go back to San Francisco State. I actually started taking classes at College of Marin, and then just did that periodically for years and years. [chuckles] I never finished anything.

0:38:44 Debra Schwartz: There's a lot of people that do that.

0:38:45 Steve Coleman: I just did what I wanted, basically.

0:38:49 Debra Schwartz: I remember Mouse, of Mouse and Kelley,² the artists —

0:38:52 Steve Coleman: Mouse, up in Sonoma?

0:38:54 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh. He told me once — this was many years ago, not in an interview — that he would sign up for the art classes, and then he'd drop out three weeks before it ended so that he could take it again if he wanted to. But if you completed the —

0:39:06 Steve Coleman: Oh, if you completed it, you couldn't take it again.

0:39:08 Debra Schwartz: Yes. [chuckles] So he liked going to the same class —

0:39:12 Steve Coleman: He came to my studio once, when there was some exhibit or something he was doing here. Once I got to meet him.

0:39:20 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember some of the people that you went to high school with? 'Cause you were there in '69 and I know I've interviewed several people

² Debra refers to psychedelic poster artists Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley—Editor.

who went to school with you, but I don't know if you were acquainted. Are there some people, students, that stand out in your mind as your friends or influences?

0:39:40 Steve Coleman: Sure, I mean, obviously I lived right next door to Tom Killion, and kind of grew up with him during that period. And he was, yeah, very influential to me at the time. His imagination and everything was always extraordinary. I really, really respect his work. And that family, they were all gifted, I mean, they were just incredible people. But my closest friend actually was John Leonard and that family, I don't know if you know them. He was mayor one time, back in the, I guess in the '80s. He was on the council. And he's the one that started the Curtain Theatre too. We kind of did that together. I was very close to that family, and they really, really influenced me. It's funny, there are very few friends that I have still that are here. I mean, one of those friends was Ellen Rosenthal; she's still here, and I get to see her every once in a while, but —

0:41:21 Debra Schwartz: None?

0:41:23 Steve Coleman: Not that many people.

0:41:23 Debra Schwartz: So, let's move along through the years. How about we talk about your affiliation with the Throckmorton Theatre?

0:41:36 Steve Coleman: Okay.

0:41:36 Debra Schwartz: Tell me how that came about.

0:41:42 Steve Coleman: Well, I'd worked at the Marin Theatre Company for a while, I mean, doing series of shows there, and so I had been working in Mill Valley a little bit. Before that I was always working in San Francisco. There were some small theater companies, and I kind of just got passed around between them. It was like these little theater families or something, and so you were always working for the same people. But about around the time when Lucy bought the Throckmorton I was here, 'cause I was starting to work more over here.³ And actually, it was weird. [chuckles] I was helping work with Ann and Fabio who owned what was Dowd's Barn — they had reconverted it and I was doing some paintings and stuff for them. That's when I discovered that the theater building was for sale, and so I was really keen to find out who was going to buy it.

0:42:44 Debra Schwartz: That it was Lucy Mercer?

0:42:45 Steve Coleman: Lucy Mercer. I went and introduced myself just to —

0:42:49 Debra Schwartz: You just walked on in?

³ Steve refers to Lucy Mercy, founder of the Throckmorton Theatre.—Editor.

0:42:50 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I just wanted to meet her and volunteer to help in any way I could. So we just started talking and discovering things, and then we began to evolve a vision of it together. I had worked on a number of theaters in the city, helping them lay out the design and do the interior auditorium stuff for several —

0:43:25 Debra Schwartz: You mean the walls?

0:43:26 Steve Coleman: Well, the way we laid out the seating and the walls, the configurations of the interior — in San Francisco.

0:43:36 Debra Schwartz: You mean you were designing the interior of the theater, as in a space?

0:43:38 Steve Coleman: I wasn't an official designer, I was just helping design. But I was responsible for the way the thing looked. And so I was keen to offer advice in that way. It was a slow, very slow, process of getting to know the building. And Lucy used to let me just go and paint. The big auditorium had windows all around at the top in the old days, and there was an incredible amount of daylight in there, so it was the perfect place to lay out huge drops. Nobody was using the building at all. We'd just go in there and look at it for a few hours and snuffle around and try to figure out how things could possibly be. But she had other projects she was working on, and I was pretty much working on a lot of other shows, so it was between that. Then she had to do some physical work on the building just to make it strong again. She got that done, and then we came up with the design for the auditorium. I can't remember how it started. I know I went and I looked at a bunch of theaters in Europe of that scale, that size, just to get some ideas of the feeling of the room and what we could do with it given the shape.

