My name is Spencer Olin, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Irvine. Today, as part of the UCI Historical Records Project, I am interviewing Robert Cohen, Claire Trevor Professor of Drama and a Bren Fellow. Professor Cohen came to UC, Irvine as a founding faculty member in 1965, having just completed his graduate work at the Yale School of Drama. As founding chair of the UCI Department of Drama, a position he held for the next twenty-five years and then recently resumed, Professor Cohen was central to that academic unit's rise in the national rankings and professional stature. Today, students come from all over the world to study drama at UCI.

It would take too long on this occasion to list all of Professor Cohen's impressive professional accomplishments. I would, however, mention some of these. He has, for example, published at least ten books and anthologies, including *Acting in Shakespeare*, *Acting Power*, *Advanced Acting*, *Acting One*, and *Acting Professionally* (which is this nation's most-used guide to professional acting careers). Cohen's newest text, *Acting One/Acting Two*, which is a consolidation of his earlier *Advanced Acting* and *Acting One*, was published in early 2007. He has also published scholarly articles in such places as *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Forum*, *Theatre Survey*, *The Drama Review*, *Contemporary Literature* and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Further, he has written more than 300 play reviews and journalistic essays, and has mounted more than a hundred stage productions at UC Irvine and in other theater venues in the United States and Europe. As a teacher of both undergraduate and graduate students, he specializes in acting, about which I hope he will elaborate during our interview.
Robert Cohen

In 1993, Professor Cohen received UCI’s highest honor, the UCI Medal, and in 2001, the campus conferred upon him a Claire Trevor Professorship.

Most recently, he has achieved a long-time goal of founding his own theater company, which last August inaugurated “Machiavelli,” which is based on his 1997 script, “The Prince.” The play completed a well-reviewed, one-month run at the Hayworth Theatre in Los Angeles, and we will discuss that project later in our interview.

Today’s date is October 18, 2006. Our interview is being conducted in Professor Cohen’s office in the Claire Trevor School of the Arts.

Robert, thank you so much for agreeing to this oral history interview. It has been a genuine pleasure to have been your friend and colleague for more than forty years. Your record of professional accomplishment is truly remarkable, and I heartily commend you for it.

Today, I’d like to focus on several key components of your distinguished career: (1) the years prior to your arrival at UCI, including your early years, and your undergraduate and graduate education; (2) those formative years in the 1960s and 1970s as you, Dean Clayton Garrison, and many others were designing the Department of Drama and the School of the Arts; (3) the evolution of those academic units thereafter; (4) your own individual professional accomplishments, both artistic and scholarly; and (5) your plans for the future.

First, could you fill us in a bit on some biographical details of your early life? Where were you born, where did you spend your early years, where were you educated, and what were the major influences that led you to a career in drama.

RC: I was born in Washington D.C. in 1938. I moved to Chevy Chase, Maryland, where I grew up. I took some very wonderful Shakespeare and English classes in my high school. I just came back from my fiftieth reunion last month and at that reunion I had a little journal of the reunion attendees in which I mentioned that I been cast by a young student named Judy
Berkenbilt into our junior play, Belles On Their Toes, which she was directing. I’d never been in a play. I didn’t audition but she called me anyway and asked me to play a part. I said, “Hey, sure,” thinking it would be a nice way to spend time with some girls, which, frankly, was what I was eager to do. So she cast me in this tiny little part of the policeman who comes in at the end. I got the script and saw there was this part of a handyman that was the starring comic role. So I called her up and said, “You know, Judy, I’d like to play the handyman.” She said, “Well, okay, let me see if that’s all right with the guy who’s playing it.” She later called me back and said, “Yes, you got it.” The play was a big success and I was very funny. Everybody laughed a lot and I sure got to meet a lot of girls.

Judy Berkenbelt. I got back in touch with her two weeks ago. I had written her, including the little clip I had written in the high school’s alumni newsletter that had been passed out. She called me back. She’s been a Professor of Dance at UCLA. She knows Jim Penrod and Donald McKayle and lives in Culver City. So someday we’ll probably get together.

The only other nonacademic experience in drama I had had was during a summer at a baseball camp. I had become a counselor there and had a lot of great friends. Turns out that a lot of the people there went into the theatre, although it was a sports camp. I just came back from my reunion dinner there, too. In my last year as a counselor I was asked to take over the swimming department. I said okay, but I needed to have a swimming test given by the American Red Cross. I told the owner who was making me the offer that I needed $20 from him to take the test. There was a long pause and finally he said, “Well, how about taking over the drama department instead?” And I said, “Okay, I’ll take over the drama department,” and I became a director. I was nineteen years old at the time.

SO: Total amateur interest then?
RC: And all boys at camp. My first play there was Shaw’s St. Joan. I cast a boy whose voice had not yet changed as Joan. All the other actors were older boys whose voices had changed. It was a huge success. I don’t know if I’ve ever matched it.

I went to Dartmouth College for two and a half years, but didn’t like it very much. Again, I had to go through all that work to meet girls—it was a men’s school then. In the winter of my junior year I went to my roommate’s home in Iowa. Iowa was playing in the Rose Bowl. So we went out to the Rose Bowl game in California. I’d never seen the West, or even the Midwest. We first went to Berkeley, where his brother was a law student. I fell head over heels in love with California, Berkeley, San Francisco. The day we were going to leave I said, “Does Berkeley have an undergraduate school?” And he said, “Yeah, it’s called the University of California.”

