

ALTERNATIVE PROJECTIONS

Experimental film in Los Angeles, 1945 - 1980

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUBJECT: Kevin Thomas

Biography:

Kevin Thomas was born in Los Angeles in 1936. He earned a BA at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania and an MA in English Literature from Penn State.

Thomas comes from a multi-generation newspaper family. With film reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* starting in 1962, he is the longest running movie reviewer for the same daily paper in the history of American journalism, according to *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*. From 1984 to 2005, Thomas wrote a column in the *Times* called "Screening Room" that covered independent, alternative and foreign film. That column helped expose screenings of underground and avant-garde cinema to a wider audience in the Los Angeles area.

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TAPE 1: KEVIN THOMAS

00:01:20

ADAM HYMAN

Alright. So, we'll start with-- oh, first the date is October 21, 2010. The interviewer is Adam Hyman. And can you please say and spell your name for the transcriber.

00:01:33

KEVIN THOMAS

Kevin Thomas. K-E-V-I-N T-H-O-M-A-S.

00:01:38

ADAM HYMAN

Alright. That's the hard question. So, let's start with, can you please tell me where and when were you born?

00:01:45

KEVIN THOMAS

I was born at Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown L.A. on June 12, 1936. I was supposed to be born in Cedars of Sinai in Hollywood, but there was no room at the inn, at the last minute. And darn, I couldn't say I was born in Hollywood. See.

00:02:05

ADAM HYMAN

I could say I'm town, no not really. I was born at a hospital that no longer exists in L.A. But we're both native Angelinos.

00:02:12

KEVIN THOMAS

Where were you born?

00:02:12

ADAM HYMAN

It's called the Rose Hospital on San Vicente near Highland. It doesn't exist anymore. And who are the other members of your family and what do they do?

00:02:23

KEVIN THOMAS

I'm a four generation California newspaper man on my father's side. I'm a second generation [*LOS ANGELES*] *TIMES* man on my father's side. My father was in display advertising. We overlapped a couple years. He took an early retirement at the age of 55 in 1963. I had started in '61. So, we ended up giving something like 69 years of unbroken full-time service to the paper. And I've been freelancing reviews for the paper since my retirement at the end of 2005.

00:03:11

ADAM HYMAN

So one more year makes 50 years of the byline.

00:03:17

KEVIN THOMAS

No, the byline started in November of '62. So this month my byline will be 48 years old. And a new book has come out, well researched. I know the fellow who wrote the book. *THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FILM CRITICISM*. And he has discovered that I am in fact the longest running movie reviewer on the same daily paper in the entire history of American journalism.

00:03:52

ADAM HYMAN

Wow, that's pretty amazing. What happened to all the others?

00:03:57

KEVIN THOMAS

I don't know.

00:03:58

ADAM HYMAN

Who's in second place?

00:03:59

KEVIN THOMAS

I have no idea.

00:04:01

ADAM HYMAN

Ebert's been writing since, since the '60s.

00:04:03

KEVIN THOMAS

Ebert is about five years younger than I am. And has been writing about five years less consequently. I'm very fond of Roger. And I think he's heroic soldiering on as he is. Roger is one of those people that I've always felt deserved every ounce of success that he has received. I really mean that.

00:04:31

ADAM HYMAN

And what were the names of your parents?

00:04:35

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, my father was El Thomas of display advertising. And at the *TIMES* my mother's name was Ann. She was from Pennsylvania. He was from San Francisco.

00:04:50

ADAM HYMAN

Do you have any siblings?

00:04:52

KEVIN THOMAS

No, I'm an only child.

00:04:55

ADAM HYMAN

And when did you start discovering film?

00:04:58

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, discovering film. I fell in love with the movies right away. I always used to believe that the first picture I ever saw was *MODERN TIMES* in 1940 when I was 4 years old. No, I'm sorry, *THE GREAT DICTATOR*, of course, *THE GREAT DICTATOR*. And I didn't see *MODERN TIMES* until many years after. Because that came out the year I was born. And yet I realized that I also had memories of seeing *THE GHOST BREAKERS* with Bob Hope. And the irony is that which ever one of those was first has the same leading lady, Paulette Goddard, who I've always found absolutely enchanting. And I did not have the happiest of childhoods. And especially as I grew older. So, you know, the Saturday matinees were really a big escape for me. First, in the neighborhoods. And then, you know, I got older I could take the street car down to the Movie Palace that's on South Broadway. And, of course I fell in love with all them too. So, then when I was in junior high, which was Berendo Junior High near Vermont and Pico, I had a really wonderful drama teacher.

00:06:49

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

She was Cecily Schniedman [sp?]. Wherever you are, I'm indebted to you, really indebted to you. She had us put together scrapbooks of reviews. I think plays, movies, whatever and of course my father was, from the time I was six months old, was working for the *TIMES*. And we naturally, we subscribed and so I had never read movie reviews before. And so I started cutting them out. And I glued them in very carefully in this scrapbook, meticulously. And I, you know, the concept that somebody could actually earn a living going to the movies and then coming back to the office and passing judgment on what one had seen really did capture my imagination big time. And I had a beautiful sort of Mondrian--esque cover I designed. And Cecily Schniedman said, oh may I keep this? And I said, sure. Well, you know, 60 years later I wish I had it. But at any rate, the irony was that two of three people whose reviews I was collecting, 10 years I'd be working with.

00:08:20

ADAM HYMAN

Who were they?

00:08:20

KEVIN THOMAS

Phil Scheuer, who was the lead drama critic and film critic at that point in '62. And John Scott who was the second in command. And they had for 29 years worked for Edwin Schallert who had retired only in '58. And I did get to know Ed and his wife Lisa who wrote for movie magazines. Since they're the parents of William Schallert who is a veteran, or a character actor in films and television, a long career. And Lisa and Ed were always really lovely to me. When we met and crossed paths and so on.

00:09:16

ADAM HYMAN

How do you spell Ed's last name?

00:09:17

KEVIN THOMAS

S-C-H-A-L-L-E-R-T. Edwin Schallert. And Scheuer is S-C-H-E-U-E-R. Philipp K. One L. And John Scott.

00:09:35

ADAM HYMAN

And where did you go to high school?

00:09:36

KEVIN THOMAS

I went to Manual Arts for one year and I graduated from Glendale High.

00:09:43

ADAM HYMAN

And so then in college where did you seem to go?

00:09:47

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, as I said, my mother was from Pennsylvania and her brother and her father and a bunch-- and her uncle, and a bunch of my grandfather's cousins had attended Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. And I ended up going there, very happily. One of the best things I ever did for myself. I'm very sentimental about Gettysburg College. And I go back all the time. Every year, you know and in recent years. And I went to Penn State for two years. I got a B.A. and an M.A. in English Lit. But what was important at Penn State which really was a dreary experience. It was like UCLA stuck in the Alps, you know, I mean it's in the geographic center. It was a land grant school formed in 1862. And it was a geographical center, which happened to be sort of in a mountain range and you were totally isolated from every place. And three feet of snow, all winter long. And the English Department was in a war succession.

00:11:27

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I had an assistantship and I mean some people did things to each other-- that damn department-- that are out of the worst Hollywood playbook with much fewer-- over petty stuff you know. And that kind of turned me off. And of academia. And because if you're an English lit major, what are you going to do but teach it, right? And I, down deep, really didn't want to do that. But I also thought that movie reviewing was an unrealistic goal. However, at Penn State I had two courses out of the English Department which were key. One was Critical Theory and one was Art Appreciation, that was taught by a fellow who loved movies. And okay, it was your ordinary Hollywood fair and the local theaters, but we could go to see those. And we could talk about those pictures that we had seen.

00:12:54

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

You know, we're too far to go to any wonderful art galleries to, you know. So it was really more of a course in film appreciation actually. And those terms kind of--and I was supposed to go to Johns Hopkins to get a doctorate--and I realizing, no, this is not what I wanted to do with my life. And I checked in before I checked out. And I ended up at the *TIMES* in the Circulation Department. A temporary job-- a cash for a contest and learn a language record offer. Filling orders on the one hand and looking for the lucky winner on the other. And to shorten this story, eventually I got a chance to be promoted to a copy boy in a permanent position. And that was a huge jump up, you know. And that's funny though. I got in there because there's this kid who had starred in *DRAG STRIP RIOT*. And his career wasn't going very much. And he ended up as a copy boy. And they found out that he was using *TIMES* letterhead to send out letters trying to get a better job, or maybe a new acting gig or something.

00:14:23

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And he got caught and got fired. And that was an opening for me. [laugh] And then I became a desk assistant, which is a glorified copy boy. And the editor of opinion--and it was the Sunday section and perspective news and review--and he said, look, you know, with your background you should at least be on the copy desk. Let me talk to Frank Haven, the managing editor. Well, luckily Millie Griffiths his formidable secretary really liked me because I worked my ass off as a copy boy. I was really hard working. And she finally one day gave me the high sign. The office is-- the coast is clear, go in and see Frank. And he was a wonderful man. I'm totally prejudiced. He said, you don't send emissaries to see me. Meaning my boss in Opinion Perspective. And he was very jovial. He was a big powerful guy. And kind of shy, but very formidable at the same time. A wonderful person. And he said, now I want to make it clear that it doesn't matter whether your M.A. is from Harvard or not, it's whether you can do the job.