0:45:18: My instinct was to not — since I wasn't an architect [chuckles] and I couldn't say this — try to pull off some kind of modern design. I do modern design in shows when it requires a set to be something like that, but I had no expertise. I'm just an admirer of contemporary design. It takes an amazing amount of experience and skill and training and years of knowing your craft to pull off a really strong contemporary design.

0:46:05 Debra Schwartz: There's so much to know, plus you have to consider how sound moves, and the acoustics.

0:46:10 Steve Coleman: And that as well. We did study that, but what I'm saying is, I just didn't have the authority to come up with a design that wouldn't become dated after minutes in time. So my idea was, since I do historic design for theater, for sets, I said, "Well, why not put it in the period of the — " The building was built in sort of like the Beaux-Arts style. It was that period, like the time when they were building City Hall in San Francisco. So that's when I really looked at — I was a friend of Dorie Bassett. Her husband had been with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and had designed the Davies Symphony Hall and the Bank of America and all this stuff in San Francisco. After he died, she just gave me carte blanche to go through his library and find books, 'cause this

was a period when I was really searching for the principles of how we could harmonize this space.

0:47:32: It had these weird projections out of the walls that were at random places, and everything was kind of out of sync. There was no harmony to it at all, not even rhythms in the columns. The proportions were just bizarre, and the place needed to be focused into a harmonious whole somehow. So I went through his books and I found two — one of them was Inigo Jones — architects who I'd read biographies of before. They were the ones that were reinterpreting the Classical designs either in the Renaissance or the more modern periods, and I knew they had really studied the proportions and the rhythms.

0:48:29: I was trying to extract a pure form from all of the massive history that goes out into different styles. I don't know how to describe it, but it's like a pure Classicism was what I was actually looking for. I don't know how to describe it another way. I didn't want to recreate something that was like a Victorian theater or the movie houses that were just palaces where they just slop on —

0:49:09 Debra Schwartz: Gobs of gold.

0:49:09 Steve Coleman: Gobs of detail and gold, abstractly with no harmonious proportions or regulation. Even the registers of spaces, they go up and down on the sides of the building. I didn't want that, 'cause that was an artificiality. I wanted something that was pure, if I could draw it from the sources, the original sources, and within that, something that would be interpreted to be like Mill Valley — do it with wood. We were not going to make it look like marble or whatever. I'm sure that we found some of the traces of the original theater that just — there are no photos or anything of the original Throckmorton.

0:50:00: There were little painted pieces of, really hand-stenciled or hand-painted little flourishes on the wall in certain areas where the plaster was chipping off. But that was the only clue about the past. We were trying to find anything that related to the original that we could incorporate, and at the same time, make it one whole. We designed it and I did go back to Europe, I think, and looked at a couple of more theaters where they used illusion. You're mixing the real architectural details with illusionary ones, so that the eye doesn't really —

0:50:55 Debra Schwartz: Can't discern, but you can feel a feeling.

0:50:56 Steve Coleman: Discern. And then it leads you more into that imaginary world, where you're going to be suspending disbelief when you're watching a play or whatever. The other thing about the theater, the reason that the design went this way, was that we were not going to be doing black box productions. It was going to be mostly music, I knew that. If you're doing a regular, legitimate play, you can obscure [chuckles] all the detail and stuff. You can cover that up. But I wanted a place that would feel good when you're just listening to music — you know how your imagination goes off into the

space — that feels really comfortable and embraces you. I can't even articulate this.
[chuckles]

0:51:55 Debra Schwartz: I know it's hard for you.

0:51:56 Steve Coleman: But that was the impetus anyway, to make something like that.

