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Oral history interview of Ralph Chessé, 1964 October 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ralph Chessé on October 22, 1964. The interview took place in San Francisco, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Ralph Chessé, spelled R-A-L-P-H capital C-H-E-S-S-E, at his studio at 54 Mint Street in San Francisco, California. The date is October 22, 1964. Present also this afternoon is Robert McChesney. I'd like to ask you first, Ralph, where were you born?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I was born in New Orleans in 1900.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: In 1900? And where did you receive your art training?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Through my own experimentation, mostly. I did all sorts of things. I started in as a painter when I was about 16, and I switched to theater, and then I combined both things. Eventually combined painting with puppetry, and I became a puppeteer. But I always painted during my puppet activities. I exhibited—my first exhibition I had in San Francisco in 1928, with the art—the Art Association, and when I won a prize with Matt Barnes at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you begin doing puppetry while you were still in New Orleans?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, I began puppetry up here in San Francisco with Blanding Sloan in 1925, I guess it was, when I first introduced—was introduced to it. And then after—I went to New York in 1926, came back in 1927, and '28 I started doing my experiments with puppetry on my own, in the theater that Blanding Sloan had started on Montgomery Street at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How did you first have any relationship with the government sponsored Art Project?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, with the Art Project, the first—the first contact I had with them was when I found out that they were going to do murals in the Coit Tower. That was in—I think it was 19—what was it—'37 or '38?

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: No, it was earlier. It was '33 and '34.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, '33 and '34. And I submitted drawings for one of the panels. I was—I was allowed a space in the building. And I submitted drawings, which was accepted by the board. And then I did a subject on children and playgrounds at the top of the stairs.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who were the people on the board to whom you submitted your designs?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, there was—Ralph Stackpole was one, and the director of the de Young Museum, Walter Heil, I remember was on that board too. And all the drawings were submitted to the de Young Museum and was passed on by this board, and made selection—they made selections as to what subjects would be, and they wanted a related style all through the building.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Were you invited to submit designs?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, no. I had to really go after it because everyone was clamoring to get

into the building, and there were probably more artists than there were spaces. And they had to really go through everything that was submitted to them and make selections, and I had to go after it. It wasn't just handed to me.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How did you happen to hear about it, that the building was going to be available for mural work?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, this was one of the first—one of the first projects that the artists became involved in, and of course, being a member of the Art Association and working with artists around town, I got wind of what they were going to do. And I knew Stackpole, and I contacted him immediately and asked to be included in those who were permitted to submit. I knew Lucien Labaudt also, one of the painters. He was—he did a stairway going up each side. And then Ben Cunningham, I knew him very well, and I knew a lot of the artists who were involved in doing those for the building. And at that time, everyone was Diego Rivera-conscious. Many of them had studied fresco with Rivera, some of those people who were working in this particular building, so there was a kind of a Rivera spirit, I think, throughout the project. And I think many of the painters had never done any actual wet fresco before. They were oil painters, mostly, and this was a new field.

[00:05:13]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Had you done any fresco painting yourself before?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: No.

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, this was the first one.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you ever hear of a man named Howard Mack in connection with the Coit Tower project?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. He, I think, was—as I remember, he was on the board, and I think he had—he was connected with Walter Heil and Stackpole. He had something to do with this project. I think he was probably one of the board members.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Of the museum, or of the—

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, of this particular federal project. I don't know how it came in, how he fit into the picture, but I remember the name very well.

[Recording stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: We were talking about Howard Mack, and you were saying that you had been acquainted with him.

RALPH CHESSÉ: I didn't know him intimately, but I knew that he was associated with the art colony, and I think that he was one of the board members who made the selections of the designs that went into the Coit Tower.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: He was an influential person, and he may have been responsible for getting the government to put up money for this project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: When your designs were once accepted by the committee, what was the next step that you went through in the process of making the fresco at Coit Tower?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, I submitted several things, and they asked for some changes, some alterations, and when they finally decided on the final sketch that they accepted, which was done, I think, an inch to the foot. It was a small drawing. It was not a full-size drawing. When that was finally accepted, then we had to make full-size drawings of the space. And we did cartoons, an outlined drawing, to scale of the—from the original sketch, and then when they were ready to go ahead with the frescos, well, the artists were—went into the Coit Tower. And it was a plasterer who plastered up the sections. As he went along each day, you put in a section of your design, and then you painted, and then the next day you'd come in and did some more. And then the plasterer was allotted to the whole building. In other words, he was

—he was the key man, actually, because he—it depended a lot on his knowledge of surfaces and art to get a good fresco job.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Several coats of plaster had to be put on the walls, didn't they?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, there's a scratch coat first, which is a rough coat, which is the basis for the final coat of the marble dust and the lime, which is the finish coat. And you put your—you put your cartoon on the scratch coat first, and you paint it in with very large, heavy outlines so that you can always see that drawing on the scratch coat as you go along. Then, when you plaster the section that you're going to paint that day, you put up your cartoon and you pounce [ph] through a perforated pattern, the outline of that part of the design.