00:16:08 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

And I said, Penn State. [laugh] It's not Harvard. And he was great. He said, well I talk to Mr. Scheuer and he will send you out on a test review. And if he likes it, you're in. And if he doesn't, you're out. But it's no reflection on the fact that you're a very hard working copy boy. And so Phil sent me to an afternoon--it was a screening, to a preview of *THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE*. And Phil said, if you can write a review of *MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE*, you can write a review of anything. And you know, I wrote like a term paper. And all the guys and one in particular plunged in. And they all helped me rewrite it. Because Phil said, oh no, you take all your time. So we really had it whipped up. And he liked it and the rest is history. I became a stringer in the Calendar section. Then to simply the Entertainment section. And then four years to the day that I had started at the paper I made staff. And I was on staff for over 40 years.

00:17:36 **ADAM HYMAN**

So what were the days that you started there and that you got on staff?

00:17:40 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Hmm?

00:17:40 **ADAM HYMAN**

What was the date that you started and then that you got on staff?

00:17:43 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I started on December 5, 1961. And December 5, 1965 I got on staff. And I retired at the end of December 2005. But I had been reviewing from November '62 onwards and I did film. I did theater. I did-- oh, I mean reviewed Nelson Eddy and Diana Shore and Jimmy Durante in concert. Jimmy Durante sent me one of his famous azaleas every Christmas the rest of his life.

00:18:33 **ADAM HYMAN**

Never heard of, he just sent Christmas gifts for everybody?

00:18:35 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Oh, he loved to raise azaleas.

00:18:39 **ADAM HYMAN**

Wow, I didn't know that.

00:18:41 **KEVIN THOMAS**

And that's sort of the trajectory.

00:18:48 **ADAM HYMAN**

So, and at that point like what was the notion at the *TIMES* of what a film review should be?

00:19:03

KEVIN THOMAS

There were never any discussions like that. You were just--you made your request--it's the same as I do now. Only I get fewer of my requests honored than I did then. [laugh] You requested things that you thought were-- that you have a kinship with. But mainly I, you know, as now I take what I get, you know. I never made it to the top slot where you can really pick and choose. There were some periods where I got to do most everything I wanted to do. And then other times when I hardly got anything that I really wanted to do. It was, you know, everything is so cyclical. But the point here is that I think we need to make at this [unintelligible] is that for the time I started writing I had a lot of leeway in that people, editors would be open-minded about whatever I would become aware of. And said, you know, such and such is outfit is going to show this at such and such thing.

00:20:17

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I'd like to go out and look at it, you know. Oh well, sure. Particularly when I was on staff there wasn't any extra stringer's budget to have to be impinged upon. And if I wanted to do all that work and then of course we were heading into the paper's plush years. Where our calendar was just thick with ads, and we had a lot of space to fill. And well, if Kevin wants to do that, okay, you know. I had a lot of laissez faire and you know, people would call me. And say, we're going to show this program at such and such. And it's this kind of a program and would you come out and have a preview? And I'd say, sure, you know. I had said yes to everybody. Because I really felt that it was important-- I thought it was important to use the power of the paper. To help create audiences for all kinds of films, all kinds of film experiences. Why not, you know. It just seemed to me to make a richer mix. And that was-- I had a lot of psychic income. Because when I would review alternative cinema, I usually could pack their house.

00:22:06

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I mean their house might be no bigger than my living room, but most of the times I, under the impression that the seats were filled, if I would review it. And I thought, well, the filmmaker's gotten an audience. The audience has gotten exposure to something that's different and so on. And that's sort of how it all began. And then by '84 the then Daily calendar editor-- I remember the breaking point was that I had gone out to UCLA and did a full length review of the exceedingly rarely seen English language version of *THE BLUE ANGEL*, which had been shot simultaneously by Sternberg, for the famous German language version. And that was fun but Connie Condon [sp?] was at the Daily counter. She said, this is really taking up too much space. And I could see the walls caving in. So I put on my thinking cap and I called for a general meeting of the film staff. And I said, I have a proposal and will call this column "Screening Room". And this was in '84.

00:23:33

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I can do alternative cinema. I can do local film festivals--small ones--not the great big major ones. And you know as LACMA developed its film programming and then the UCLA Film Archive was born. And then Cinematheque was born. Then I could really cover those big three on a regular basis. And help create audiences for them. And I thought that was really invaluable. And my dear friend, Myron Meisel who is a brilliant critic and film historian, just a brilliant man. Anyway, he kindly said, Kevin, what you have lost in space you have gained in impact by having this column, you know. And it exists today but in a different format. It's mainly an announcement column. But I would go out and look at six to eight pictures a week from different organizations. All different kinds of foreign films, experimental films, revival of classic film. Anything that I thought was of interest that they could show me enough in advance for my diddling.

00:25:02

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

Then I would do anywhere from three to five regular length reviews of, you know, commercial run pictures. And I would do the occasional features and then for a long time I had a column that I had to write for TV Times, you know, about movies on television. And throughout the '70s indeed I reviewed about half of the movies for TV in the '70s. And then I did interviews on top of that. I think they got a lot of bang for their buck when it came to me. I will say that. No, I'm not saying about-- I'm not making a case of superior quality here, but I really did present-- I produced a great deal of quantity of copy over a wide range of film, of extremely breathtakingly wide range of film. And I think that was very valuable to the readership and to the paper and I still do.

00:26:17

ADAM HYMAN

I agree. I mean there's still nothing-- we'll never see it's like again I think is the problem.

00:26:25

KEVIN THOMAS

You're right there.

00:26:27

ADAM HYMAN

So, let me return slightly then-- we'll just go through the '60s in a little bit more detail what you can remember. But in general to even see a film to preview, how would that work, even for things like the cinema, Movies 'Round Midnight or whatever?

00:26:48

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, it seems to be that Movies 'Round Midnight at the Cinema Theater, the building still stands but hasn't been a theater for many, many years. That was on Western and...

00:27:07

ADAM HYMAN

North of Santa Monica.

00:27:08

KEVIN THOMAS

...Santa Monica, yeah. And the Cinema was part of a Lou Sher I think Art Theater Guild, I think it was. He had about 26 houses nationwide. And he had taken it over and his young nephew Mike Getz became the manager. Mike and I became really pretty good friends. I loved to see Mike, he's a wonderful guy. And he was in his 20's, he's younger than I am. And he would do this Movies 'Round Midnight thing. And I mean one time it would be the 1940's Batman serial all chapters and starting at midnight, you know. But of course this is, it's in the days before VHS or DVD. So, you know, I don't think, no by God I reviewed the whole Batman serial. Yes, I did. Because I remember Lambert Hailer was a veteran silent director. He directed it. And I mean I thought it had a lot of pace and vitality. And keen visual sense, you know. It was fun. I've got it on VHS in the other room. I haven't looked at since, but there it is.

00:28:55

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And then he would start a showing of what at that day was called Underground Cinema, you know. Of a lot of stuff from New York, you know. I can't remember where I first saw *FLAMING CREATURES* or the Kuchar's, I don't know, it might have been at Cinematheque 16 up on Sunset strip. Where I saw a lot of this stuff, I can't remember. Things came and little organizations came and went. But I tried to go to them all, you know. I mean I couldn't always cover every single thing that they did but I really tried to give a regular sampling to let people know what was-- but so that's how I got into covering experimental cinema, you know. And there were important events and there were important people here. I know at Theater Vanguard later, that was later, Bill Moritz and Doug Edwards a wonderful, I miss Doug a lot.

00:30:18

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I haven't seen Bill in years but they were really super dedicated fellows. Really dedicated. Doug ran films at the, that sort of folk museum across from LACMA for another formidable granddame just like at the Theater Vanguard.

00:30:50

ADAM HYMAN

The Folk and Craft Museum.

00:30:52

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah, Folk and Craft Museum. And but Bill and Doug were wonderful teachers in a way. Not in a didactic sense, but just talking to them about what we were going to be seeing or what we were seeing. Really opened my mind, you know, more and more of I have to say, I think the most important thing I can say in this discussion is that I came to realize that seeing a lot of surreal, abstract imagery and very experimental styles and so on, really sharpened your senses that you were working in a visual medium. And I feel whether, I don't care what kind of film it is that you're reviewing, I think it's an extremely important starting point to remember that it's what the camera is revealing of the scripts and scripts are important in traditional narrative. But they're but the blueprint. It's what is up there on the screen and how it gets there and what it does to you once it's up there. And the camera placement and the movement and the editing and the composition and how all these flow together.

00:32:40

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

If a picture works on a visual level and the prose of the dialogue is less than Shakespearean I'm not as upset by that as some people are. If I'm getting all kinds of feelings and meanings from the power of the imagery I don't really worry too much about how great the dialogue is. Now I mean I love great dialogue. I mean I love Billy Wilder. I loved his movies and I loved his absolutely deathless dialogue. And I mean *Sunset Boulevard* is my favorite movie of all time. And, you know, I mean I-- but again, I mean what works in *SUNSET BOULEVARD* I've seen many times, you know. I mean is all that atmosphere and all that, the black and white and the-- how beautifully modulated the black and white is. And you know, I mean I do think that Billy Wilder's films have a great deal of visual elegance to them. So, I mean I don't-- this is a starting point for me.

00:34:12

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I don't believe in hard and fast rules. But I do think-- but looking at, you know, I've sat there and looked at squiggles painted directly on the film stock, you know. And I thought, well you know, okay, there's some rhythm there. There's some movement. Is this pleasurable or not pleasurable? Or you know, what am I getting out of this. But it was very-- I think more the critics would benefit by being exposed to challenging material like-- where the bottom line is-- the filmmaker does need to give you enough dots so that you can connect them there yourself. And some kind of inspiration to want to connect them in the first place. I mean they have to give you that much information if that's the right feeling or something. To be participatory in the experience of watching the picture. But I mean, I think all this was really quite good for me, you know.