So, long story short: I transferred out to Berkeley immediately, in mid-year. Two weeks after the Rose Bowl game I was a Berkeley student. In the summer of my senior year, I had some minor surgery, which required me to stay in the hospital for a week while I was recovering. At that time I was a pre-law student, but virtually overnight, by myself in the hospital, I decided that I did not want to become a lawyer. I was a Political Science major up to my senior year, but realized that what I really wanted to do was Drama, which I had been doing totally as an extracurricular activity. So when I got out of the hospital, I went straight to the Drama office and I said I want to become a Drama major.

SO: As a senior you did that?

RC: As a senior, and they said, “How many courses have you taken?” I said, “I’ve taken no courses in Drama, but I’ve done a lot of it—acting, stage managing—and I’ve taken a lot of classes in literature: Shakespeare, Elizabethan drama, French neoclassic drama, the history of drama.” So I was able to add on a Drama degree. I graduated from UC Berkeley with a double major in Political Science and Drama.
Then I went to Yale Drama School. When I got to Drama School, I knew that I was less trained than anybody else there. I'd only been a Drama major for a brief time. I had barely studied it at all. I didn’t even know who Stanislavsky was, or most of the other major figures in drama, acting, theory, and design. However, I’d been going to theater all my life. First, as a boy in Washington, then in New York. I used to go to New York with a friend of mine to see plays, even when I was in high school. I just loved the theatre as a spectator, never thinking of getting involved in it. When I got to Yale, I knew I was going to have to work hard to succeed in this field. So I said, “I’m going to have to work twice as hard as everyone else did, because they were much more talented than I was.” And I did. Let me add that I wanted to be a Professor of Drama. I was the only person in the Drama School who didn’t want to be a professional actor or director. But I ended up becoming both of those as well.

SO: How many students in your class?

RC: There were about twenty-five in our directing class, but we knew only about eight were going to be allowed to graduate because there were only eight thesis slots. At that time, Yale Drama School was only for graduate students. It still is. There were no undergraduates, so we received no teaching experience. We had about thirty actors and only ten of them would graduate too. So there was a severe weeding-out process. As a director, you had to be really good to make it through the three years in order to get your degree. I also wanted to get a doctorate, for which you had to get a full M.F.A. in Practical Theatre and then do all the scholarly work for a Ph.D. You really had to get two complete degrees at the same time. My dissertation was a book on Jean Giraudoux, a French playwright. I later published that as my first book. My book, at that time, was indistinguishable from what would have been written by a Professor of French. You wouldn’t know from the book that the person who wrote it was a member of a Drama Department; he could just as easily have been in the French Department. But that was just
my dissertation; I also wrote a 400-page book-length study of the Shakespearean productions of Edwin Booth from 1867 to 1872, and I directed a play by David McDonald which included a 300-page production book of my research and production decisions. That was three volumes of 300 to 500 pages each just for the one DFA degree. It was tough but it was a tremendous education.

SO: Grueling, huh?

RC: But as I said, I knew I had to work harder than anybody else. In order to graduate from Berkeley with my double major, I had to take another half a year, plus a summer course. Clayton Garrison was on the faculty as a guest lecturer that summer. I played a leading role for him there in a play he directed, *The Taming of the Shrew*.

SO: Who is Clayton Garrison? I don’t know if you’ve identified him.

RC: Clayton Garrison was our founding dean at UCI.

For *Shrew* at Berkeley, I designed the lighting, played the role of Grumio, became his friend, helped him cast the play (because he didn’t know anybody there when he arrived). When he was later looking for faculty to hire for UCI in the Fine Arts five years later, he wrote to Dean Canfield at Yale and also to me. Dean Canfield recommended me, not knowing that Clayton and I had any connection. And of course, I said. “Yes.” I had been offered two positions on the same day, the one at UC Irvine was as an assistant professor at two-thirds time and the other one was as an Instructor at Berkeley at full-time. The Berkeley position paid more, but I decided to take the one with the higher status and at the new campus, figuring that at a new campus I would be able to create my own working environment. To my delight I liked it very much. At Berkeley, from which I had graduated, the entire faculty knew me and they would just treat me like the student who went away to grad school and then came back. I just thought that I would be the flunky and here at UCI I would be the proverbial one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind.

SO: And a decision I presume you never regretted?
Robert Cohen

RC: No. Within two or three weeks I felt it was the home for me.

SO: Thank you, Robert, for that brief, but illuminating, account of your early life prior to your arrival at UC Irvine. Let’s now move on to your professional life. In an earlier oral history interview with Samuel McCulloch, conducted in July of 1990, you indicated that, before coming to UCI, you were very keen on Clayton Garrison, whom you had met as a summer instructor at UC Berkeley, as you just elaborated. Could you also elaborate on what attracted you to UCI? Please describe the highlights of founding the School of Fine Arts and, within it, the Department of Drama, including the role of the founding dean, Clayton Garrison.

RC: Well, Garrison was an incredible force. He was a charismatic human being and a very glamorous person. He was one of the best looking men I’ve ever known. That’s something I had never seen in a professor - I was used to academics being homely and as ill-dressed as I was. And here comes this man with beautiful hair, a wonderful jaw, and an elegant, sartorial presence. He also had a beautiful home that he designed himself.

SO: With, as I recall, a creek running through it.