And then you use colors that have been ground. They had a color man there who did nothing but grind colors for the whole project, and you would go down, get your plate full of colors, and you'd come up. And it was just the water process, a watercolor process, and the water dissolved the paint, and it was absorbed in the plaster. And as you went along, you had to do it—it was a little different from watercolors in that it took a little while for it to soak up, and you had to sometimes go over it with several—with several washes before you got the depth of color that you wanted. You couldn't pile it all on in one—in one—at one time, as you do a watercolor drawing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How large of a piece would you do at a day—in a day's work?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, I would say you could do, depending on the amount of detail involved, if there wasn't too much detail, you could do maybe a three-foot square section.

[00:10:05]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And what was the size of the panel that you did?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I don't remember offhand. I would roughly say that it was about four feet—it was a curved—it was a curved surface at the top of the stairs—it was about four, five feet wide, and then it was the whole length of the building, which must—of the—from the floor to the ceiling, which must have been possibly 10, 12 feet.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And you said the subject that you finally decided on was children?

RALPH CHESSÉ: It was children in a playground. There was a slide, as I remember, and children playing. Was a nurse with children, some playing ball. And it was a little—it was a long, narrow panel, it was a little difficult to fit in this particular type of subject because instead of doing it wide, you had to just do it from the top to the bottom. And if you used a—I used a central apparatus as the motive [ph] around which I could work in the other figures for my composition because of the type of space that it was.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, I see. Did you begin painting from the top?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then worked down?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Worked down. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The plasterer must have been pretty busy running around, there were about 30 artists working there at that time, weren't there?

RALPH CHESSÉ: That's right. The plasterer was a very busy man. He was a very skilled man. In fact, it was Matt Barnes, who was also a painter, who did the plastering, but he was—he was a skilled plasterer, and that was his trade. He painted—he was a painter also, but he was a plasterer by trade, a very fine plasterer, and he was—that was his contribution to the project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you know very much about Matt Barnes?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Not too much. I knew him personally. I used to meet him at Art Association meetings and art gatherings, and I went to exhibitions and parties where I met him. I knew him that way. I didn't know him too personally, but he used to—he had a studio on

Montgomery Street at one time when I had a studio too, so he used to run in and see me sometimes. I had a marionette theater there at—during the '20s and '30s.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: He became rather well known locally, a bit later, for his very romantic paintings.

RALPH CHESSÉ: He had a particular style of painting. I don't think I know of anyone that has ever painted just the way he did. It was a very individual style. He would use very heavy surfaces, hard, very highly glazed, and usually moonlight subjects, one little house, maybe a foggy moon coming through a very deep blue-purple sky on top of a hill, or something. And it was a very individual style. It—I don't think he was successful outside of San Francisco. He did have an exhibition in New York, I remember, at one time, which was not successful, but that's true of many artists, many good artists who never make the scene in New York, although they do have exhibitions. Which is not always a reflection on their work, but depends a lot on the market that dealers are selling at the time. It's true today, as well as it was then.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you have any assistants working with you on your fresco?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Not on my panel. I was—I worked alone because it was one of the smaller spaces. I was able to do it alone, and the—some of the jobs took, oh, several months to complete. I think mine—I took about five or six weeks on the one that I had.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You mentioned Ralph Stackpole. Was he working on a fresco at Coit Tower when you were there too?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. He had a space there, a very large space downstairs. I don't remember just what the subject was, but he was one of—one of the painters on the project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And Lucien Labaudt, as well?

RALPH CHESSÉ: And Lucian Labaudt had a space up the stairs on either side. He did—his subject, I remember, was Powell Street. He used the—because it was going up the stairs, he used the idea of a hill and the cable cars on the building, going up these stairs, which was a very clever idea, I thought.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I interviewed Marcelle [Labaudt's wife –Ed.], and she said he had put several people who worked on the project into his fresco painting art [ph]. Were you in it?

[00:15:00]

RALPH CHESSÉ: I don't remember whether he put me into it or not. I know that he did that in some of the other projects that he did, the one he did up at the beach.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: [Cross talk.] The beach in L.A. [ph].

RALPH CHESSÉ: There were many of the local people there who are on that—in that mural.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You were upstairs though?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes, just at the top of the stairs.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who were the people working next to you?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, across from me was Ben Cunningham and Edith Hamlin. They both had spaces there. I don't remember the names of the other people who were around me. There were—there were other spaces across from me and alongside of Ben Cunningham, and I just don't remember now who they were.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What was Cunningham's mural of?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I don't remember now just what the subject was. They were all—they were all figures, subjects, all of—all of the subjects on them—on the walls was supposed to represent, I think, California activities generally, from industrial—some of the industrial subjects, like farming and wine, and then there was the city activities. There were industrial activities. All of these various subjects which represented California were included in this—in

these murals.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You mentioned the influence of Diego Rivera on the murals which were done at Coit Tower. Did you know him personally when he was here in San Francisco?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I met him on several occasions. I met him once at Perry Dilley's studio, at a puppet show, strangely enough.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Whose studio?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Perry Dilley. He was a puppeteer on Montgomery Street at the time that I had my theater. He had an upstairs studio, and he gave hand puppet shows in schools. And he had a little theater in his studio, and he invited people occasionally to special performances, and Rivera was invited the night that I went to see it.