00:35:39

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

As a reviewer. I mean I don't know whether it shows up in my reviews necessarily or anything. But I mean I just-- I think it enriched my whole appreciation and my whole approach to how I thought about movies, you know.

00:35:52

ADAM HYMAN

Do you remember a first avant-garde or underground film that you saw? Or like, the first one that made a lasting impression?

00:36:02

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, one of the earliest certainly. And it may be this might be the right time to tell this story because it's a hell of a story and it's a long one too, is, this *SCORPIO RISING*. You know, and Mike had booked *SCORPIO RISING* for Movies 'Round Midnight. And I guess he was about 24 at the time and he was maybe more naïve than he thought. For some astounding reason I think he invited Hazel Flynn of the, an old battle-ax from the *HOLLYWOOD CITIZEN NEWS* to a preview of *SCORPIO RISING*. I think that's how the story went. I can't swear, it's been so long ago. And then I think she called the Vice Squad, you know. And the next thing I knew was, I was getting a telephone call from the late great Stanley Fleishman of-- it's a great privilege to have known him and become acquainted with Stanley Fleishman-- who was an extraordinary man and a very great attorney.

TAPE 2: KEVIN THOMAS

00:00:30

ADAM HYMAN

So before Kenneth, let me ask you a couple brief questions. So where, how did you see *SCORPIO RISING*?

00:00:40

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, Mike had showed it to me at the theater before it opened.

00:00:49

ADAM HYMAN

And that was standard, where you would just see it with like an empty house or a couple of...?

00:00:52

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah, sure.

00:00:54

ADAM HYMAN

And was there anybody else in town at that time covering this material?

00:01:00

KEVIN THOMAS

Not that I know of, let me put it that way. I can't remember when the *L.A. FREE PRESS* kicked in. And I can't remember how much coverage they gave to alternative cinema. I really don't recall. I know Paul Schrader was one of their first, if not their first film critic. But I don't-- I can't remember whether Paul got into experimental cinema at all. I can't remember.

00:01:33

ADAM HYMAN

He did a little, but not to the same degree. And the *HERALD EXAMINER*?

00:01:37

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, now I was friends and I have stayed friends with Gene Youngblood. And he really wrote some seminal books, didn't he? And Gene is absolutely a wonderful guy, I just adore him, you know. But I'm not so sure that he actually-- I can't remember whether he actually wrote reviews on things like I did for the *HERALD EXAMINER*. He might have been writing them for more selective publications, you know, film journals and things like that. I don't remember.

00:02:25

ADAM HYMAN

Was he writing for the *HERALD* before he wrote for the *FREE PRESS*, Gene?

00:02:28

KEVIN THOMAS

Gene?

00:02:30

ADAM HYMAN

Gene wrote for...

00:02:31

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah.

00:02:31

ADAM HYMAN

I didn't know that.

00:02:32

KEVIN THOMAS

He started as a copy boy there. And one of his jobs was to go out to Louella Parsons house and pick up her copy, I think he told me once. [laugh]

00:02:45

ADAM HYMAN

Wow. We're hoping to talk to him as well, but...

00:02:45

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah Gene is-- I have his phone number.

00:02:50

ADAM HYMAN

He's been ducking-- he's been trying to avoid it, because he's like, I don't remember anything from those years.

00:02:56

KEVIN THOMAS

He's working on something, because he's been over--the past year or two-- he's been calling me up and we've had long interviews. And around Christmas time last year or I don't know, some months ago, he said, Kevin, don't give up on me, I'm still working at this. And you will hear from me again. I don't know. He wants big long-- stuff like this from me for whatever he's working on. But that's-- he's absolutely wonderful. I'm just very fond of him.

00:03:27

ADAM HYMAN

And why, it seems was Kenneth never involved in the *SCORPIO RISING* trial? Is that true, and why was that?

00:03:37

KEVIN THOMAS

I don't know. I don't know. I don't think-- I don't remember when I met Kenneth to tell you the honest truth. But he has never acknowledged-- let me say. He's either completely unaware of or forgotten anything in my role as a really central role in defending his picture. And certainly no gratitude has ever been expressed. I think it went out of his mind or he really didn't even bother with the details of Stanley's defense or the source materials for Stanley's defense, you know. I could think maybe he was completely detached for that. Or maybe he was off in Europe or maybe he was wherever, you know. But he's never really acknowledged being aware of any of this. Or my role in it at all, over the decades. And that's okay. But I've had some, over great periods of time I subsequently reviewed practically everything he did, you know. And what or whoever was showing it, you know.

00:05:03

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I became friends with Samson De Brier. You must know who Samson De Brier is, you know. Yeah, I was very fond of Samson. And then I guess with the years I became more acquainted with Kenneth personally. And there's a lot of funny stuff, you know. I remember not so many years ago Schindler House was giving a retrospective. And this is before I left the paper. And I would have devoted a whole column. And I could have pulled up the clips for everything. And I could have refreshed my mind and I could have done a whole column. I wouldn't of had to re-see them to do a sort of mosaic, you know, overview. I would have given a whole Screen Room column. But the Schindler House had no imagination to contact me. And Kenneth had no imagination to contact me. And then I swear to God, it was like two or three weeks after the fact that the Schindler had come and gone. He called me up and said, Kevin, you haven't been doing anything for me lately, you know. And I thought, Kenneth, if you had told me that Schindler was coming up, it would have cost you nothing except a telephone call.

00:06:46

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

These people wouldn't even have had to show me a single film, you know. I could have just written, you know, I could have stitched together whatever, you know. That's the kind of person he is, you know. But there were other incidents. I became very friendly with Carol Kron, may she rest in peace. Carol was a very brilliant woman. Her husband Peter was an artist and I think he also designed certain kinds of boats and stuff and they lived in Summerland. And they had a business called Machine Age, where they had a guy, somewhere up in the Santa Barbara area, where he would do superb restorations of Deco streamline-moderne era appliances. And she would have wonderful cocktail shakers and all this chrome Deco stuff. And they would exhibit at the flea market at the Rose Bowl. And Carol was a brilliant woman and Carol and I got very friendly with Carol and Peter too. But especially Carol, who was a very dynamic woman.

00:08:23

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And really brilliant. And she had worked her way through UCLA. And she had lived at Samson's compound on Barton Street in Hollywood. Where there was a, I think, damn near Victorian cottage in the front of the property. And there was a cottage in the back where Samson lived. And she rented a room. And Kenneth was living there at the time and she became great friends with Kenneth. And she had a broken romance and she did a pill overdose. And Kenneth saved her life. He sprung into action, got the ambulance there and got her pumped out, and she was fine, you know. But when he was out of town his boyfriend at the time made a pass at her. And she said, I was the kind of girl who always thought you should say yes. And somehow Kenneth never forgave her for that. And here it is, you know, 40 years later or whatever, you know, 50 years later, whatever. Decades later she said, Kevin, I want to be in contact with Kenneth.

00:10:13

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I was scared shitless. He was teaching at USC by this time and living-- this was more recent you know, in the last 10 years-- and he was living in an apartment I think in Echo Park. And I took a really deep breath and gave her his address and even his phone number. And miraculously they had a very lovely reunion. And Carol wanted to follow it up with him coming up to Summerland and they would do some tours of various, oh the opera star's famous estate in Santa Barbara. They were going to visit the grounds and things. But it really never happened because he was becoming unstuck at that period. And I think he got evicted or whatever, you know. This was a really chaotic period for him. And she called him and he did answer and he was not impolite but he said, I just can't talk to you now. And they never did see each other again. Carol has cancer, advanced and it was finally terminal and that was it.

00:11:45 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

But not long before I left the paper I got a phone call at the paper. This is Kenneth Anger and I'm in the mental ward at the General Hospital. And I want you to know it. [laugh] And somehow I can't remember. I got in touch with or was put in touch with Simon Leve [sp?]. You know, Simon Leve was the famous warlock, you know.

00:12:24 **ADAM HYMAN**

Okay. I never did know him.

00:12:27 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Well, anyway, and the fellow seemed like a really nice guy. And he said, well, Kenneth's been very erratic lately and so on. And oh, there's other-- there's just on and on other crazy incidents. I don't know if I should go into all of them. But...

00:12:48 **ADAM HYMAN**

One is good.

00:12:49 **KEVIN THOMAS**

But I know one time he said, I'm going to-- Gary Graver, may he rest in peace. Gary Graver and I are going to be shooting you on Main Street midnight tonight. Be there, you know. I knew it wasn't going to be happening. And, however, only about two or three months ago I was at a Hollywood Heritage screener or program at the Lasky-DeMille Barn. And I was sort of settling myself into a seat and Kenneth came over without an ounce of recognition and had a very sweet smile he wanted to-- like I was a truly elderly person, although I'm 6 years younger than he is or 8 years or something like that. He very kindly made sure that I was perfectly seated in this. And I mean that was Kenneth, you know, I mean he's really very, very-- oh, I can tell you this story. Oh my God. This story is really funny and outrageous. I was a very good friend of Curtis Harrington. And I, of course, reviewed all of Curtis' experimental films from the '40s. And I reviewed most all of his feature films, almost all of them.

00:14:40 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

Maybe all of them, I'm not sure. And I mean I was good casting for that. I appreciated his sensibilities very much. And Curtis was an absolutely wonderful man. And of course, there's was lots and lots people in this town who would tell you exactly the same thing. And there was his funeral at the Hollywood Forever Chapel. And Jack Larson, the wonderful Jack Larson, was presiding, because he was an old friend of Curtis'. And you know who Jack Larson is I would hope, the actor.