RC: Yes. But he wasn’t a glamour queen at all. He was a very rugged individual at that time. He had a way of attracting faculty members to UCI that was almost without precedent. For example, he got Eugene Loring, “Mr. Ballet” in all of southern California, to be the founding chair of the Department of Dance. And Roger Wagner to direct the UCI chorale. Mehli Mehta, the father of Zubin Mehta (who had just become conductor of the LA Philharmonic), to conduct the orchestra for the Department of Music. John Coplans, the founder of his discipline’s core magazine, to be the head of the Department of Art. We are talking about a faculty of seven, five of whom were very distinguished, plus me and Richard Triplett in Drama. In my case, I was just out of grad school. And Richard had been working, I believe, at Western Costume Rental Studio when Clayton first met him.
Clayton was very organized and was an intensely hard worker. The average teaching load for UCI faculty in those years was six courses, soon to become five within the first year because of academic advising responsibilities. For faculty in Fine Arts, however, Dean Garrison said we would have a nine course load. And nobody flinched, because we wanted to work for this guy and we wanted to work for the School. We were all very excited about the chance of creating our own environment here. We knew the School was destined to grow. It was a small School but with unlimited potential. At the beginning, in 1965, UCI had about 1,500 students, but we expected it was going to grow to 27,000 students by 1990. We didn’t quite make it but that was the goal when we arrived there.

The downside was that the Arts were originally planned to be just a department within the School of Humanities. It was Clayton himself who, as the Dean of Humanities at UC Riverside, had been asked to comment on that plan. He wrote that the Arts should be a School, not a department. It should be divided into areas of dance, drama, music, and art. His counsel won and he was selected as the founding dean. The central academic administrators thought a guy with such good ideas should be asked to head it, and he did.

We initially had no facilities planned as our own. We only had rooms in the Humanities buildings, which meant we had no theater. So while the original buildings were under construction, Humanities Room 160, which was going to be a regular classroom, was converted into a theater. While it had no offstage space, it did have theatrical seating, a curtain, and the rudimentary elements of a small theater. Back then it was called the Studio Theater. For five years that was all we had by way of a performance space. The scene shop was just a room in the Humanities Office Building in which power tools were kept. It was really primitive; today they would be illegal facilities, according to OSHA regulations.

I don’t think there was an OSHA in those days. They would have had a fit if they saw the way we operated at that time.
Back to programs in Drama. We had seven undergraduate majors, no graduate programs, and a faculty of two, plus Clayton, none of us full-time. Richard Triplett was the designer of everything: scenery, costumes and lighting. He also was half-time and during his other half-time he built all the costumes in the costume shop, which was another classroom. And another downside. When I got to Orange County in May, 1965, I assumed I'd work at a summer theater, which I was used to doing back at Yale. But there was no professional summer theater in the county, only an amateur theater called South Coast Repertory. It was just starting that year, and was totally an amateur community theatre. There was no real professional theatre anywhere in California. There was nothing, absolutely nothing.

SO: A theatrical desert.

RC: A theatrical desert. The only professional summer theater was in San Diego at the Old Globe. There was no freeway down there yet. I knew I needed job. I needed some money, as I had a new baby. I directed a play for $350 at the Long Beach Jewish Community Center and I designed lighting for some plays at South Coast Repertory as a volunteer because I wanted to get active. At that time I didn’t know anybody in Orange County except Clayton and the new people I met at UCI.

SO: That’s when you met David Emmes and Martin Benson?

RC: Yes. I went to a play two days after I moved in, in May I think. David had directed the play and Martin was in it playing one of the leading roles. And Jack Davis, who was also one of the triumvirate who created the South Coast Repertory Theater at that time, was also in it. We all became good friends.

Those were some other downsides, and another was that none of my students had ever seen a play. I asked my students that first year, “How many of you have seen a play. Not in high school, but a professional play. Anywhere.” Not a single hand went up. No one had ever seen a professional play. One of my first classes was Theatre of the Absurd. One
student thought “theater” meant movie theater. So she didn’t know the class was about drama. She had never heard of any of the playwrights who were covered, but she took the class anyway. Maybe she liked the teacher I don’t know. She’s now my wife. For 35 years. But I should make clear that we didn’t meet socially until many years later, after I was long divorced.

That was a downside, but the upside was a very exciting, creative program. Furthermore, we also created the whole campus. The founding chancellor, Daniel Aldrich, left to the faculty so many fundamental decisions about how the Schools, and how the campus, should be organized. We voted on whether we should have a College of Arts, Letters, and the Sciences, or we should have individual, interdisciplinary Schools.

SO: That vote of the Academic Senate occurred in May 1966.

RC: You got it. That’s one of the fundamental decisions at UCI. You know, in twenty minutes we made that decision that’s now been with us for forty-two years. Nobody has regretted it and very few people can remember that it ever came up for debate.

SO: But it distinguishes UCI from most other major research universities.

RC: You and I were key faculty members, along with Hazard Adams, Jim McGaugh, and others, making those fundamental decisions: are we going to have football, are we going to have fraternities? It was a very exciting time. I also went to UC-wide meetings that were held up in Davis every year and run by Clark Kerr, the genius President of University of California at that time. I went to two of those. It was probably a mistake that I went because I was just a beginning assistant professor, way over my head, among all those very senior professors and Noble Prize winners. But we were a small school and I was the only person they could think of to get to go to something like this. I guess it was because I had gone to Yale. Clark Kerr called me by my first name. To be on a first name basis with the president of the university system and the chancellor when I was twenty-six years old was pretty incredible. I was at the very beginning, the greenest possible stage of my career, and
it was such a thrill for me. I was flying around to different campuses for meetings. A very exciting time.

SO: It was a very unique experience for all of us, and it will likely never be replicated. Well, Robert, that's exciting stuff. What were the intellectual issues that dominated your professional life in the 1960s and 1970s?

RC: There were two foci. One, we wanted to be performance-oriented. We wanted to be a program that created art. That was fundamental to Clayton's vision. He thought it was very radical. I think it was where most of the universities were going at that time. But most of them, having started earlier, began at a much more academic level. So they had a long way to go. Berkeley's still at that level. For example, I don't think there were that many Dance Departments, maybe one or two in the whole country. Dance elsewhere was essentially about dancing, learning the steps for ballet 1 and ballet 2, what was dance position one or two, that sort of thing; here it was about learning how to be an artist. We have always had a high intellectual quotient in the Dance Department. All the arts programs were divided about 80% practice and 20% theory. That was very revolutionary and very exciting.