Then I met him again during the exposition, the Golden Gate exposition, and he was doing this great big mural at that time. But he had a great influence on all the painters at that time. He was considered very controversial in his subject matter. He got away from the modern movements of Paris and the Paris schools, the abstract painters, and he went back into his own native folk lore for his material, which combined a very sophisticated political approach in an illustrative way, and his forms reflected the peasant—the peasantry of Mexico, the primitive type of work that the peasants did. All of these things were combined, and it came out in a style which was very much his own. I don't think he was just as successful when he attempted to do the same thing with American subject matter, when he went into machinery and the industrial things, and he combined a lot of things. I think he got—he got off the track. I think his best things were the things that he did in Mexico, his Mexican subjects.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Had you seen any of his frescos yourself before you did the fresco at Coit Tower?

RALPH CHESSÉ: His frescos—the only one that I saw—I have never been to Mexico, so I've never seen his Mexican—only reproductions, but the one that he did at the stock exchange I had seen, and the one he had—the one that he did at the art school I had seen.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: That was the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco?

RALPH CHESSÉ: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you think his influence in San Francisco came mainly from the frescos that he did here, or did it come from people who had gone to Mexico and seen his work there?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, it came from his popularity in Mexico, and many of the painters went down there and worked with him on these large Mexican projects. And it was considered quite the thing to do, to go to Mexico and work with Diego Rivera. So that there was a very definite trend to do frescos up here at that time. Everybody was dabbling with plaster and plaster panels and doing wet fresco à la Diego Rivera.

[00:20:00]

And it was a very—a very appropriate thing, I think, for the Coit Tower to have used this medium at this particular time because I think it does reflect a very definite American art period. The whole WPA Art Project is a period in American art which I think will stand as an example of coordinated effort among artists. There was a great deal of collaboration, coordination in selecting materials and in styles of painting. Each one had a little bit different style, but still there was a coordination in all of the subjects that were done in all the art projects. Many post offices, many public buildings, schools, benefitted from this subsidy, and the artists did too because they had work, which they didn't have before. They were left to their own devices.

In fact, all of the art—all of the art projects—the Theater Project was a very important contribution, and I came into the Theater Project after having done this Coit Tower mural. I was appointed state director for puppetry for the Federal Theater, when the WPA finally came into its full—its full program. And I remained with that through the Golden Gate

Exposition, where I had several shows—several groups of people putting on shows that I had designed and directed both in San Francisco and in Los Angeles. And then, when the—when the Federal Theater was disbanded, it was in July of 1939, I went into the Art Project in San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Before we get on to this Theater Project and Art Project, I'd like, if possible, to do a bit of this chronologically, and I did have a few more questions—

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY MCCHESNEY: —about Coit Tower. I was curious to know if, during the time you worked there, there were many discussions going on between the different artists who were doing frescos. It does—the reason I ask is that when you look at the Coit Tower frescos, you have an impression, as you said earlier, of people—many people working very much in the same direction, and I was wondering if you met together or if you talked a lot about what you were doing as painters there. Or was this just something that was sort of spontaneous?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, I don't remember that kind of an association from it. Artists generally are pretty individualistic, and while they may agree or disagree about certain movements in painting, basically they remain—they try to remain themselves and try to develop something within themselves which will be recognized as their own contribution. Influences have a tendency to destroy that—and even though, we'll say an influence like Diego Rivera, at that time was very evident in everything that was done in this program. So, each artist tried to contribute something of his own to it, so that there are variations.

The general thing was that Rivera approached the mural as a very political idea, and some of this got into the Coit Tower, too. Also, he reflected the times, the people around him, the peasantry, the political things which happened to the people. There wasn't so much of that that could be used as an American theme, but they went into the industrial side of the American scene, such as dairy farming and coal mining or gold mining or ranching—California ranching. There were some that showed the fruit orchards. All of these things came into the California scene. This is the kind of influence, I think, that Rivera had on the subject matter. The style of painting itself was pretty much controlled by the medium, which is a very flat-type medium. You work from an outline, and you color and build up your form from a flat, two-dimensional drawing.

[00:25:10]

You don't paint a fresco the way you paint an oil painting, where you can start with a blob of color and develop it and add, detract, and build forms and textures, and create these things in variations of textures. A fresco is flat. It's a two-dimensional thing, pretty much, and even though you may give them some modelling, you work within an outline. You do a pattern in two dimension, you work out your color scheme, and it's merely a matter of enlarging that when you get it on the wall. There's no—there's no spontaneity to fresco painting, as I can see it. It's a pretty well cut and dried design, which is well organized and very hard-edge, usually.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you find it difficult to work in fresco, since you've never done it before?

RALPH CHESSÉ: The medium itself was a little strange, working on a hard wall, and finding that the paint didn't react the same way to the surface as an oil painting would. And you don't have the flow and the plasticity in a fresco that you have in an oil painting. I mean, you could a use a knife with an oil painting, you could use a brush, you can vary your techniques, but with a fresco you can't. You have to keep it pretty flat, and usually, you work up these surfaces with very small brushes. You don't use large brushes for great big areas. You have to crosshatch to get your tone because the color doesn't stick. You have to go over it, and over it, and over it, in order to get a depth of color. You can't put it on in one operation.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you there at Coit Tower during the time they did the demonstrations?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Which demonstrations?