0:52:01 Debra Schwartz: I interviewed Lucy last week, and very similarly to you, she seemed to have a super sense of the feeling a room — not just feeling it, but a vision of what it could feel like, that sense of something that to most theater-goers is absolutely invisible. You go in and you take for granted the way something is, for us plebeians. Lucy very much had a sense of how she wanted people to be in conjunction with the performances. And I think that is what you're describing right now — that a company is a production, that it's not just about the music it's not just about a song and a performance, or the people that are up there, but your relationship with the space as well.

0:52:57 Steve Coleman: Yeah. And it's funny how it also affects the performers. Because they're constantly thanking us for what we did. It's funny, but I wanted everybody to feel special in there, that it's a special experience or something. It really only comes alive, of course, when you turn on the lights and you bring the performers out. Then all the elements connect together. And then you bring in the audience, of course. When you're designing a set, you're creating an imaginary space for the mind to go. You get this Zen view of where the hidden limits of that space are outside of what your perception is. You can't walk into a room and just see a brick wall. You create illusionary space off from that so that there's always a place for the mind to go, or the imagination to go, and that's what I wanted the overall design to do too, to be able to lead you, through your own imagination obviously, as you participate and experience it.

0:54:28: When you're doing a set for a historic period or a play about a family or whatever, you're putting in the history of those people into the set too. I mean, what's gone on in this place is somehow included, and I sort of wanted us to feel like we were in a bigger part of history, that there was something that we were connected to. A lot of people kept saying, "Why don't you just do a deco design." That's the popular thing, but I was thinking that it was too finite. And also, it comes from a machine aesthetic. I love it when I experience the real places like the Paramount Theater. They are spectacular. But I didn't have the authority to pull that off. It's too much of only one period, one time, and you want something that's timeless somehow.

0:55:31 Debra Schwartz: It seems like you're describing wanting a time portal, where any time could come forward.

0:55:35 Steve Coleman: Oh that would be beautiful, if that were possible. Yes.
[chuckles]

0:55:40 Debra Schwartz: Where there's a holding space for anything to percolate up and out, unencumbered by something that had been preceding before. You know you said that the theater comes alive when the performance comes alive, but I've walked into that theater so many times when nothing is going on and I have always had the sense that — the sense of possibility — that it's alive. It almost feels like a living, breathing place where the anticipation of the next event is always held. I always feel like something's percolating in there. The possibilities are floating around and so it's very alive, even when nothing's going on.

0:56:29 Steve Coleman: Oh how wonderful that you get that feeling cause, I love what you just said. And it's funny that to Lucy, too, it was always that the building talks to you. Even just before we did anything, it was doing things like that. One time it was just at dusk and the side door was open to the parking lot, and I was looking back at the back wall of the theater, and I could see this little curve that looked like the edge of a screen or something in the back wall in the plaster. I went and looked at it and I scraped off some of the stuff. It turned out that it was part of the original silver screen that had been in the original — it was like a Nickelodeon theater or something, and they did sort of vaudeville things between films. And then I went around and I found the other four corners of the screen and I asked people from the film festival about it. Why did they use the silver, and could this really be the screen? And everybody agreed that it had to have been.

0:57:44 Debra Schwartz: And why did they use the silver?

0:57:46 Steve Coleman: Because the reflectivity of the light. It bounced so much more light for whatever the film stock was with the limited projector capacity.

0:57:57 Debra Schwartz: The silver screen. There's the word.

0:57:58 Steve Coleman: Yeah. That's what I was thinking. This is the reason for why they call it the silver screen.

0:58:03 Debra Schwartz: And you saw the light bouncing off from the door, is that what you said?

0:58:05 Steve Coleman: Because I'd never seen it before, the light just hitting the edge of this curve in the wall, just like a trace. But it was a definite incised pattern. And then, of course, I found the other four corners. In between, the walls had been broken and plastered over and smashed, but this was the original. I didn't know the origin of the word silver screen. I just knew it was associated with films.

0:58:32 Debra Schwartz: How did that make you feel to find the vestiges of the truth of the history of the building being revealed?