The other important focus was being contemporary. My very first class involved directing contemporary European drama and I was doing playwrights who were still alive at that time—Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco. Some of them had died, like Brecht, but most of them were alive. We also did contemporary American drama. My first play was Night of the Iguana, which had just opened in New York a couple of years previously. We were the first people to do lots of these plays in California. We premiered O What a Lovely War in America in our first year. We were doing a lot of very contemporary work, Lanford Wilson, John Claude van Itallie, a lot of performance-oriented work. The Art Department was also doing extremely hard work with some of the leading artists of the day.
SO: With Coplans at the helm?

RC: Coplans. And David Hockney, who was unknown then, was on our faculty. Tony de Lap, Craig Kaufman. We were very contemporary. For me, that meant not only European drama but existentialism. I was an early existentialist, a phenomenologist, so this was really important to my theater. I was deeply committed to the theater of the absurd, although it’s not really part of existentialism. That was fundamental to me and the most important thing to me artistically. At Irvine, we did not have an “acting” faculty. I hadn’t come here to teach acting but dramatic literature and directing. I was trained to be a director. I had done some acting, of course, I was even a professional actor, but I was not a good actor and did not consider myself a good actor. I certainly did not consider myself qualified to teach acting. I had studied some acting at Berkeley and at Yale and, more importantly, studied at the Actors Studio under Lee Strasberg, who was probably the most famous acting teacher in America at that time and, to this day, probably the best known acting teacher in American history. He was a great follower of Stanislavsky, and the founder of what we call “The Method,” and the director for most of his later life of the Actors Studio, still best-known school of acting in the country. I studied there for a year while I was at Yale. So I knew a lot about acting even if I didn’t like doing it. At UCI, we had hired acting teachers on a part-time basis. They were professional actors. One was a great star of the British theatre, Brewster Mason, would come over and teach the classical English style of acting. Another one was a great star of the Group Theatre, the great American Theatre that was part and parcel of the Strasberg method - Strasberg had been one of those who had founded the Group Theatre. His name was Curt Conway, and he taught the “blood and guts” school of American acting. The problem was that Brewster and Curt were teaching two completely different styles. Students liked one but didn’t like the other. They couldn’t like both of them because each one taught in such different ways.
And they didn’t like each other themselves. They’re both deceased now, long deceased, so I can talk about them pretty freely. They were both wonderful men.

I decided—and this is the most important thing I have to say to you today—that my goal, if we were going to have a great program here, was to have really good actor training. We didn’t have any new FTE (full-time faculty positions) for this. So I thought, “I’m going to have to make a contribution in this field myself.” I knew actors very well.

By that time—I’m talking about 1968—I had married an actress and we lived in New York and LA. She had an agent in both cities. I wrote a book on how to get a job as an actor. I decided I was going to have to come up with a system of acting that combined all we had learned from the Group Theater and from the American technique, which was basically emotion-centered, and all we had learned from the English technique, which was basically language-centered. I thought I was the perfect person to do it. I was guided by two people on this faculty. The first was [Lewis] “Creel” Froman, who recommended a book entitled *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, by Paul Watzlawick. That was the most important book I have ever read in my life because it introduced me to the theories of Gregory Bateson, and then the work of Erving Goffman and Eric Berne, and to contemporary and even pop psychology, sociology, and psychobiology. I also learned from [Social Science faculty members] David Sudenow in conversation theory, and Louis Narens, who I understand is still here and whom I haven’t seen in twenty-five years.

SO: He’s still around

RC: Dean Neubauer was another guy in Social Sciences and Political Science who was important to my intellectual development. Of course, I had a tie with him because I was still a Social Science -- or at least Political Science, B.A.

The result of these influences led me to what I called a “cybernetic theory of acting.” Cybernetic in the sense that it is future-oriented, whereas all my predecessors were past-oriented. I explored this first in a four-page essay based on a class I was teaching.
Robert Cohen created a repertory theater at UCI, first called the Students Repertory Theater and then the Irvine Repertory Theater. It ran for four years. I picked twenty students, all undergraduates, until in the very last year we had a couple of graduate students. We did from three to five plays in over a two-quarter period. During that time, we had students from one o’clock in the afternoon until eleven o’clock at night, six days a week. We worked right through Spring break – about 22 weeks. It actually cost me my marriage. We did four or five plays, we had acting classes, we did improvisations, we went on retreats, we studied acting, we created ideas about acting, we created new ideas about acting, we created new ways of acting. Out of that experience, and the intellectual confluence of those [aforementioned] colleagues on this faculty and the books by Watzlawick and Goffman and others, emerged my cybernetic acting theory. In addition to being future-oriented rather than past-oriented, it is also other-oriented, interactive as opposed to self-absorbed, privileging situation over character. I can’t explain these things to you now or else it would prolong the interview. But that really formed me and that’s how I’ve been ever doing things ever since.

SO: So, in sum, Robert Cohen “re-invented himself” as an acting teacher at UC Irvine.

RC: All I teach now is acting. Occasionally I will teach a directing class. I have also taught over the years dramatic literature (in the early years I taught mainly that); playwriting, theatre history, dramatic criticism, even stage lighting (though I could never teach that today). I’m an old-fashioned generalist. I still do conventional scholarship. And I’m a drama critic, as you pointed out in your opening remarks. But I am primarily a director, and every year I direct one or two. I’m a playwright, as well, and did my own new play last summer. But as a pedagogue, I am an acting teacher and that’s why I travel around the world. I’ve taught in about fifteen countries, on all continents, and the books that you mentioned at the beginning, are published in five languages.