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Well as I understand it, that there were two. There was one demonstration in support of Diego Rivera's mural, which was destroyed in Rockefeller

Center, New York. I saw photographs of that one, and the artists went outside and [inaudible]—

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh yes, yes. That—I remember that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You were there then?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I was there then, yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And then there was the second difficulty that I've heard about when a man named Clifford Wight had painted a hammer and sickle on the beams of the roof [inaudible]. [Cross talk.]

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes, well, he was one of—I think he was one of Diego Rivera's pupils, or associates. He had been—he's one of those who had been to Mexico and had worked with Rivera.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you know him?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Only by seeing him going in and out of the building, and meeting him, as I did, many of the other artists who were painting, but I didn't know him too well.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: He's the one who did those very tall panels of single figures.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. He, and then there was another painter, a local painter, who had—who did the similar one that was a sort of a companion piece to it. Used to live across the bay. I'm trying to think of his name now.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mallette Dean?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Mallette Dean.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Is that it?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: After the Coit Tower project, did you go ahead and do any further fresco work?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, because there weren't—in order to do a fresco, you had to have a wall, and as I—as my activities, as WPA came into the picture, switched to theater, I didn't—I didn't pursue the mural phase of painting as many of the other artists did because there were mural projects that developed along with the WPA Art Project later on. And there were many fresco projects. There were post offices that had spaces that the painters designed for, and there were many—there were some of the murals that were done on canvas and then stretched and applied to the wall surfaces later, glued on.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Let's see, the Coit Tower job was finished in 1934, as I understand, and then you went on to the Theater Project. Was there any lapse of time there, or did you go directly from the Coit Tower to the Theater Project?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, as a matter of fact, the Federal Theater Project—the WPA project which I became associated with, started in 1936. And I was with the San Francisco unit during 1936, and I developed—I organized a company here, and we did—*Crock of Gold* was the first production that we did on Bush Street.

[00:30:24]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Was this puppetry or actual theater?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, this was—this was a marionette project, and these were—these were marionettes—a marionette unit, which was a part of the Federal Theater unit. They had different units. They had vaudeville, they had dance, they had a music unit, and they had serious drama. They had opera. They covered all of the different activities.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who were some of the other people who worked with you on this *Crock of Gold*, your first production of the marionette theater?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Charles Bratt [ph] was one of the very active ones, and many of them—I don't remember the names of many of the people who acted as puppeteers. Crawford Perks [ph] was one, who had worked with me in my own theater before. [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: About how many people did you have with you?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, there must have been—we started out here locally with about 15, 20 people. But the quotas changed constantly from year to year, and there was always the—at the end of the season, they—to cut back, they would lower the quotas. And they would insist on people who had—who were on relief. And many of the good people who were qualified did not have relief status. So that they were considered non-relief people. And they tried to balance them up. But as time went on, more of the relief people they insisted on having, and the non-relief people were let out, even among the supervisors. Most of the supervisors were non-relief people, because they were key people who would have to be brought in to keep these things organized.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You were non-relief —

RALPH CHESSÉ: I was non-relief because I had a job at the time that I went into this. I was doing some work for the City of Paris [a department store –Ed.] at the time. Some window shows. And this was something that they had to do very hurriedly. They got people to get the thing started. It had to be started right away. And they got the key people to start the project. And then from that time on, why, there were many, many changes that happened. Good people were lifted to higher supervisory capacities and were taken out of smaller projects. Which meant that you had to try to find replacements. It wasn't always easy. And the change was quite—quite regular. There were—you didn't hang on to one group of people for too long a time, unless they were really relief people.

And there were many problems in the W—in the theater, because everything had to be passed on by Washington. A supervisor, while he had complete authority over his group, he had to—if he was going to produce a show, he had to have the approval of Washington before they would permit him to do it. And very often the things that were submitted were lost in the shuffle. By the time they got back to you, they were either rejected or something else had taken its place. Or you couldn't get the rights to a play. Or sometimes you did something—you went ahead and did a show, and then you found out after it was done that you didn't have the rights to it and Washington would call you off. This happened with *A Crock of Gold*. The—it was the first project that we did. We developed a script from one that had been previously written by Meyer Levin [ph]. And we produced it in San Francisco. And it was very successful. We had quite a long run. And then when I was made supervisor for the state, I took the show to Los Angeles.

[00:35:00]

And the marionettes that were used here, I took [as well (ph)]. But the crew was different. The people was—they had a much larger marionette unit in Los Angeles because the population was greater. By the time we got *The Crock of Gold* rehearsed and ready to go on, a wire came from Washington to say that we had the rights to do the show. But we had already produced it in San Francisco very successfully.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh.