0:58:40 Steve Coleman: Well, it was almost like, as you said, the building was talking or speaking to you or something. And at that moment, when that light was just like that, and it was just the way the sun came through the side door, and the building was pretty

dark inside, it revealed that. But I was so excited I wanted to share it with somebody, 'cause it was like, to me, it was the discovery of the original identity of the building. And I think David Meyers was coming by, the cinematographer, and I showed it to him. I said, "You've got to tell me, do you think this is really the original thing?" And he was amused by it. But it was like, I wanted to just tell everybody. [chuckles]

0:59:28 Debra Schwartz: You spend a lot of time in that theater.

0:59:30 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I practically live in that theater.

0:59:33 Debra Schwartz: I've been to your studio office, the ledge on the edge, with all the worlds you live in, Steve. It's almost an alternative reality. [chuckles] In our pre-interview talk when I asked if you considered yourself an artist, you sort of challenged that thought, yet as we're conducting this interview, you've got your pencil box open, your sketch pad open, it's filled with remarkable sketches, and yet you don't really describe yourself as an artist.

1:00:15 Steve Coleman: Well, I guess because I don't do [chuckles] the traditional thing. I draw obsessively, and that's all I want to do. But that's an obsession. I don't know what that is. But I don't ever give myself permission to go and take a canvas and say, "I'm going to do a painting or something." I never do that. People say, "Do you paint?" I don't. I paint scenery, that's all I do. It's always for some other purpose, I guess.

1:00:47 Debra Schwartz: So, to you an artist is someone who —

1:00:50 Steve Coleman: Dedicates themselves to that. They're constantly searching for a vision. Their work takes them through a life process of discovering who they are through their art. Mine is more like just interpreting — I don't know, something that, in this case, really relates to theatre, which of course is an art form but it's —

1:01:25 Debra Schwartz: So we'll call it "art lite", shall we? [laughs] If you're more comfortable.

1:01:28 Steve Coleman: Whatever.

1:01:29 Debra Schwartz: It's so funny, because you're talking about someone that puts some idea onto a canvas. Well, your canvas is rather large as a theatre. In that remarkable world you've created at the Arts Festival last fall, the canvas was the trees and the landscape. And then you brought in this wild miniature fantastical world that became a world unto its own within the beautiful Art Festival, within the landscape of the area, within Mill Valley, within Marin County. It was utterly transformative. People were magnetically attracted to your display. And with all the details, shall we talk about that? The tiny world of cups and saucers and things off kilter, and animals, and flying things, and —

1:02:43 Steve Coleman: The fact that I haven't had any coffee makes it impossible for me [chuckles] to speculate what that's about. I can't remember. But all my life I've been fascinated with this idea of the microcosm and the macrocosm — even when I was a child, when I was escaping. I think when I was at Edna Maguire — talking about how miserable that experience was — I probably had it easier compared to so many kids that have had it way worse than I did. But even then, I would sort of lose myself in this imaginary thing of dreaming of these little tiny worlds. I'd be outside, and there was a field, a grassy place — I guess it was actually a part of the track. It was like flying over a continent to me. I'd just walk over during the lunch period when you're just free to walk around or whatever. I imagined myself flying over these formations, and exploring these valleys, and things that were just way down hundreds of feet below. And that kind of thing, when you'd be out in the garden, playing with little tiny things, and ants come and walk over them or something. You must have done that.

1:04:13 Debra Schwartz: Oh yes.

1:04:15 Steve Coleman: We have this genetic disposition to want to explore those little worlds. I started doing it for the library years ago, for the old display case up there. I would make the little mole stories and stuff for them. But that was just one version I did. I had a little gallery in the city that actually found me through the display cases. And that's how I used to pay my rent. I would just take things over there and they'd buy them, and then sell them afterwards or something. But I really was amazed during the Art Festival by the fact that I felt people really have a need for this. I thought, Nobody's going to want to see this, it's so boring, it's been done so many times before, and everybody is so used to the hi-tech films and things where you have these incredible unbelievable world's that are just so amazing, you can't even take it in. And this is so simple." But —

1:05:32 Debra Schwartz: It's visceral, Steve. You can get there, you can touch. It's three dimensional.

1:05:37 Steve Coleman: Yeah, and it somehow takes you out of yourself for the moment, because when I went down to look at the grove there in the Art Festival, I would go there every few days before when I was getting the show ready, and try to draw those stumps because it's like there were whole worlds in those ancient redwoods that had been cut 150 years ago. They had sculpted themselves into something unbelievable — these things that look like Monument Valley — little, tiny worlds.