SO: A wonderful story of creation.
RC: Well, it’s a confluence of great faculty colleagues and some terrific students.

SO: It might not have happened that way in a more established and more tradition-bound university.

RC: Oh no. Or if I were one of the twenty-five faculty members we now have here and were forced to specialize. But I’m not a specialist and I’ve never been a specialist.

SO: Well, Robert, I’m not sure how best to formulate my next question. It derives from another comment you made to Sam McCulloch in the aforementioned 1990 interview, in which you observed that your department is primarily a training ground for pre-professional actors, directors, designers, and scholars and critics, too. I am interested in how or whether you distinguish between your role as an artist and your role as a scholar.

RC: That’s no longer exactly the case, because we now have the Ph.D. program which we didn’t have at that time. But the majority of our faculty are very much dedicated to professional training. My goal of teaching is almost totally devoted to professional training for actors in our M.F.A. program.

SO: That’s a fundamental change in the last fifteen years.

RC: No, it’s not. That’s not the change. The change is that we now have more scholars in the department than we did. While my teaching is totally devoted to training actors, my interests as a chairman, and as a Professor, are much broader. The point I made to Sam was said at the peak of that era where we were trying to build a world-class training ground for theatre artists – actors, directors, designers, stage managers. I now see that as just half of the goal of the department.

SO: That being?

RC: The professional training. And half devoted to theater in general, as a humanist study, as a way of exploring the world around us. That was really the way we started and that’s the way we are again. It was in the middle period that we joined what is called the URTA, the University Resident Theater Association, and created our M.F.A. programs devoted to
training professional actors, directors, and designers. Many of them go on to fine professional careers, and many go into teaching. I now teach a course I’ve never taught before called Acting Theory, which is readings from Aristotle and Plato and Diderot and Stanislavsky and Artaud - and myself, to be sure. These readings are very theoretical.

What is the nature of acting? We have courses in performance theory, which is not about training professionals. Our Ph.D. program is in its sixth year and growing. We’re now graduating our first Ph.D.s and they’re getting academic positions around the country. It’s a joint program we operate with UC San Diego.

I have maintained my scholarship which began as a book, which as I said earlier, could have been a Ph.D. literature dissertation. So I think that scholarly activity is very much part of our business. Not just scholarship, not historical scholarship, but cutting edge theoretical explorations. My colleague, Bryan Reynolds, is the creator of a major theoretical movement. He calls it transversal theory. He has published about five or six books in as many years and he is sought after all over the world to come and lecture. The play I’ve been directing this spring is by him, as he’s also a playwright. But we have half-a-dozen scholars, all strong in theory, all very well known around the world.

SO: We’re now looking at a page in a magazine called American Theater, in which there is an advertisement for UC Irvine’s M.F.A. Program in Acting and Directing. Fantastic, very captivating.

RC: Well, it was designed by members of the faculty and it was difficult. We redesigned all of our advertisements this year. This ad is only for the acting and directing program. We also have other ads in other journals for our Ph.D. Program and for our design programs. We promote ourselves in all our different areas. There are now sixty schools that advertise here [points to the journal, American Theater]. We were the first, we created it.

So I started to say, not just scholarship, not historical scholarship but cutting edge scholarship. And not just cutting edge scholarship but also creation of new theater and
trying to help move the theater, not just create art for the existing theater but art for tomorrow’s theater. We were not as devoted to that as were Cal Arts and UC San Diego, historically at least. But I think we have built up to this in the correct order. We began by trying to create excellence in theater practice. We are now hoping to achieve that excellence in creating new theater.

I think the danger in coming from the other direction is that it’s very easy to be avant-garde and be terrible. It’s very easy to say, “Hey, I know what we’ll do. Let’s have an actor defecate on stage.” Well, I know I can do that, but is this going to excite people? There’s one thing that theater has that we all have to recognize and that is “applause.” We do not do theater just to entertain each other. Finally, theater has to reach an audience. A public audience. We have to have mechanisms to do that. It’s an inexhaustible subject, how to reach an audience. We do it through the intellect, through novelty, through passion, through entertainment, through a variety of ways. We have to find it, create it in the theater and individuals have to create it as individuals.

SO: You reach them as you would reach a jury.

RC: There’s a lot of theater in law and a lot of law in theater.