RALPH CHESSÉ: These things happened all the time. It was very frustrating to directors, because there were so many people who had jurisdiction over local units. And everything had to be passed by Washington. A lot of red tape involved, which interfered with the freedom. It was a wonderful start for a federal—federally subsidized theater, and everyone had hopes that it would be a permanent thing, because there was—there's still a great need for this sort of thing in this country. But when the theater became more articulate, when they began doing things like Living Newspaper, which was very political, the congressmen began to get a little frightened and thought that the artists were too articulate. And the writers were using it as a springboard for their own propaganda. So, they stopped it. This is what killed it off.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you work with writers? You were talking about getting a script like *The Crock of Gold* and working from a script of Meyer Levin's?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Meyer Levin.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Meyer Levin. Then would you have writers that worked with you, or would you—

RALPH CHESSÉ: We had writers working on the project. And they didn't always produce things that we could use, but we had them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: Very often I made my own adaptations. I liked to have full control of whatever I was producing. And if I couldn't find something which I could have rights to, I would write my own. And even those things were not always accepted. I was very anxious to do a Roark Bradford story at the time. And I had written to Roark Bradford and had permission to make an adaptation of a short story he had written, which was called *Child of God*. It was a very—it was a fantasy. But it had some Negro folklore in it, and it also brought out the problems of the Negro in the South. Lynching, the unfair trial of the Negro, unfair accusations, southerner's attitudes towards the Negro. I was very anxious to do this show. But it never got off the ground. It was lost in the red tape in Washington. They never seemed to clear it for some reason or other. I wrote the script, but it was never produced.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: That's a new name to me. Roark Bradford?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Roark Bradford. He's the one that wrote the original stories for *The Green Pastures*.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: He wrote the Negro in relation to Bible stories. And the characters in the Bible were all Negros. I mean, God was a Negro. And the angels and all the important Biblical characters were all Negros. And this is how *Green Pastures* came about.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I remember seeing that movie a long time ago.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Is he a Negro writer himself?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Where's he from, California?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, he's from the South. He was from—

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, from the South?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: When you first began the marionette unit, did you set up the whole project yourself? Did you establish headquarters, and go into business, hire assistants, or? I'm just curious how you [inaudible]. [Cross talk.]

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, you organize your own unit. You had—

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Nothing had been in existence, thought, when you took over, had there?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, there was a director—a local director appointed. And it was her job to get the people organized to do this Theater Project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: This would be a local director of the Theater Project?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, she was not local. Her name was Elson. Elizabeth Elson [Cohen]. And she had a very fine theater background. I think she was from Vassar. And she was appointed by Hallie Flanagan to direct the San Francisco unit.

[00:40:01]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What was that name? Hallie—

RALPH CHESSÉ: Hallie Flanagan. Hallie Flanagan was the head of the theater unit in the WPA.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then Mrs. Elson, or Ms. Elson, was the one that contacted you?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: I had had several marionette theaters in San Francisco, so my reputation as a puppeteer was known pretty well locally. And I was the first one that they approached on this thing. They organized one in Los Angeles, which had a much larger group of people. There were about 50 people at the time. And Blanding Sloane, who initiated me to puppetry much earlier in my career, had headed that unit. Then he moved on to something else, and another puppeteer took over the southern directorship of the WPA marionette unit. Robert Bromley.

But we were so successful up here with the shows that we did. We got very fine reviews. And I organized it almost from people—many people who had no previous marionette experience at all. Most of them got their training right in—on the project. And we had a shop, we built things. I made the signs and taught them how to make the marionettes. And then we had, of course, the advantage of people with theater backgrounds. Actors, who—sometimes we used actors' voices and used puppeteers to manipulate to the show. In the southern branch of the WPA marionette unit, they had more people.

But they didn't seem to hit it off too well. They weren't doing anything very imaginative as I remember. And the people working on the project didn't seem to take advantage of what really the WPA Theater was offering them. I mean in experimentation, a new form of puppetry. New ideas, new things which should be developed under this kind of sponsorship. They were doing the old stuff, the old fairy tales and the old song and dance routines, and the popular type of Vaudeville show for puppets. So, I was asked to go down there and take charge of both units. The San Francisco unit and the Los Angeles unit. So, I used to travel back and forth. And they didn't like it too well, because I was considered an intruder. And I had quite a bit of trouble at first because they thought that I should have stayed up here. And sometimes if the performances would get into a hassle, I'd get a wire to come suddenly—suddenly go back to Los Angeles because the unit was in a mess. I'd have to go down there and get the whole company into the theater and give them a big pep talk. And re-rehearse the show, and get them started again, because they didn't like the material. They didn't like the sort of things that we did up here.

And I refused to do things that were just run of the mill type of puppetry. I thought this was a chance where you have so many different people of different talents to use that they should be used to better advantage than just doing stuff to keep people in jobs. We had very good craftsmen in that unit. People—women who could build very intricate types of animals and jointed types of marionettes that did special things. Well, they were more interested in the tricky faces of puppetry, and I was more interested in the dramatic face of puppetry. I looked at it as more of a theater and not as a trick. Which is, I think, where we disagreed.

So finally, I was moved to Los Angeles. I lived in Los Angeles from '37 until 1940. Then I came back to San Francisco at the closing of the Project. We did one last show on the second year of the Golden Gate Exhibition under the Recreation Department. We did a performance of *Pinocchio* for the center. It was after that that I joined the art unit.