1:06:14 Debra Schwartz: Which you populated.

1:06:16 Steve Coleman: Yeah, 'cause it was calling out or something like that. But I just wanted to connect to that space and feel the presence of the wise ones that were the ancient trees.

1:06:30 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember the Unknown Museum?

1:06:33 Steve Coleman: Yeah, but I didn't really get to know Mickey McGowan much until after that was gone. After that became Smith and Hawken he started a smaller version in a house. Did you ever go to that one on Blithedale? It was fascinating.

1:06:53 Debra Schwartz: Yes. For those that are listening and don't know about the Unknown Museum, maybe you could describe it?

1:06:58 Steve Coleman: Oh, God. I can't even begin to describe it.

1:07:02 Debra Schwartz: 25 televisions with the screens smashed out and doll heads inside, on the top of the roof, which is now Illumigarden, the building next to it. Tiny, little, obscure — so many things all glued together, spilling out of the entry way and on to the road. A microworld put on any number of things: a car, a stump and a collection of junk that miraculously becomes an alternative world and then, in the process, art. That's what I remember. I remember the Unknown Museum being one of the most iconic parts of Mill Valley and you could never go by without marveling at some bizarre, wonderful, confusing, brilliant — it really was quite an experience. And then, when that closed, how it must've been to move all that stuff!

1:08:05 Steve Coleman: Well, he moved a lot into storage, and he had some of it in Sausalito, in a postal building or something.

1:08:10 Debra Schwartz: Yes, it's still there, I think. There are still some remnants.

1:08:13 Steve Coleman: There is? And then he did the one that I was telling about, the one on Blithedale. The individual rooms were all sort of telling a story as you went through them. I think there was one that actually related to Vietnam. It was that period. And then the one about the bride or something. He would stand behind this little bar downstairs that looked like a cocktail bar and give — how do you call it? — dissertations or something that were just off the cuff. It was all about this world that he had created, reflecting it against our world. He used to open up his house in San Rafael, the one that's right out towards the freeway. It's entirely full of collection and the garden is full too. But he'll light it up sometimes. Just before Christmas time, he'd go around and light all the rooms and all the things.

1:09:24: I noticed though there is something about his collection that it only encapsulates the time that he's been alive. It's a certain period. There's no ephemera or anything from before that. It's sort of his lifetime. He has encapsulated all of America and all this stuff in telling a story through these discarded objects. It's just so fascinating to me. Sometimes I've given him things and I can tell if it's not really his era or if something was a little too early. It's funny, but he doesn't talk about that.

1:10:05 Debra Schwartz: His name again?

1:10:06 Steve Coleman: Mickey McGowan.

1:10:07 Debra Schwartz: Mickey McGowan.

1:10:08 Steve Coleman: At the time he had lots of friends. But the other person that I knew from Mill Valley that did some of the work that you saw in there — I don't if she did the horse, but she was a glue artist — Lois, oh God, Lois Anderson, who also worked at the library in her last years. She did phenomenal pieces that were like temples and she'd just take the Venus de Milo or the huge replica of her and completely do the glued on amazing creations. Indescribable.

1:10:50 Debra Schwartz: Here you are, innately able to imagine a microworld filled with any number of little beings, and the way it could be apart from the world you live in. And then you see his museums, somebody who was doing something similar, but different. Did that affirm or affect you? Here in Mill Valley there aren't many places like that museum. That it was in Mill Valley is kind of interesting to me.

1:11:30 Steve Coleman: Yeah. Well, I think there are around the country a lot of people that created their own world. There are books and books of people that are artists, that have invented — from the Watts Towers on, there are people that just kind of started creating this way. But his is unique in that it really is based on the ephemera of toys. In his house, he has things, like stacks of Bibles, so you can put your hand on the stack of Bibles and swear and stuff like that. And, of course, music. He must have millions and millions of records and things. But it's almost like it's there to capture something of that time. Mine is just sort of self-generated in a different way. It is sort of making up its own time.