00:15:28 **ADAM HYMAN**

Olsen.

00:15:30

KEVIN THOMAS

Hmm?

00:15:30

ADAM HYMAN

THE ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN.

00:15:32

KEVIN THOMAS

And what?

00:15:33

ADAM HYMAN

Jimmy Olsen on the...

00:15:33

KEVIN THOMAS

Jimmy, yes of course. And Jack Larson is the absolutely living, breathing, walking definition of a true blue gentleman of the very first water. He's a very elegant wonderful, wonderful man. [laugh] And Kenneth was sitting in the front row and he would interrupt him every few minutes. And Jack was such a pro he would not let it throw him. At one point he said, well, Kenneth why don't you come up here and stand with me and talk about Curtis? Well, no, that kind of got Kenneth to back off a little bit. And then afterwards, there were a group of us talking and one woman I must say was real admirable, what she said, 'Today Jack was Superman.' [laugh] And believe me, if you were there, you know. Okay. Then there's going to be upcoming a memorial service for Curtis at the Linwood Dunn Theater at the Pickford Center of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences building on Vine Street in Hollywood.

00:17:06

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And, we don't want Kenneth to wreck the memorial service. So, the people in charge devised this plan. First of all, they did beef up security. But they told him it was a different-- they gave him the wrong date. And he didn't show up and that went very beautifully. Because he had really kind of spoiled the funeral and they didn't want any more nonsense about that, you know.

00:17:51

ADAM HYMAN

Sort of a legendary... yeah.

00:17:52

KEVIN THOMAS

Maybe you have heard some of these stories.

00:17:56

ADAM HYMAN

Well, the funeral, I know other people who attended and talked about how he like threw himself on the casket.

00:18:00

KEVIN THOMAS

He what?

00:18:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

He like threw himself on the casket.

00:18:04 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Well, you know, they had been estranged as friends for decades, you know. It wasn't like they were, you know, I don't think Curtis had spoken to him in 30 years or something, you know. I don't know. They had some kind of falling out, but then most everybody had I think, you know.

00:18:27 **ADAM HYMAN**

With Kenneth? With Kenneth you mean?

00:18:28 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah.

00:18:31 **ADAM HYMAN**

Did you ever talk to either of them about their early years together and their early work? Like from the '40s or early '50s.

00:18:48 **KEVIN THOMAS**

No.

00:18:51 **ADAM HYMAN**

On one of their-- a separate question, since some early-- did you ever attend any shows at the Coronet Theater or know Raymond Rohauer at all?

00:18:57 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I did not know-- I knew who Raymond Rohauer was of course. Now see I-- between the years of '54 and '60 most of the year I was spending in Pennsylvania. And I think-- when he had the New Beverly Cinema as a twin theater. I forget what he called it.

00:19:36 **ADAM HYMAN**

The Riviera Capri.

00:19:38 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah, I may have gone there once or twice just as a member of the public. I never met him. I certainly didn't-- he never contacted me. I think by the time I was revving up he was kind of-- had moved on.

00:19:59 **ADAM HYMAN**

He left L.A. in '62.

00:20:01 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Hmm?

00:20:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

He left in L.A. in '62.

00:20:04

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, my first review appeared in November of '62. So, you know, I think so never the twain met, you know.

00:20:12

ADAM HYMAN

And over the course of the '60s-- let's stay focused on the '60s for this. Do you think there was like an evolution of the underground film scene in L.A.?

00:20:24

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh yeah, sure. It flourished.

00:20:26

ADAM HYMAN

Tell me about that.

00:20:27

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, I mean all I can tell you is there were, you know, venues would come and go. And you had seen new stuff and people were doing new things. And remember we were getting a lot of stuff from New York, you know. The Kuchar's and I remember Carolee Schneemann's *FUSES*. That caused quite a ripple I think. And people were making movies and stuff, you know. This is all so long ago. It all kind of runs together. But yes, there was certainly some ferment going on of young people getting out a camera and making their own, doing their own thing type of thing. That's a terrible phrase, you know. It was in the air. And remember there was a lot of exciting work coming out of UCLA and USC. Now back in the day I would review their annual or semi-annual film evenings. We finally had to give it up, because there were too many other schools starting to have a department. LACC, Cal State at Long Beach, Marymount, Loyola Marymount. They all wanted equal time. And it just got too much.

00:22:20

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And UCLA was-- instead of having one big thing-- the kids would organize their own. And they would expect coverage and stuff. And it just got way out of hand. And nobody did it but me, so we finally said, look, we just can't do this anymore. And that was, oh God, 15 years ago at least, maybe longer than that. And sometime in the '80s we finally had to pull the stop, otherwise the paper would be filled with nothing but reviews of student films, seriously. And also the student film had-- I try to circle back on myself here. The student film had evolved. In the '60s, the Vietnam War era and so on, the kids were really out for personal expression and they were interested in what was happening in society. And they were fired up, you know. And all the hippie stuff. Oh, psychedelic movies, oh that was a whole genre practically, psychedelia, you know. And there was all this ferment. But I sort of thought, when Vietnam was finally resolved, that people would become a lot more conventional again.

00:23:53

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I was right. And I do know, however, when you talk about experimental film and stuff, at UCLA and at USC both in the '60s really had some very creative people doing some, you know, non-linear stuff you know. I mean the student films of George Lucas, for example, were real standouts at USC. Bernie Kantor, Bernard Kantor was the Dean at USC. And he really seemed to be a very creative inspirational type of guy. Unfortunately he was relatively young and he just keeled over with a heart attack. But he was a wonderful man. And I think he was a real inspiration for these people. And there was very good stuff coming out of UCLA too. It was exciting, you know. But I know at USC towards the end you were having these rich kids with deep, deep pockets. They were creating for themselves very slick calling cards for the industry. Very strong production values, you know. I mean I think some kids were spending \$50,000 probably on a student film, you know.

00:25:41

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And they have professional actors and everything was, you know, that you could take this to some TV company or hopefully maybe even a Hollywood studio or something and say, look this is what I can do, you know. And I didn't invite-- I did not invent the term, but it is wonderful, and these were calling cards for the industry. And that had-- I saw that creeping in about the time that we just said, no we could not do student films anymore. But some of that stuff was really good film.

00:26:29

ADAM HYMAN

Do you remember any others?

00:26:31

KEVIN THOMAS

Hmm?

00:26:31

ADAM HYMAN

Do you remember any others in particular?

00:26:33

KEVIN THOMAS

No, not at this remove. There's a wonderful, Lou Stoumen. Do you know that name? A wonderful photographer.

00:26:45

ADAM HYMAN

How do you spell that?

00:26:47

KEVIN THOMAS

S-T-O-U-M-E-N.

00:26:51

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, I heard about him.

00:26:51

KEVIN THOMAS

He died a number of years ago. He was a really a tremendous photographer, well known and respected, out of New York. He taught film and stuff at UCLA. And I remember, he's been gone a long time. I remember he put together a retrospective program of UCLA student films. And it was terrific. It covered like a 20 year period or a 25 year period. It was really interesting to see the progression, you know, beyond, you know, like home movies and stuff. So. But I once asked Frances Ford Coppola what he learned at UCLA. And he said, not a damn thing. Although, he's actually said some very kind things about Dorothy Arzner there.

00:27:47

ADAM HYMAN

She was there at that time?

00:27:48

KEVIN THOMAS

Hmm?

00:27:49

ADAM HYMAN

There's a few other people of course like Thom Andersen was there in the mid '60s. And Jim Morrison and so forth.

00:27:55

KEVIN THOMAS

And who? Oh, Jim Morrison. I've never seen Jim Morrison's pictures. I think Pauline said it wasn't all that great.

00:28:01

ADAM HYMAN

I don't think it was supposed to be that good.

00:28:06

KEVIN THOMAS

What?

00:28:06

ADAM HYMAN

I don't think it's supposed to be that good. Can you tell me-- describe to me like physically what it was to attend a show at the Cinema Theater.

00:28:23

KEVIN THOMAS

Physically?

00:28:24

ADAM HYMAN

Like what did the theater look like and so on.

00:28:26

KEVIN THOMAS

The Cinema was a vintage neighborhood house. I suppose it dated back to the late '20s or '30s. You know, like so many theaters had gone through all kinds of remodeling so that it was very, it had a very indistinct generic impersonal kind of design or architecture. There was nothing distinctive about the place. And I'm big on architecture and décor and all that kind of crap. And I-- it's just sort of a blur. And I remember I thought it was kind of a blah at the time. Because other neighborhood houses had a lot more character to them. But it would probably had started out with some character. It was just a simple efficient unpretentious art theater. And it was nicely run. And Mike when he was there he was a very conscientious manager, you know.

00:29:32

ADAM HYMAN

Who would attend?

00:29:32

KEVIN THOMAS

Younger people. And there was a pizza place nearby I think that, you know, the pizza place benefitted by the theater. And the theater benefitted by the pizza place. But that character in that neighborhood has completely changed. It's entirely Latino now. It was not in a section of town where there were-- you can't say that it was a Bohemian neighborhood at all. I mean there weren't book stores. Well, yeah, there had been one. Yes, the next block there was. I think Ezra Goodman who wrote *THE RISE AND FALL OF HOLLYWOOD* had a book store near the corner of Western and Santa Monica. But it disappeared, the whole complex was all torn down decades ago. But it was not-- it just was a centrally located neighborhood. It had at that time, it was fairly easy parking. And it attracted a lot of young people. But then it showed, you know, really good quality art films. *WOMAN IN THE DUNES PLAYED* there.