SO: I’m going to pose this question, but it may be something you have already addressed. If you have, we can move beyond it. In 1990, you declared that “this has been my goal as a scholar and theorist—how do you translate style into believability. American acting theory has been toward greater believability. We come from the Russian background, the Stanislavsky background in theater in America. And American actors want to be truthful and honest above anything else....” In fact, during the mid-1970s, you moved into the forefront of post-Stanislavsky acting with your investigations into the psychological and artistic processes of acting. Do you still subscribe to that basic goal and for the same reasons?
RC: Absolutely, for the same reasons, absolutely unchanged. I do everything that way. This week I was working with my grad students on a fourteenth century text, a medieval text: “Here, ‘neath me now, a new isle I neven, the island of earth.” This is a line from the character of God. Now how do you play God believably? The chapter that this comes from in Acting One/ActingTwo is called “Playing God,” and it’s a pun of course. How do you play God? It’s not just about playing God’s words; it’s not just a matter of the meaning of God’s words. The writer, the dramatist, was a novelist 600 years ago, did not go to drama school, and was uneducated in the arts of theater. Aristotle had not been translated. And yet the writing is brilliant. It contains puns. It contains word plays. It has verse, it has meter, it has metaphor, it has things an actor can use. But the biggest thing the actor who plays God has to do is convince his angels that he’s Godlike, that he is worthy of their respect. Later he is going to say, “But for them that are nought, Be put to my prison to pine.” First he creates and names [nevens] the Earth, and then he says that those who don’t live up to his standards [are naught] he will make suffer [“pine” – referring not just to grief but the pain of the cross]. He has to threaten them, he has to encourage them, he has to interact with them using 600-year-old language, including a word, “neven,” which nobody in America today would know, even I wouldn’t have known. I had to look it up. We don’t have footnotes for the audience, we don’t have superscript that explains what the words mean, so we have to make it clear and be believable or else no one’s going to watch it, nobody’s going to care. It would just be someone up there reciting text from memory. He or She has to be God. To be the medieval idea of God. So how do you put these together? This is always the challenge of acting. The Method actors in America escaped this. Strasberg said, “Just be yourself.” Well. I say be yourself too, but be yourself as though the people you are trying to persuade not to be naught are your angels. My basic work is reversing the intuitive understanding of playing “character.” To me, playing character means you don’t have to think of yourself as God so much; you think of these people
you’re speaking to as your angels. I call this reciprocal characterization. Your character comes from what you think of the other characters. If you imagine they’re you’re angels, you will automatically assume a Godlike identity. That way you “become” God without getting so self-conscious, without feeling so phony. You get your character by being the reciprocal of the persons you’re trying to influence. To play a paranoid, you don’t think “I’m a paranoid,” you think “All these smiling people I’m looking at are really trying to kill me.” Then you “become” paranoid without having to work at it. It’s an original technique, something Stanislavsky never thought of, or at least never put into words. I can assure you that if he had thought of it, he’d do it. He probably just didn’t name it.

SO: So this is a continuum in your approach to acting?

RC: That’s why I revise books from time to time. There’s going to be a new edition in February.

SO: UCI’s Department of Drama indisputably has long been one of the best academic units on this campus and has now emerged as one of the finest in this nation. What accounts for its impressive and admirable stature? There is no need to be modest in your response.

RC: It has always been, even in the early stage, partly because we have very celebrated people like Mr. Mason and Curt [Conway] and Herbert Machiz. There were people who have very well known reputations in professional theater who come here as our guests. Bill [William] Inge was a great playwright who taught playwriting for two or three years in our first phase. We also had significant foreign visitors.

SO: Who was the fellow from Europe who came, who had the controversial approach to theater?

RC: Jerzy Grotowski was in the mid 80s. Originally Grotowski was the greatest celebrity in our field as a theater actor. He was earthchanging and very, very influential. I just got an e-mail from the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw today. We have a barn on the campus that we have created for him we were going to rename it the Grotowski Barn. But because the central administration is concerned about other developments over there, they have deferred approving that.
You allowed me to be immodest. I have to say that my textbooks in acting. *Acting One* is the number one acting textbook in the country and my intro to theater, which is simply called *Theater*, is also the number one theater intro book. This has helped our department. My theater books from the 1980s on have had a national readership. Many, many people always ask, “Oh, you’re the one who wrote that book.” And I have to say, “What book?” My *Acting Professionally*, which was the second book I published, was a little paperback and I wrote it in three weeks. It’s just a little journalistic book I wrote on how to get a job. That became widely known as the first book of its kind. There are now about forty such books. Almost all of them have the same general contents as mine. But mine became very widely known so, as a result, I became widely known and the Drama Department became widely known. Lots of us write books here. Janice Plastino and Jim Penrod in the Dance Department but who worked with us then, have a book called *The Dancer Prepares* – Jan actually helped me get me my publisher for *Acting Professionally*. Now Richard Brestoff has four books on acting and Eli Simon is working on his third, and this helps as well; among us we’ve written ten books on acting. I don’t think there’s another faculty that’s written more than three—and, if so, they’re all by the same person. Richard’s and my books are mentioned often in *Backstage* Magazine, the weekly bible for actors. We’re just honored that acting theory and pedagogy has spread all around the world. Then we always had alumni who had done very well. Five or six on Broadway this year, two in starring roles. Our very strong alumni relations has been a great help. Now we have a tremendous faculty. Cameron Harvey, who served as chair for ten years, was at UCI from the very beginning. There is also a strong Utah Shakespearean Festival connection which he engineered and a connection with South Coast Repertory Theater two miles away. That’s a major factor.

SO: Well, you’re just discussing the reasons for the eminence of your department.
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RC: We are certainly one of the most distinguished departments in the U/RTA, our national organization. And the U.S. News and World Report has always had us in their very top ranks.

SO: Did the National Research Council when it published its rankings in the mid-1990s?

RC: No, they only rank doctoral programs and we did not have our Ph.D. Program then.

We have this great person, Bill Rauch, who unfortunately will leave UCI this summer for the best job in the country. He’s become the artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare festival, with a $25 million budget, which is the equivalent of ten drama departments. His position here will be filled in the long run, but he is another reason for our reputation.

SO: Well, this is a good segue to my next question. At the end of each calendar year you prepare a very impressive Alumni Newsletter that is sent to all graduates of the UCI Department of Drama and I presume to many others. It describes the quite extraordinary alumni placement record and the wide-ranging professional activities of Drama alumni, 250 of them in the 2005-2006 edition. How long have you been doing this and what has been the impact of these informative newsletters?