1:12:25 Debra Schwartz: Timeless, the little animals and the little tea parties and the —

1:12:30 Steve Coleman: Yeah. But his is more related to the Smithsonian in a sense because he's really like taking America and putting it in a context that shows it somehow so that you get messages from it. It speaks to you, it's not just objects. It's the way he's arranged them and carefully created these really brilliantly conceived imaginary worlds. Anyway, I was very much taken by his imagination and everything, but again we have a completely different kind of vision.

1:13:11 Debra Schwartz: Have you ever found yourself getting lost in your little world?

1:13:16 Steve Coleman: Yeah, I think that's part of the necessity. You really have to put yourself inside of it in order to make it work — to believe it's real, up to some point. Maybe I don't do it as effectively now as I did before. [chuckles] That's the child part of ourselves that has to believe still that there's the possibility of that.

1:13:49 Debra Schwartz: When you look back at your time in Mill Valley and with the theatre — I know you're still in process here — but do you have any observations or takeaways? You've grown up in the area, and I don't know about you, but I have a

trajectory and expectation of how things may turn out and then life shows you what really happens. Here you are so involved in our community, so much of a part of the creativity that, whether people know it or not, we all enjoy and appreciate and depend on you in town through the Throckmorton Theatre and the other theaters that we have, and music halls. Now you're a person of a certain age, how do you feel about how things have turned out for you?

1:14:54 Steve Coleman: Oh, God. I never think about it. [chuckles] I just think about what I'm working on. I do notice when I'm in the theater, and somebody comes to visit, and we're just sort of showing people around and stuff like that, I'm like, "Oh my God, it's like I've touched every wall in this place." [chuckles] There are just too many things. It's too obsessive. I have to pull back at some point and let go more. But it's a part of me. Why is that puppet theatre upstairs for instance? Or the camel, or whatever. Well, there's just no other place to put this stuff. There's stuff all over the place. There is a creative dynamo that keeps producing. The spine of my character is just to create.

1:16:03 Debra Schwartz: Creative dynamo.

1:16:05 Steve Coleman: At some point it doesn't mean anything. You just have to be doing it, and that's the only meaning there is for me. I don't know, I guess most of the theaters I worked in the city were all — I knew they were pretty ephemeral. They weren't going to be there forever. People would change them ultimately into other things. But I hope this one lasts for a while. [chuckles] I think the biggest thing for me has been able to partner with Lucy. She has an imagination that just is — how do I describe somebody who's living in *the world as it should be*, the dream of the possible world where the interrelationship of the parts and the people is no longer based on a capitalist model or whatever, the hard system that we still live in.

1:17:23: It's way beyond that, her generosity and just the breadth of her vision — the future that the world should become, that we want it to become. To partner with, to work with her, is to get to share in that perspective, even though I will never be able to live up to it. It's so rare. In my lifetime she is probably the only person I've ever met with this kind of a gift.

1:18:02 Debra Schwartz: Well, she certainly is a visionary and so are you, Steve. So, I just want to thank you for sharing your story today, sharing your life, and your experiences, and your worlds, the creative dynamo that you are, and for making our community just that much more interesting and inspiring. I know you're in the day to day of your work and that's where you live but, we on the outside of that, we really get a lot out of it. Thank you.

1:18:39 Steve Coleman: Thank you. I feel like all along, I'm not doing anything. I'm just doing whatever it is that comes through me. It's not me. [chuckles] I'm just an instrument or whatever.

1:18:53 Debra Schwartz: We're grateful for the creative process and for the creative reality of a lovely little town filled with so much possibility. Because here in Mill Valley there's a lot of talk about that small town feeling being gone and the way that culture has changed and people being pulled apart from each other through technology. But that's exactly not what's happening at the Theatre. So there's an enclave that's protected, where a kind of community involvement and interaction is protected, and that's the beauty of art too. And the vision that Lucy has, which she is helped in, as she's mentioned, by her collaboration with you, is precious. So, thank you very much. I think we've said it all.

1:19:51 Steve Coleman: Thank you for interviewing me. I'm sorry I can't think about these things in more depth. I'm just saying what comes to my head.

1:20:00 Debra Schwartz: That's what we're here for. [chuckles] That's what we're here for. So on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library we'll conclude this interview, and I'll see you at the Theatre.

1:20:13 Steve Coleman: Okay, thank you.