[00:45:09]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What were some of the other shows that you did? Besides—you mentioned *The Crock of Gold* and *Pinocchio*.

RALPH CHESSÉ: We did *The Crock of Gold*. I did a production of *Alice in Wonderland*. I did *Mikado*. I did a topical review type of thing, which was not the usual song and dance type of review that marionettes go in for. We did little things, which were little satires on the prison systems. And we brought in—I had Bernard—George Bernard Shaw as the Master of Ceremonies, who damned everything. He was—instead of saying how wonderful the program was going to be, he would knock it down before each act would go on.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you write this one yourself? The review?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. I selected the material and there were some sketches and things available. If they were good, I would use something that was available. But mostly, we developed—I developed the ideas myself. And we used recordings for background music. One of the things we did was a reading of—a dramatization of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, which was done as a dramatic reading to a musical background. And then it was animated with the character of Poe in the setting of the library with the raven coming in and perching on the bust of Pallas. It was very exciting, very interesting. Something that puppeteers ordinarily wouldn't think of doing. They wouldn't want to do it. In fact, Los Angeles people, when I took it down there, they didn't like it. They thought that it had no place in the variety show at all, this type—this type of performance.

Another thing that I did, which I had produced on my own before I went into Federal Theater, was a performance of *Emperor Jones*. And we built a production of *Emperor Jones* on the Project. And I played the part of the emperor, as I had done it previously. And one the things that we wanted to do—I had done it—was a reading, as a prologue, of Vachel Lindsay's "Congo." It all works in beautifully because *Emperor Jones* is a short play. It's a very fast-moving play. It has about—a first act, which runs almost about a half an hour. And the seven scenes that follow it are very fast moving, flash scenes as he goes into the woods, to the beat of the tom-tom. The climaxing of the gunshot going off. But I had to—to lengthen it, and to give it the right mood I had to use Vachel Lindsay's "Congo" with a voodoo figure in a jungle setting. With brilliant lighting and with a tom-tom rhythm. And I recited the Vachel Lindsay's "Congo" as a prologue. Well, we had to clear this thing through Washington. And again, we were on the stage opening night with all the people rehearsed. We did it then as a choral thing, to do the prologue to *Emperor Jones*. And we're ready for the curtain—we're ready to go up on the show, and a telegram came and No, we couldn't go the "Congo." We didn't have the rights to do the play.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh. So, you never got to perform that?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, not the "Congo." We had to eliminate the "Congo." We had rehearsed it and it was all ready, but they wouldn't let us do it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: But you went ahead with *Emperor Jones* without using Lindsay's poem?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. Well, *The Emperor Jones*, we had permission from O'Neil to do it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: He was living out here —

RALPH CHESSÉ: He was living out here at the time. And this is how it was possible for us to do it. He gave us clearance on it. Ordinarily, it would've been impossible to do *Emperor Jones* because it was royaltable [ph], for one thing. And the government tried to steer clear of royaltable [ph] plays as much as possible. They did royaltable [ph] plays, but they wanted to cut expenses as much as possible. And we found in Los Angeles, even with all the conflict, that the marionette group took in more money at less government expense than some of the other large, theatrical productions that were done. But all the money went into a kitty. We didn't get the benefit of the extra cash to do better productions. It was soaked up by the theater unit.

[00:50:17]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh. What did you charge for a performance?

RALPH CHESSÉ: I think it was 50¢ to a dollar, was the range of price for the shows.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And where did you perform them? Did you have a theater here in San Francisco?

RALPH CHESSÉ: The first theater we had in San Francisco was Little Bush Street Theatre. There's a recording studio there now. But then they had the Alcazar. They had the Old Columbia first, which was later knocked down. Then they had the Alcazar. And we played *Emperor Jones* in the Alcazar.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How often would you give a performance?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, it would run once—well, there were a lot of things going on. The marionette was merely one of the theatrical units. And they scheduled—because they only had this one theater at the time, they would schedule the marionette performance for—to fit into their regular schedule of plays. In Los Angeles, it was a little different. They had quite a number of theaters. They had them all over Los Angeles. There was one little theater where we played *The Emperor Jones*. And I've forgotten the name of it now. It was a very small theater. And there was another one on Hollywood Boulevard where we played. We did *Rip van Winkle* in that theater at that time. And then for the fair, we did a musical production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. This was one of the compromises that had to be made, because this sort of thing that the federal, that the Los Angeles group of people loved to do.