00:31:09

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

EVA, the Joe Losey picture played there. I think I reviewed both of those. I mean there was a quality-- it was a quality art theater. But then the neighborhood started to change. And it started to have more competition.

00:31:36

ADAM HYMAN

And do you remember, well eventually it started showing porn as well.

00:31:41

KEVIN THOMAS

Hmm?

00:31:42

ADAM HYMAN

Eventually it started showing porn.

00:31:42

KEVIN THOMAS

I don't remember that.

00:31:45 **ADAM HYMAN**

As in the '70s. Like in the '70s.

00:31:53 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Confusing it with what?

00:31:52 **ADAM HYMAN**

The Cinematheque 16 in West Hollywood.

00:31:59 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Did that go over to porn?

00:32:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

Yes.

00:32:01 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Oh, I didn't know that.

00:32:04 **ADAM HYMAN**

Can you describe the Cinematheque 16?

00:32:06 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yes. In that it was a cubby hole. You went down this flight of steps on the lower side of Sunset Boulevard. I guess that would be the South side. And you went down quite a steep incline. And then there was a landing. And then you'd turn left and there was this absolutely sort of non-descript, kind of cubicle. I don't know what the purpose of the building had been originally at all. But it was very small. And that was the Cinematheque 16. I think cinder block or something really, it was no frills. But I mean it had good projection. The seats were fine, you know.

00:32:58 **ADAM HYMAN**

It's the same space where Book Soup is now. That's what I've been told. Or adjacent to where Book Soup is now.

00:33:10 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I can't hear you.

00:33:12 **ADAM HYMAN**

It's where Book Soup is now.

00:33:14 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I don't think so.

00:33:15 **ADAM HYMAN**

Or on the same block or something like that.

00:33:16 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Not too far. I can't remember.

00:33:21

ADAM HYMAN

Did you ever interact with Lewis Teague or Jeff Perkins at the Cinematheque 16?

00:33:24

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, I got very friendly with Lewis.

00:33:29

ADAM HYMAN

Tell me about Lewis Teague.

00:33:30

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, he's a very nice guy. He was really friendly. And I was very excited when he managed to break into directing. I don't know what he is doing these days. I haven't seen him for years. But I was very fond of him. We worked together very harmoniously. He was always, you know, really helpful. Jeff Perkins, that's a name that rings a faint bell.

00:33:52

ADAM HYMAN

He took it over from Lewis Teague. But in '68 or whatever. And then he was a member of the Single Wing Turquoise Bird Light Show. But we don't need to fall on that. So...

00:34:11

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, we haven't talked about Warhol. I don't know. Does Warhol fit into this?

00:34:14

ADAM HYMAN

Oh yeah. Well, we'll talk about that, he's in a moment.

00:34:17

KEVIN THOMAS

Okay.

00:34:17

ADAM HYMAN

And then do you think there was any difference or any sort of importance behind that the Cinematheque 16 was in West Hollywood?

00:34:32

KEVIN THOMAS

I think that was a good location. Yes, for that era, sure. Yes.

end of tape 2

TAPE 3 : KEVIN THOMAS

00:00:22

ADAM HYMAN

All right, Please. So, *EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE?*

00:00:26

KEVIN THOMAS

Yes. Well, that was a lot of fun. And I kind of thought of— maybe I sensed that it was some kind of a landmark occasion but not nearly as, you know, significant as I would later come to realize. At— it was sort of Andy's west coast debut and he made a lot of forays into LA. in that era. There was some famous place in the hills he stayed and then he stayed at that famous old motel on Santa Monica Boulevard where Duke's Café originally was. Can't remember the name of it but it's a tragedy, they-- it was a lovely old motel.

00:01:19

ADAM HYMAN

Tropicana.

00:01:20

KEVIN THOMAS

Tropicana, yes, yes, yes. Okay, exactly. And was fun to- you could go to Duke's and there would be Tom Waits sitting there, you know. And I had a number of interactions with Andy over the years, personally, as well as reviewing all his and Paul's films. I put— I think I put *CHELSEA GIRLS*— was that '66 maybe? I put it on my ten best list. And so I looked at all those and I liked most all of them. I thought they were sexy and amusing and different and laid back.

00:02:11

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I, you know, I enjoyed them, you know. And I like Paul's films. They had a little more shape and direction to them. I didn't care for his *DRACULA* and *FRANKENSTEIN'S* too much but most of the other pictures I've always enjoyed. And I'm sort of out of touch with Paul now but we became pretty friendly and I'm very, very fond of him. He's really a wonderful guy. And I can remember on— Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française came to town and they're giving him an honorary Oscar or whatever.

00:03:01

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

It was a kind of big deal and there was a— was that the factory? There was some event. Yeah, I think maybe at the factory. There was some dinner party and I was invited and Andy was there. A lot of celebrities of different stripes and kinds. Don't remember that so well but the event that I remember the best though was— I'm having a senior moment. Jack Larson's partner, the late film director Jim Bridges. Jim and Jack had a wonderful— and Jack still lives there,

00:04:06

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

Frank Lloyd Wright house in Brentwood and they had a party. I was invited and it was really interesting. Vadim and Jane Fonda were there. Jane was in the kitchen making salad, you know, and Joe Dallesandro was standing there, leaning against the wall sort of gazing at a space and nobody paid much attention to him. And I suppose there were some other celebrities there. It was a fairly small group, though. And I actually managed to have a few brief conversations with Andy at these various times but, you know, very minimal because he was not somebody that was easy to have a conversation with.

00:05:15

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But I remember what—the highlight of this event was the *TIMES* Society editor was there and she sat Andy down and she decided it was her job to earnestly, earnestly interview him. And it was funny because she didn't really know anything, I think or not very much about his whole world, you know. And, I mean, she was asking very square questions and stuff and he was being elusive but polite and then all the rest of us were trying to keep a straight face, you know. And that was fun.

00:06:02

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But I'm getting a little vague here, my God, that's— I'm pulling cobwebs away. But I know I was astounded to—although I shouldn't have been—to realize that he had spent— there was a rumor at one time he was actually born in my mother's hometown, McKeesport, which is a totally derelict, rust-built steel-mill town a few miles outside of Pittsburgh. And apparently, it's been established he was, in-fact, born in Pittsburgh but he did live in McKeesport for any number of years. I'm sure his father worked at one of the mills because my mother's family dated back to the 18th century in that town.

00:07:03

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And they were the aristocrats and they once had a lot of money and owned half the town and all that but that's Magnificent Ambersons time. But people from Eastern Europe, you know, Poles and Czechs and Hungarians, they are the people who went into the really back-breaking jobs in the mills. And considering his background and everything, now it makes perfect sense. I think his father worked in the mills for a period. And I told him, I said, well, I'm pretty impressed somebody such as you could come out of McKeesport or something like that but he didn't say anything. He hardly ever said anything, really.

00:07:56

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

In fact, I don't know how I ever got that interview out of him when I did because it's actually—for Andy Warhol—a rather complete interview, you know. But, oh, yes, I know. It was about the time of *LONESOME COWBOYS* [laugh] Viva and Paul Morrissey decided to drop in on me at the paper. I don't know whether we had security guards or anything and they waltzed in. And Viva said to me, I hope you are aware that I am dressed as Che Guevara. She had on fatigues and what—bandoleros, you know, with, I think, bullet shells, you know, and that was fun.

00:08:55

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I remember—I don't know if it was that time or what. I took Paul—I don't know what Viva said, down to see Union Station because I thought he would love that, you know, Spanish Colonial moderne architecture. You know, a sort of fusion of streamline moderne and Spanish Colonial and he did. And there were other encounters, I guess but it's all kind of a haze, you know.

00:09:32

ADAM HYMAN

By the early '70s, like, in the—at the very start of the '70s, do you recall, like, who was exhibiting avant-garde film in LA in that period? I mean, we could more easily perhaps look at...

00:09:50

KEVIN THOMAS

Hum?

00:09:51

ADAM HYMAN

...old reviews but I'm just trying to remember, like, you know, like, just prior to Theatre Vanguard?

00:09:57

KEVIN THOMAS

Yes. Theatre Vanguard, yes, I think that was the key thing. I saw a lot of stuff at Theatre Vanguard and at the Folk and Craft Museum thanks to Doug and Bill, yes.

00:10:13

ADAM HYMAN

Can you...

00:10:13

KEVIN THOMAS

Those were the ones.

00:10:14

ADAM HYMAN

Can you describe or tell us more about Bill Moritz?

00:10:22

KEVIN THOMAS

Bill really was a very passionate guy about film and so on and he had formed a close bond with Alfreda Fischinger, which I'm sure you know. And he was really instrumental, I think, encouraging her on and helping her in her great mission in life, which was to preserve Oskar's films and to try to secure his reputation and so on. And Bill was absolutely dedicated to Alfreda and Fischinger's work. I remember Fritz Lang saying— I think Oskar Fischinger worked with Fritz on one of his films. And Fritz— and he says, the poor guy, he never had any luck, you know.

00:11:24

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But, yeah, Bill and Doug were really dedicated. Jesus, they were really— they were very passionate about what they presented and it was contagious, you know. They, I mean, they were good— there's this crass term but they were good salesmen, in the sense that they really were— they believed in what they were putting up there on screen and it was quite contagious. And they sort of— they kind of opened things up, as I said earlier. They— but, I mean, God, Doug was patient.