RC: Incredibly, I do it myself. I am the author, the sole author, of the whole thing. Of course, I admit a lot of it is just pasting up things that they write. I keep in touch with them. I write back to every single one of the alumni/ae who has written to me. We have an alumni/ae party on November 6th in L.A. We have companies that start up from alumni, one of which is a major theatre in Albany, New York, known as Capital Rep. That came from students from the 1960s who got together and created a theater company in New York. Oakley Hall’s son was one of the major people involved. [NOTE: Oakley Hall was for many years a UCI faculty member in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, and a leading figure in the Creative Writing Program.] There’s a movie about him, called The Loss of Nameless Things, and it includes a lot of UCI alumni talking about that and Oakley’s son. Lexington Conservatory became Capital Rep, now its thirty-fifth year. We
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have another theatre called Coyote Rep in New York, which was formed by some recent
students, and actually three other New York companies and others in Los Angeles and
elsewhere.

SO: That must be a great advantage.

RC: Yes. We have a whole body of alumni that is very gratifying to us as a department and
certainly to me, personally.

SO: I cannot think of any other department on campus that has developed such close and lasting
ties with former students.

RC: True. Some of my very best friends, literally in my life, are my alumni. People like Bob
Currier, artistic director of Marin Shakespeare Festival. I don’t want to exclude people, but
Bob and I are especially close. In my very first quarter at UCI, Bob was a young kid. Now
he’s a gray-haired guy and he runs his own theater company, teaches at colleges, and has a
company that runs down in Mexico in Baja for a Shakespeare festival in the winter. He is a
major figure in American theater and we see each other every year and we talk often on the
phone. There are dozens of people like that, such as casting directors and artistic directors
and of course actors and designers and professors. They are all over the world.

SO: Could you briefly describe the significance of the brand new M.F.A. program in sound
design, under the leadership of Michael Hooker.

RC: Fabulous. I was the one who wrote the proposal that led to it being identified as a “Program
of Excellence” [and, as a consequence, the recipient of a special allocation of faculty
positions]. We had applied the year before for a cluster of additional faculty members, but
it was not approved. It was a proposal asking for a lot of money, because we’ll need
special equipment to run a first rate program, not to mention salaries and faculty and their
office space and all the rest of it. When the Program of Excellence was announced by the
Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost, I began to draft a proposal for sound design. I was
keen on developing sound design since my very first year, in 1965. Sound design in those
days didn’t even exist under that name. Sound was of course used in theater, but as its
technology improved, sound design became a very major part of the theater. Very few
colleges attempted to teach it.

I’ve tried to implement such a program for years and years. But there were always
higher priorities until now. And now we have to do it. So I rewrote the proposal, and
this time it was approved. We will be the only campus in the country with only two
fulltime faculty members and a technician in this area. We’ve always had a technician to
program the speakers, basically, to deal with the technical end of things. But now we
have a full program - we hope to have the best sound design program in the country.

SO: I did not realize that this emerged from the Programs of Excellence. I am wondering if you
agree with me that this is a very important endeavor. The campus under a sequence of
former Executive Vice Chancellors never really had the courage to go forward with a
program that so boldly identifies excellence. Instead, the approach has customarily been to
distribute the same percentage of faculty positions as in the previous year. Therefore, year
after year after year we have this “cookie cutter” approach to the allocation of FTE at UCI.
Now I have to give [Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost] Michael Gotffredson credit
for identifying nineteen programs and departments on campus with this special allocation
of thirty nine FTE [faculty positions]. I am glad to hear that this new program you have in
sound design emerges from that decision.

RC: I was an enthusiastic supporter of that decision even before the recipients of it were
announced. Back in the early 1990s, I was on the Academic Task Force headed by Ralph
Cicerone [who later became Dean of Physical Sciences and then Chancellor]. It was part of
a review process established by Chancellor Jack Peltason and Executive Vice Chancellor
Dennis Smith, and then brought to conclusion by Chancellor Laurel Wilkening and
Executive Vice Chancellor Sidney Golub. The idea was precisely that we have limited
resources during a time of severe budget cuts. Where should we focus these resources? In
its wisdom, UCI created a blue ribbon committee, comprised of faculty from across the
campus. We spent two years trying to make very crucial decisions, knowing that these
decisions were likely to be very unpopular to departments or programs that we thought
were not first-rate. We knew we were going to be hated by one-third of the campus.

I was the one delegated to approach Chancellor Wilkening, in order to get her
agreement to be bold in implementing the recommendations of the Task Force. She said,
“Well, we’re just going to throw this to the Academic Senate.” “Well,” I responded, “if
you do that, I can tell you exactly what’s going to happen.” And I was right. As it turned
out, our two years of work were absolutely wasted, absolutely wasted. Same thing
happened with the undergraduate education regarding the breadth requirement. Two years
working out what would really improve this campus, knowing that there are all kinds of
vested interests..

SO: I call it the principle of in perpetuity. Every university program that is created must remain
forever.

RC: I was one professor who knew that it would be difficult to get the Academic Senate to
change the curriculum requirements. I knew at that point nothing was going to happen and
nothing did happen. What finally came out had nothing to do with making a more exciting
campus. When you read the student books about UC Irvine, what do they say? It’s boring,
it’s a boring campus, it has a boring academic program. None of the problems we raised
are being addressed.

SO: Which report was that? Because there is now a new Strategic Plan for Academic
Development called A Focus on Excellence,” which provides a comprehensive approach for
the period 2005-2015.

RC: Well, I was just talking about the breadth requirements.

SO: Oh. I’m hopeful the current plan might have some positive impact on this campus.

RC: I haven’t seen that one.
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SO: That was the result of another year or two of discussion and debate involving six planning committees and more than one hundred faculty and staff.

RC: I'm in favor of focusing the campus and not just extending everything as is.

SO: Robert, we've gone on a bit. Would you prefer that we not speak about the Field Station?

RC: No, no.