So, they had musicians and singers and every kind of talent imaginable that had to be put to work. So, it was one way of making use of this talent. And they gave a very good performance, a very good production of *Snow White*. But the San Francisco unit then did the *Rip van Winkle*, which I had—which had been built in Los Angeles and had been shipped up here. And there was always a rivalry between the two groups. When—after I was sent to Los Angeles, well, then the rivalry between San Francisco and Los Angeles was quite strong. And there was always something going on. And I wasn't able to travel—they didn't permit me to travel as much after the first year, because after the first year, when I did the first year, when I was getting things organized. So things sort of got out of hand when I wasn't around to keep them straightened out.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Where did you give your performances at the Treasure Island Fair? Did you

RALPH CHESSÉ: There was a theater built. There was a federal theater built—very complete federal theater in the federal building. It had revolving stages. It had the most modern switchboards. And they had a little marionette theater, which was on the side. And I designed the stage and laid out the whole theater for our performances. We had a revolving stage and had an upper balcony for a marionette bridge, which was used as a bridge and as a storage space as well. And it was a very comfortable theater. The seats and everything were very comfortable. And we played, oh, five or six performances every day.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Every day, five or six?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: That's a heavy schedule.

RALPH CHESSÉ: It was. And it would alternate. One week, the San Francisco unit would play. Another week the other unit would play. And we had to balance them up. But they—it was closed up that summer. It was, instead of letting the season run through, Congress saw fit to shut our federal theater in the middle of summer. In July, it was. And this when they had done—scheduled quite a number of Living Newspaper performances.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: There at the fair?

RALPH CHESSÉ: At the, yeah. [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Then the theater there was just no longer used?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, I don't know what has happened to it since. After the Federal Theater broke up, I don't think there was any live theater going on in that building. But the second year, the recreation took over the marionette unit so that there were still marionette demonstrations in the federal building. Under the recreational department. And we produced a show of *Pinocchio* in the marionette theater for that summer.

[00:55:27]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: So, your unit, the marionette unit, didn't close down? You just transferred from the Theater Project to the recreational —

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, this was closed down. This was entirely—this was not federal theater at all. This was a recreational department. And it was—I had to organize another crew of people. The people that we had originally for the other performances, that had all been dissolved. They had gone back to Los Angeles, the people in San Francisco had been taken

off the project. There were just one or two that we were able to get ahold of. But it was an entirely different set up. It was not like federal theater at all. We'd built this one production for the fair.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: So, the recreational department you worked for wasn't under the WPA, then?

RALPH CHESSÉ: It was, yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, it was?

RALPH CHESSÉ: It was still WPA.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh.

RALPH CHESSÉ: It was not federal theater.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: They worked a lot in playgrounds and the teaching of crafts and all this sort of thing. Which was not theater, actually. The puppetry happened to be one of the crafts that was included in it. And since the theater was available, why, we were asked to do a marionette show for the fair.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Where were your headquarters here in San Francisco where you actually made the marionettes?

RALPH CHESSÉ: At Bush Street. We had a shop upstairs. And even after the theaters were rented, the larger theaters were used, the headquarters was still at Bush Street. The executive offices and the shop for the marionettes was still at Bush Street.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How were the marionettes made?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, they're made—they're carved—the parts are carved out of wood. In some instances, heads are carved out of wood. In other instances, they're modeled. The clay—the plaster molds are made from clay models. And then the plastic wood cast is made into the mold. And this is done—refinished like a piece of wood. Well, you have moveable parts like moveable mouths or eyes, the plastic wood casting is preferable because it's hollow. Whereas the solid wood carving for smaller figures works very well when there's no moveable parts in the head. But the joints, the body parts, are made of wood. And you combine different materials: cloth, sometimes sponge rubber, chicken wire. For some things, animals, require certain shapes. And we find that chicken wire works very well because it's light and it gives you something to build it—a skin around.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What's the usual size? About two feet?

RALPH CHESSÉ: The marionette—the human figures ran around two feet. 18 inches to two feet. In my own theater, I used smaller figures. When I did Shakespearian productions, I used a 18 to 20 inch figure. Very slender, and tall. They look very tall. They weren't very big but they were very slender, so they seemed huge on the stage, even though they were only about 20 inches. And you could use a large—work them into a large stage, have complete settings like you would in a modern theater. Lighting and the figure became the important unit, important instrument, rather than the head or the face.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: Which is the case in the hand puppet, for instance. Wherein you concentrate on the head and the hands. And this is usually oversized, overexaggerated. Whereas in the classic type of marionette, you strive for a classic proportion. Classic movement, simple movement of the body. And as little movement as necessary to put over your dialogue or your verse.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: With the workshop and the people who were actually operating the marionettes and the actors, you must've had a very large project.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Locally, it wasn't as large a project as it could've been. Although we borrowed people who were on the Theater Project where we needed them. We needed

actors, for instance, they were on call.

[01:00:02]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: And sometimes we would have maybe 10 or 12 people on the bridge. And then we'd have maybe half a dozen actors or so along with us who would read parts while we manipulated.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The bridge is the platform above from which they suspend the marionettes?