00:12:11

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I mean, Judith Stark and that woman at the Folk and Craft, Edith— What's her name, you know, they were grande dame, lady bountiful types, you know. And I can't say I ever had unpleasant moments with them but they sort of were a little bit self-important. And, you know, I thought, gee, you know, I deserved a lot of credit for learning how to handle people like that. You know, because, you know, in these institutions, film so easily becomes the poor step-child. Look at the whole history of LACMA. From the day one, the film programmers have had a hard time.

00:13:06

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

It's always been treated as the poor step-child. And whereas actually, you know, people come in to see movies and they may stick around to see the exhibits. It's absolutely ridiculous, you know, really LACMA's had a lousy attitude toward films. And, I mean, I've really been there since day one and I'm sure it's probably still true. Then— but I think that I— as I recall, Theatre Vanguard and— was really the primary— that I recall. There might have been— was some— somebody tried to do experimental stuff in some little storefront, I think, on Normandie off of Sunset Boulevard.

00:14:03

ADAM HYMAN

Haven't heard of that one. There was a point where Mike Epps moved over to the Encore Theatre. Do you remember that?

00:14:14

KEVIN THOMAS

Was that the old Melvan at Melrose and Van Ness?

00:14:19

FEMALE

Yes.

00:14:20

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah, that was in— when I was a child, that was the Melvan. Melrose and Van Ness, you know. And then KTLA took it over as a studio for their live things. I mean, Ray Hutton and her all-girl orchestra show was telecast from there. They had all kinds of variety shows that were— and then Max Laemmle took over the Encore and he gave it that name, Encore. And then that thrived until the Raleigh people came and they tore that whole block down, including the Encore, to expand the Raleigh facilities and sound stations, so...

00:15:20

ADAM HYMAN

So is that the stuff on the east side of Van Ness or the west side of Van Ness?

00:15:24

KEVIN THOMAS

Hum?

00:15:24

ADAM HYMAN

It's on the east side of Van Ness or the west side, do you recall?

00:15:28

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, if you're going to— if you're driving toward Beverly Hills, it would have been on the left. Which is north, south, east or west?

00:15:44

ADAM HYMAN

North is where Paramount is.

00:15:47

KEVIN THOMAS

That's north?

00:15:48

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah.

00:15:49

KEVIN THOMAS

Yes. Okay. It was on the south side. It was— would be the southwest corner.

00:15:54

ADAM HYMAN

Okay.

00:15:55

KEVIN THOMAS

It was a nice theater and Max had fixed it up. It was really kind of nifty mid-century modern fixture with cranberry shades. Conical cranberry shades and I wish I had gotten my hands on that fixture. Probably was trashed, you know.

00:16:17

ADAM HYMAN

And...

00:16:18

KEVIN THOMAS

But it was a nice theater. And, you know, the— as the Melvan when I was a kid in the '40s, you know, I don't know. I'd probably date it to the '30s and maybe even the late '20s. I'm not sure how old the Melvan was. But it was one of hundreds of nice, pleasant neighborhood theaters that were all over southern California back in the day. But I can't remember— well, now, wait a minute. I didn't know the— I didn't know that Mike went over there.

00:16:59

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

Did Lou [sounds like Schur] operate it before Max Laemmle took it over? I don't...

00:17:06

ADAM HYMAN

1971, sort of, they took Movies 'Round Midnight or Underground Cinema 12 and they stopped running them at the Cinema Theater and they started running them at the Encore Theater.

00:17:18

KEVIN THOMAS

But I— God, was it that long ago? I kind of think that Laemmle took it over from the beginning. I think Lou sold off his chain.

00:17:28

ADAM HYMAN

It might have been just, you know, running them on Saturdays at midnight.

00:17:31

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah, it may have been a special thing. Then— I know that Mike went up north and then I ran into him after many years at the dedication at the Pacific Film Archive and I haven't seen him since.

00:17:46

ADAM HYMAN

He's in Nevada City.

00:17:48

KEVIN THOMAS

Nevada City?

00:17:50

ADAM HYMAN

Yes.

00:17:50

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, wonderful. Well, what's he doing?

00:17:54

ALISON KOZBERG

He runs a movie theater.

00:17:57

KEVIN THOMAS

Hum?

00:17:58

ALISON KOZBERG

His wife— him and his wife run a theater.

00:18:00

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh.

00:18:01

ALISON KOZBERG

Independent movie theater.

00:18:01

KEVIN THOMAS

Good for him. Oh, does— do they have children and everything?

00:18:05

ALISON KOZBERG

I don't know if they have children.

00:18:07

KEVIN THOMAS

He's such a wonderful man.

00:18:09

ADAM HYMAN

And somebody— nobody mentions this but I'm curious. I mean, Doug and Bill, of course, were both gay as well and I was curious about the linkage between experimental film exhibition in LA and the gay community or if there's any significance or insight that might be there?

00:18:31

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, I have often thought that— there was a core group of film enthusiasts who were all gay, starting with me, and Doug and Bill and Ron Haver at LACMA. And then Bob Rosen at UCLA, who just only recently retired as the Dean of Film, Television and Drama and the founder of the archive, you know.

00:19:20

ADAM HYMAN

And the Garys?

00:19:21

KEVIN THOMAS

The Garys. You want to talk about the Garys?

00:19:24

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, I do but you know what, before let's— talk about the Garys, let's investigate this other question. So it's, like, there's a point there where, for, you know, a couple of exceptions, the majority of the alternative film exhibitors, curators in Los Angeles are gay?

00:19:39

KEVIN THOMAS

Yes, sure.

00:19:41

ADAM HYMAN

[unintelligible] I don't know if there's— what other, I mean, whether it's just, like, a safe preserve at that time or is it— what is the nature of the cultural interest of that sort?

00:19:51

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, I think— I don't mean to be simplistic but I can't— I think that for gay people, particularly my age, movies were a big escape. And those of us who had some intellectual pretension and so on, could explore different, you know, it wasn't just the latest Betty Grable musical, although we might have loved it, too. But, you know, we could see the art form there and we could see— we might have a, you know, when I read Susan Sontag's *NOTES ON CAMP*, I thought, oh, my God, you've got the biggest Camp you've ever been aware of, you know.

00:20:54

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I do think— but I do think that actually— I think movies were a really valuable escape for gay people through some very tough periods in our individual lives and for our position in society, which, unfortunately, still remains unenviable. I was back and forth about Don't Ask, Don't Tell and gay marriage and all that kind of crapola, you know. I'm 74 years old and I'm fucking fed up with all that shit, you know. But I do have— it's the first time in my life in the past six months or so that I think I may just live long enough to experience what it's like to be a first-class citizen, something that I have never experienced ever in my entire life, you know.

00:22:04

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I think it's unconstitutional and it's absolutely outrageous. But I think— now, I think I'm older than all of these guys. I think I'm even older than Bob Rosen. I'm pretty sure that I am. And I know I'm older than all the other people I've mentioned. Of course, Doug and Ron and the Garys all fell victim of— you're not supposed to use that word but, I mean, they all succumb to AIDS or AIDS related diseases. But I think that it's just— I think it's just self-evident.

00:22:54

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But I knew Vito Russo and I think— what's the name of— Celluloid...

00:23:04

ADAM HYMAN

CELLULOID DREAMS, Epstein— Ron Epstein?

00:23:08

KEVIN THOMAS

No, no, Vito Russo.

00:23:08

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, Celluloid...

00:23:10

FEMALE

THE CELLULOID CLOSET.

00:23:11

ADAM HYMAN

...*CELLULOID CLOSET.*

00:23:11

KEVIN THOMAS

THE CELLULOID CLOSET, yes. I knew Vito while he was working on the book. You know, my God, he would take waiter jobs, everything. It took him years to get that out. I think it's just invaluable social history and it was very good for gay people to read this because the very— of course, he was talking mainly about mainstream Hollywood pictures. And he also— he made a very detailed study of the whole spectrum of cinema from the beginning. And he made the ironic point that maybe movies were an escape for gay people but that the images that mainstream movies presented gay people, created and perpetuated very negative stereotypes in many instances.

00:24:30

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I thought that Vito did something really indispensable there. It made us kind of think, well, okay, you know. We may embrace all of this but, you know, we're clasping the serpent to the— our breast, so-to-speak, in a way, you know. And, I mean, I think it's just— And Vito was a really wonderful— I'm always saying everybody is wonderful but I have known a lot of wonderful people. But Vito was very brave, you know, and he was a real fighter and he just gave his all to AIDS activism, subsequently.

00:25:13

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But to, you know, reveal the role of mainstream cinema in creating negative gay stereotypes, too. But it makes perfect sense to me. I know I've thought about it a lot that there was this core of us who were either exhibiting or writing about alternative cinema and specialized cinema, you know, non-commercial, you know, in institutional settings and things like that. Like all these places I've mentioned in— UCLA [unintelligible] and so on. But there's always been gay— a strong gay presence, somebody ought to write a book maybe, I don't know.

00:26:04

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But, I mean, I just think it is very simplistic reasons that the movies have always been an escape, a refuge for gay people, I think.

00:26:29

ADAM HYMAN

All right, great. So tell me about the Garys but please start by telling me their full names.

00:26:36

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, Gary Essert and Gary Abrahams. I first met Gary Essert when I went to screenings or previews at Royce Hall. I think Gary was still an undergraduate and he had a tremendous spirit of showmanship. And he wanted perfection and projection in Royce. And I think we met there when maybe he was showing me some student films or something like that. Because there used to be a lot of venturesome film programming in Royce itself. Because I don't think they do that at-- they have Jim Bridges and they've got, of course, the— Billy Wilder nowadays.