SO: You've very recently realized one of your long time dreams, namely your own theater company. Borrowing from the sciences, you adapted the field-station concept for dramatic production. In August, 2006, your play, *Machiavelli*, inaugurated the UC Irvine Field Station at the Hayworth Theater on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Your production received many favorable reviews, including one that described it as a “fascinating rumination on the seductiveness of power.” Another reviewer suggested that, “The idea of terror as a political tool makes this play resonate across 500 years....” Why do you believe that this Field Station is an important artistic development?

RC: I first proposed the Field Station as one of these all-campus proposals I told you about earlier. It was inter-campus; we couldn't possibly have done it on our own. I said it should be in Los Angeles or San Francisco. Everybody thought it was a great idea, but everybody wanted to run it themselves. The idea that campuses could get together turned out to be too idealistic. The one thing that my department lacks, and the huge thing that our competitors at our level have, is professional theater. San Diego has the La Jolla Playhouse right on campus, and they own it. UCLA has the Geffen Playhouse, and they own that. The artistic director of it is a professor. We don’t have a professional theater wing.

SO: Is the South Coast Repertory Theater an independent entity?

RC: They have nothing to do with us. We have nothing to do with them. Usually we have good relations with them. Lonnie Alcaraz heads our design program. He’s designed lightning at South Coast for many years. Many of us have worked there over the years; I was once
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asked to direct there, a long time ago. But they’re wholly independent, and not part of our operations at all.

With a professional theatre wing, we could have some close-at-hand internship possibilities. I’m talking about theater right on campus. We want our students to have a transition place into the profession. There are theater programs that can promise their students equity cards [equity is the national stage actors union] upon graduation. Harvard is one. We do our showcase with ART/Harvard. [ART is the American Repertory Theatre, a professional company on the Harvard campus associated with the University.] Their students earn equity cards because during their three years at Harvard ART, they earn points towards an equity card. So they become members of the union. That’s tremendous feather in their cap.

When the Barclay Theatre was built they ran out of money while the building was in construction. They asked [then Chancellor] Jack Peltason to put a million dollars into completing it, which became two or three million dollars. I said, “Jack, don’t put UCI money into a building. Put it into an endowment so we can have a theater there, so we can actually use it as a theatre.” He said. “Well, we’ll get it built first and then we’ll build the endowment.” But that never happened. We have a professional theatre building but no professional theatre. That’s why I created this one.

There’s a peculiarity in Los Angeles. It’s called the L.A. 99 Theater Plan, in which you can hire professional actors. Equity actors who are required to receive equity salaries. But this plan waives the salaries. It’s popularly known as “equity waiver.” You only need pay the actors $4.00 a performance. They act so they can be seen by Hollywood casting directors, which they have to do if they want to get ahead in the business. So very fine professional actors will work at L.A. 99 Theater. They want to work there. We had a tremendous success. We had nearly sold-out houses every night for the last two weeks.

SO: Did you commute back and forth everyday?
RC: Yes, at least three or four days a week. We rehearsed on weekends. I rode up by train most of the time. The theater is ideally located on the red line. Many of the actors and designers lived in L.A., of course. A lot of them were UCI alumni, to which we added a few current students here, and also two professionals who had no connection to UCI. The reviews were outstanding and it was a terrific success. It took a hell lot of me. Frankly, I missed my nine-month academic schedule. For that reason, I haven’t yet committed to doing future shows. I’m not committed to doing one this coming year. I need some more formative infrastructure up there so I don’t have to go up there everyday. This past summer, once the show was up, I didn’t have to be up there. But I felt the obligation to be there anyway. I have to really work it well with my own schedule.

SO: Well, I wish you well with that.

RC: Thank you, but it’s something we need to have and I’m funding it entirely from my own research funds. If this continues beyond me, then it would have to be funded by the University, or by somebody I don’t yet know.

SO: We are coming to the close of our interview, Robert. I have to ask you this. Although you have traveled the world as a guest lecturer and director at many universities and theaters, and while you have certainly received many outside offers, you nonetheless have declared that you have never thought about leaving UCI. Why is that?

RC: Well, there’re many reasons. My family’s here. I’ve been very honored here. I love the people here. I make a reasonable amount of my income from my writing, so the idea of leaving here to get a big raise is not compelling. I have no interest in that. I would never dream of that. The only incentive for me to leave would be if I didn’t find my position accommodating, but I do. I am very well taken care of here by everyone. I don’t need flattery. I don’t need power. In my department, the faculty can override any decision made by the chairman by a single majority. Any decision can be overruled. My home’s here, my wife’s here. She’s tied to our local community in Laguna Beach and so am I. Our family
members are here. Both my children live in California. I’ve often been asked to apply for
positions and deanships and once a university presidency. I simply say, “No, don’t invite
me out. I’m not interested.” That’s my immediate response.

SO: I applaud that and I share your sentiments.

RC: Well, I am in a fortunate position that I don’t have to consider outside offers. UC doesn’t
pay the highest salaries. I can see someone wanting one of the highest salaries in the world.
I can see someone wanting it. I am sympathetic to it. We’ll assume that they’re doing it
because they want to be in that position.

SO: Robert, I want to thank you for this interview. Is there anything you want to say that we
might not have covered?

RC: I have enjoyed knowing you for forty-two years, Spence. I haven’t known anybody who
knows more about general campus matters—as a colleague, as a dean, and as a fellow
chair, in all kinds of ways. You’re one of the very important reasons why I have enjoyed
my professional life at UCI.

END OF INTERVIEW

NOTE: At a reception honoring Robert Cohen held at the Paramount Studios in Hollywood on
February 3, 2007, Dean Nohema Fernandez of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts
announced that the UCI Studio Theater has been renamed The Robert Cohen Theater, and
will soon be extensively remodeled.