RALPH CHESSÉ: The bridge is the framework between the—on the—or, rather, on each side in front of the stage and around the back of the stage. And the—you have a front bridge, which makes the proscenium of your theater.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: And then in back of that, the stage floor. And then back of the stage floor, the back bridge. And you have operators on each bridge, so that you have enough—you have, say, four feet—approximately four feet between the front and back bridge so that you can work back and forth. And the operator can hand the marionette to the one on the front bridge and vice versa.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: And then you have the under bridge, if your bridge is high enough, so that you have space for settings, for a sky drop in back. For lighting. You can use the depth under the bridge for distance. You can use—we have incorporated shadow figures, for instance, in conjunction with shows like *The Emperor Jones*. And the apparitions in *Emperor Jones* were all shadow figures that moved on a very stylized movement. Coming up and disappearing in the lights and the back curtain. This is the advantage of the marionette theater over the hand puppet theater, I feel. The hand puppet theater concentrates entirely on the head or the figure itself. And usually, it's oversized. But it has a greater satirical potential than the marionette, because you're right on top of it and it's larger.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: And stronger, in that way. But it's not as classical in its form. It would have to be more caricature.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How large of an area would the proscenium actually be?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Pardon?

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How large of an area would the proscenium actually be? 10—

RALPH CHESSÉ: Oh, well you had a 10 foot—you had about a 10 by six opening. Six feet high, about 10 feet long. Then you had space on either side in the wings of the 10 feet. In other words, your stage was about 15 feet long.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: Which gave you plenty of proportion for a two foot figure. I mean, you usually have a two foot figure and you have a six foot proscenium opening, you have a very fine height proportion so that your settings and your figure can look very large.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I think that's almost the end of the tape. [Inaudible] wait to go into the Art Project.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, the Art Project, one of the activities that I became involved in and something I had never done before was silk screen. I had done other types of prints. I'd done woodcuts and drawings. But I'd never done any silk screen. And there, I learned how to do silk-screen prints.

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MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: We were just saying that you had gone on to the silkscreen division of the Art Project when the Theater Project closed.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. I found that this is one of the activities in the Art Project, I was very glad to get into it because I had never done any silk-screen printing before. And the studio that they had, the old pickle factory it was called, 950 Columbus Avenue. Had quite a complete art set up there. They did everything from screen printing to large murals. And the artists were used in different ways. I mean, sometimes you were put to work on painting a mural, and sometimes you were put to work developing a series of silk-screen prints. Sometimes you were assisting someone painting a mural in some school. For instance, as I did in the case with Jack Garrity at the State College. And you were not entirely on your own. Some of the artists were merely permitted to paint at home, and to bring their work into the project. But I worked in the Art Project studio, which was combined various activities among the artists. I mean, they did everything. They painted murals and worked with other people.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: I was also, for a short time, in the Art Project in Los Angeles before—when we were shipped back to Los Angeles after the Federal Theater closed, I worked with Lorser Feitlson on the Los Angeles project. And we did murals there too. There were mural projects going on.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You worked with him on a mural?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Where was the mural located?

RALPH CHESSÉ: That was done in the studio.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, I see. It was an oil painting mural.

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: These were assignments for schools, for different places. There were oil murals, and then there were on canvas and rolled up and installed in schools.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Yes. And you were only on the Art Project for what, about a year?

RALPH CHESSÉ: About a year.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who was your supervisor?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Lorser Feitelson in the Los Angeles project. Trying to think of the instructor that was head of it here.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Was it a silk screen project?

RALPH CHESSÉ: No, he was supervisor for the whole department.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: Silk-screen was merely one of the activities that we were involved in.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Must have been Gaskin or Danysh?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, Gaskin and Danysh were heads of the Art Project, I think, from its beginning here. I was trying to remember the name of the immediate supervisor who was in charge of this unit that I was in.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, I see. Did you design the silk screens yourself?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Yes. When we were assigned to do a silk screen, we made our own designs. And they let us carry out whatever ideas we had. And then they were—I think they were banked in—I don't know where they stored them, how they were distributed, or what use

was made of them. But they had a regular art bank, had paintings and sculptures, all sorts of things.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Looking back on it very briefly. How would you sum up your experiences on the WPA? Do you think it had a good effect on your career as an artist?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, I don't think it had any effect on my careers in art outside of the fact that it gave me an opportunity to work and to do things, which I probably would not have had a chance to do on my own because it was subsidized. But it didn't influence me as far as my style of work was concerned, or it didn't change my way of painting or didn't change my ideas as far as puppetry was concerned. I maintained that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: And they give you a free hand, in that respect. They didn't try to force you to do a certain style or a certain type of work. They let the artist retain his individuality, which I think was a very good thing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you think it would be a good idea to establish a Federal Art Project again?

RALPH CHESSÉ: Well, I have thought of it many times. And after the experiences that we went through with WPA, I wonder how good it would be.

[00:05:00]

If the artist is given a free hand, and he isn't bound up with a lot of red tape, it can be a very good thing. The same is true of the theatre. And the same is true of writers. The WPA Projects all had very specific projects outlined. They did—the writers, for instance, did research. The theater did a documentary type of thing, which they call the Living Newspaper, which were all very definite contributions. But the minute they tried to interfere with that, then the theater lost its punch. They were merely imitating Broadway and doing things which were successful shows on Broadway. And I don't think that that made any particular contribution.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RALPH CHESSÉ: I think that if the government is going to subsidize something, I think it should do something to stimulate new movements in art and to level things out. To eliminate what we feel is bad and to stimulate interest in the public to things which are good. I think the biggest job that the government could become involved in right now is to educate the public as to what the meaning of art is and why. People have education, but not in that respect.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]