00:27:42

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And that's where I first met him and then the next thing I know, these— hatched the idea for Filmex with his friend, Barbara Smith. I don't think Abrahams was on the scene right away. I think the Garys met later on. I think Gary Abrahams had some kind of associate position at Paramount, if I recall. And I know that Essert was crazy about him, that's for sure. And then Filmex did get off the ground and it was a tremendously ambitious thing and vast in scope. Gary had such a hard time saying no to anybody and he should've— Gary Essert should have exerted— there were two things.

00:29:01

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

He had all this passion and all this drive and he had the right ideas but he overreached. He had too overwhelming a program. And if it— if all that was of really superior quality, you could say, well, that's defensible. This is a rich year in world cinema or something like that. But unfortunately, it really wasn't. He could have eliminated a lot of dross. He could have shown some of the really key pictures several times. This is a big town, always has been in my lifetime and people have to travel distances. Of course, it's much worse with the terrible traffic, now. It's unbelievably bad.

00:29:59

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But even then—I'm talking 20, 30 years ago—there had to be a certain amount of want, see, and availability and people had busy lives. He had been— I think he would've had a stronger suit had he been able to show the picture two or three times. It was a really quality— to reach out, make it more available. Now, may— there might have been some contractual things there, like the person said, well, I'll let you have my film for one screening only. I don't want to sap away the LA market, you know, or whatever.

00:30:34 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

But— and then Gary did seem— have a gift for alienating all the wrong people. I mean, this is a terrible generality but the Garys enlisted George Cukor to direct this TV special, I think it was maybe for the Actor's Fund or the Motion Picture Fund. And I remember going over to The Herb Alpert Studios, you know, it wasn't the animator guy— it wasn't Jim Henson yet. And had been, of course, the original lease to Chaplain Studios. And I went over there for an afternoon and there was George Cukor directing Lillian Gish in a segment and Jack Nicholson in a segment, you know.

00:31:40 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

Oh, my God, you know, it was really fun. And then to sit in the dressing room with Ms. Gish and she was going on about, how I am determined that D.W. Griffith is going to get a stamp in his honor and she succeeded, you know. And that was just wonderful, you know. I knew Jack, of course, as I said before, and that was fun. It was a wonderful day, oh, my God.

00:32:09 **ADAM HYMAN**

What was the...

00:32:10 **KEVIN THOMAS**

But the trouble was when it was about to air and everything, the Garys tried to take all the credit, you know, sort of leave George Cukor, who directed the whole thing— and George had been such a dedicated supporter of Filmex. And he was— I don't think he was so hurt as he was just pissed off. And, I mean, I don't think that rift was ever resolved, you know. And I know there were other instances. Essert just wasn't— I always had perfect relations with Essert always. He seemed to respect me, I seemed to respect him. You know, we always were harmonious.

00:33:08 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

Now, how are you bringing the Garys in and when it comes to alternative cinema?

00:33:14 **ADAM HYMAN**

Well, they included some in the programming every...

00:33:17 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah, they did some.

00:33:19 **ADAM HYMAN**

So I just wanted to see if there was any insight into that or why they included it.

00:33:25

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, they were— Essert— Look, Abrahams was decoration. Let's just talk about Essert. Well, Essert really had this passion and I, you know, he did want to be inclusive and having alternatives [unintelligible] is completely legit, you know, obviously. But Abrahams could really be pretentious. But I— oh, to hell with all that. I had a real set to with him once but that's besides the point this time. I have to say I have undying respect for Barbara Smith having to keep the dream of The Cinémathèque alive and her absolute determination despite the setback of the '94 earthquake, which took off the whole back wall of The Egyptian.

00:34:33

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And still she persisted and she was the one who had to be steadfast with both of them as they had those really— both of them had really terrible early AIDS deaths. It was just horrendous, you know. And so she has all my respect for holding everything together. And she had never been intended to be a front person. She was always going to do the business end in the back and out of sight, you know, then she had to move to the floor, you know. It was not an easy adjustment for her.

00:35:10

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

Besides losing two friends, too at the same time, you know, I mean, they died about six weeks apart, you know. Horrendous, you know.

00:35:20

ADAM HYMAN

And amongst curators we were talking about a minute ago— a few minutes ago, was there coordination and communication among all of them or...?

00:35:31

KEVIN THOMAS

[overlapping] Yes, sure.

00:35:31

ADAM HYMAN

Tell me about them [unintelligible].

00:35:32

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, yes. Doug Edwards ended up at— ended up at the Academy. And I know— I think Doug and Ron Haver collaborated on the restoration of [unintelligible] at the very tag ends of both of their lives. They died within a month or two of each other. I know Ron came to the memorial service for Doug at the Academy lobby. And then he was gone in another month or two himself, you know, maybe three. I can't remember. It just— it was a matter of a very short time. Terrible, you know.

00:36:30

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

They were both really good guys. I loved working with them both, you know.

00:36:37 **ADAM HYMAN**

Who was Doug's partner, do you remember?

00:36:39 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Oh, Gary— I think it was...

00:36:47 **ADAM HYMAN**

Do you know what happened to him?

00:36:48 **KEVIN THOMAS**

No. I don't, I'm sorry to say.

00:36:52 **ADAM HYMAN**

Or Alison, do you remember?

00:36:54 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Who?

00:36:55 **ALISON KOZBERG**

What happened?

00:36:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

Doug's partner?

00:36:56 **ALISON KOZBERG**

Oh, his last name?

00:36:57 **ADAM HYMAN**

Yeah, do you recall?

00:36:58 **ALISON KOZBERG**

I might be able to find it... his last name, I think, started with a W. It might've been Polish.

00:37:05 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Well, I do remember that he had the same last name as some deranged killer in New York. And he was extremely sensitive of having the same last name. And, oh, I think they even made a movie. I think maybe he was a serial killer or something, some kid from Brooklyn or something.

00:37:35 **ALISON KOZBERG**

I found the name. It's Gary Berkowitz.

00:37:37 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Berkowitz, yes, that's right. And there was somebody Berkowitz was this killer in New York.

00:37:43 **ADAM HYMAN**

Yes.

00:37:44 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Oh, he was so embarrassed by that.

00:37:47 **ADAM HYMAN**

Do you remember anything about— at LACMA, there was a series on avant-garde film created by Bill Moritz in 1977, I think.

00:37:58 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah.

00:37:59 **ADAM HYMAN**

It had a poster with *LAPIS* by John Whitney. Do you recall anything about that?

00:38:04 **KEVIN THOMAS**

No. I probably covered it but I don't recall it.

00:38:07 **ADAM HYMAN**

Okay. Because that would've been Haver and Moritz, I guess, so just curious about that.

00:38:10 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Mm-hmm.

00:38:11 **ADAM HYMAN**

And...

00:38:11 **KEVIN THOMAS**

No. But I think, you know, I know that Doug and Ron worked together and I'm sure Rosen knew all these people and they knew Me. We all sort of knew each other and worked together.

00:38:25 **ADAM HYMAN**

Wait, who did you just mention, Rose?

00:38:27 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Rosen— Bob Rosen.

00:38:28 **ADAM HYMAN**

Oh, Bob Rosen, yeah. Well, you and Bob Rosen are the two who survived, so then there was a letter— oh, tell me about— did the attitude toward alternative film coverage evolve at the LA Times through the 1970s?

00:38:47 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I don't know that there was any attitude. If I wanted to do it, that was okay.

00:38:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

How many column inches, did that change over time?

00:39:16

KEVIN THOMAS

Screening Room got bounced around and then it found a home in Calendar Weekend, which we, unfortunately, had to suspend publication of a number of years ago for economic reasons. And it found a home there. And when—when they launched Calendar Weekend, I was asked if I— if it would be okay with me if they gave it a permanent spot. I said, no, that would be absolutely wonderful. I would love that. And because they didn't know how they were going to fill the book when they first launched it, oh, I never worked harder because I had no limit.

00:40:04

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I would, you know, I would just write pages and they could use it all up because they had not gotten a stable of freelancers or special features. They were— they were, you know, it was developing [unintelligible] going along. In that first year or so, I had had just endless space and, I mean, I knew I could get away with it. So I went on— just saw everything, I mean, I had really long columns. And then finally, we did have to shrink it down, which probably preserved my sanity.

00:40:38

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And then when Betsy Sharkey took over Calendar Weekend, she— it was way buried in the back and she moved to...

00:00:28

ADAM HYMAN

She was working with him at the Academy and she said, like, he went home on Friday and, like, died on Monday, so...

00:00:35

KEVIN THOMAS

Mm-hmm, yeah, I notice...

00:00:43

ADAM HYMAN

Mm-hmm.

00:00:43

KEVIN THOMAS

...Doug was very, say, down at the mouth the last— the last year of his life. And I didn't quite know why, you know, and I didn't ask him. And I also noticed that he was very puffy looking and he sort of was putting on extra weight. Like me, he did some fluctuating on the weight thing but he was really getting puffy and I didn't— I didn't connect the dots. I didn't know and I was just stunned but I knew that I'm right, that he did work right up to the last day. He was much luckier that way than he was— than Haver the Garys, who, you know, it was really terrible.

End of tape 3

TAPE 4: KEVIN THOMAS

00:01:37

ADAM HYMAN

The— in 1980 or so, we have a letter that Doug wrote to Charles Champlin...

00:01:45

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah.

00:01:45

ADAM HYMAN

...at that time, talking about the decrease in the coverage of experimental work and how threatening that was to counter cinema. And I was wondering if you have any recollection of that?

00:01:57

KEVIN THOMAS

No, I don't.

00:02:04

ADAM HYMAN

Do you remember anything changing regarding your coverage of events, like, from '79 or 1980?

00:02:10

KEVIN THOMAS

No, I don't, actually. I think, when you did the same thing year after year— and of course there were constant mutations but you didn't always quite notice them until they really started pinching your toes somehow. But I do know that my coverage of alternative cinema really did decline. Oh, I will say— I'll apropos that I've had such a spotty— a spotty history with Filmforum. It was all determined on who the director was at the moment. And now, my— my friend John Stout was wonderful and we worked together very well.

00:03:02

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I went up to his apartment off of Echo Park Avenue, up— you drove up from Sunset and it was a nice sort of semi-rustic area there. And I went there countless times to look at stuff and that was later on, too. But there was one woman in charge and apparently, she never read the paper or didn't care or what. She constantly calls Sheila Benson and Sheila— and sh— Sheila would never say, well, why don't you talk to Kevin? She just didn't return the call or said, no, I'm not interested or something.

00:03:48 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

And this woman— I remember— I found that out when I was— when Doug was with this woman one time. And I said, well, you know, I don't understand why you don't ever call me but you don't, so I got plenty of fish to fry. You know, which I did always, so, you know, I can't remember her taking me up on that or what. Some people were much harder to work with and some people had less time to set up stuff for me to look at, you know.

00:04:24 **KEVIN THOMAS**

And this was sort of before VHS and DVD. Would've made things a lot easier. And so it's very— the Filmforum was very spotty.

00:04:34 **ADAM HYMAN**

Did you ever work with Terry Cannon, do you remember?

00:04:37 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Who?

00:04:37 **ADAM HYMAN**

Terry Cannon. Terry Cannon founded Filmforum in 1976 and ran it until 1984.

00:04:45 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Spell that name.

00:04:47 **ADAM HYMAN**

T-E-R-R-Y C-A-N-N-O-N.

00:04:52 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I think she's the person who never contacted me.

00:04:55 **ADAM HYMAN**

He.

00:04:56 **KEVIN THOMAS**

He, oh. I just can't recall.

00:05:05 **ADAM HYMAN**

After him was a woman named Trish Knodle. She did a year.

00:05:09 **KEVIN THOMAS**

That's the one who wouldn't contact me ever.

00:05:13 **ADAM HYMAN**

And then she was succeeded by Buddy Kilchesty and Richard Amromin

00:05:17 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yes. Yes. Richard, I worked with. He's a nice man.

00:05:23 **ADAM HYMAN**

And then they were followed by John Stout.

00:05:24 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah, I worked best with John.

00:05:27 **ADAM HYMAN**

And then Mark Rance.

00:05:28 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yes. We tried to work things out. Sometimes the schedule was difficult but we did pretty well.

00:05:36 **ADAM HYMAN**

And then me but I don't think I did very well. But I didn't have any way to project anything. I was just going to screeners occasionally.

00:05:43 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah, and then...

00:05:44 **ADAM HYMAN**

But I took over in, like, 2003, so...

00:05:47 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Yeah, well, I was out of there by 2005, you know, that was history.

00:06:11 **ADAM HYMAN**

All right. And then Film Oasis, how did it— do you remember working with them?

00:06:16 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Film O— refresh me what Film Oasis was.

00:06:19 **ADAM HYMAN**

They were a group of filmmakers that— they made the exhibition from, like, '76 to '81, Pat O'Neill, Morgan Fisher, Amy Halpern, Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Freedman. And they screened at LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art] on Robertson Boulevard.

00:06:35 **KEVIN THOMAS**

At what?

00:06:36 **ADAM HYMAN**

LAICA, which was at Robertson and Cadillac and they screened prior to that at the Haymarket, which was near MacArthur Park, so that was in the late '70s. And I don't know if they did [unintelligible] .

00:06:48

KEVIN THOMAS

[overlapping] The names are familiar but I never went to those places. Now, there was a place at— off on a side street, off of Seventh and MacArthur Park. I think it was Seventh— Seventh, the south side of MacArthur Park on a side street that came in about halfway through. And they had an old auditorium, oh, I would say from 1915, something like that. And it was a outfit called The Long March.

00:07:33

ADAM HYMAN

That sounds like The Haymarket, though, the same place that Oasis screened.

00:07:38

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, I have no memory of doing anything with Film Oasis. But there was this very impassioned young leftist. I can't remember his name but he was a sweet guy and he had all— all these terrific revolutionary films, like, from Latin American Cinema. And I had some very exciting-- they had these— these old, slatted, wooden folding chairs from the '20s and— and the screen was a white sheet. And, I mean, I sat there for, like, four hours watching *LA HORA DE LOS HORNOS* and tragically fell off the chair, it was so extraordinary. And pictures like *VAL PORIZO MI AMORE*, these really strong Latin American political films and everything.

00:08:45

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But they were really— I never got in any trouble with right-wingers in my column. First of all, I'm sure they didn't read it but, I mean, I judged them as works of art that contained certain messages. And there's, what— there was one— there was one deeply ironic film. I wish I could remember the name of it. It may also have come from Chile, where in— there is this man who's been a killer and somehow, in prison, he had access to humane people and libraries and reading.

00:09:41

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And he did this incredible rehabilitation but, of course, he— he— and you could see him becoming a real human being but, of course, then he was hung or shot, you know. And there was this whole irony, is that here you take a man who has done an act of violence and you rehabilitate him and bring out the humanity in him, only to commit an act of violence upon him. You know, I mean, it was deeply ironic. It was a brilliant film. Was that *EL CHACAL*? I'm not— I'm not sure.

00:10:15

ADAM HYMAN

Don't know this film.

00:10:16

KEVIN THOMAS

But these were not necessarily in your realm of experimental but they were really a-- but in a way, they were in that they were experimenting with a documentary form and narrative form to create art that was also highly politicized. But that it— the— but that you could respond to it as art and all. They were really strong. And I went there week after week, oh, they had extraordinary— and then, of course, it sort of died a natural death and they've since torn down the building.

00:11:05

ADAM HYMAN

Where do you think your tastes in experimental film lie or can you isolate any particular notions or sub-genres of avant-garde film which appeal to you more?

00:11:25

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, okay. I suppose it's only natural that, as a gay man, I respond to Camp sensibility, the— the outrageousness of the Warhols and the Morrisseys. And I love the Kuchars and the— and Jack Smith, you know. I mean, that's closer to my inner sensibilities. I'm— to be really candid. But I know I have admired a whole, I mean, not— Amy Halpern's work is wonderful, I think and, of course, Nina Menkes I think is just a class by herself, as a really bold, experimental filmmaker, who really gives you plenty of dots to make connections yourself.

00:12:28

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And that she has always steadfastly held to a feature-length film length. And to sustain that was— that feature length, I mean, she's making regular-length movies. The same, you know, and it would be wonderful if she could actually get a theatrical release at some point, you know. And she persists in supporting herself teaching, you know, first at USC a long time and now she's at, I think, Cal State Northridge now. But I think that her picture— her films are really remarkable and I really— I really, really do think they are extraordinary works.

00:13:18

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

So it isn't all Camp sensibility. And certainly, I have responded to Chick Strand and Pat O'Neill's work and there's other local people. And, you know, I'm sure— but, I mean, it's kind of hard to reach back 30-40 years, you know, to get those images to pop, where you have emotional connections. But...

00:14:03

ADAM HYMAN

Do you recall— could you generalize as to an evolution in the nature of Avante-guard films that you've viewed through the decades? Do you think there was a predilection of what people [unintelligible]?

00:14:18

KEVIN THOMAS

[overlapping] I think— I think I may not have seen enough, amazingly. I mean, I probably have seen more than most mainstream critics bother with or critics for mainstream public— the publications. I think that's— I'm on fairly safe ground to say that I have probably seen more than most. But I have not made that the main focal point and I'm sure that there's just terrible gaps. So it's kind of hard for me to talk about evolution because so much of it's so idiosyncratic. You know, you can sort of see— you can see— and a straight-forward, narrative film, you can see certain progressions and directions that are pretty self-evident.

00:15:28

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

But so much experimental film by nature is so intensely personal that it's very hard to see an evolutionary line. I mean, do you see an evolutionary line yourself?

00:15:42

ADAM HYMAN

There are a couple points where I see changes, yes.

00:15:45

KEVIN THOMAS

Like what? I'd like to know for my own knowledge

00:15:48

ADAM HYMAN

Well, one thing that I'm interested in, in looking at the '60s, is there's a period in the early '60s and mid '60s where it was really pitched as, like, underground film and it was racy and sexy and...

00:15:58

KEVIN THOMAS

Mm-hmm.

00:15:58

ADAM HYMAN

...there was nudity but it wasn't— and then there came in what became known as structural film, which were very sort of, you know, predetermined, tied more to other arts, as opposed to say— to other films. And would work frequently in abstract terms or a really close examinations of the material film. And that seemed to come— become more prominent in the later 60s. And one thing that's interesting is whether the audience reduced. I mean, you could have 500 people a week at the Cinema Theatre for Movies 'Round Midnight.

00:16:34

ADAM HYMAN (CONTINUED)

And now, you know, and for decades, it's been 20 or 30 or 40 people. And obviously, that's a major shift in the position of what avant-garde film was or how it was perceived as a social community. I'm curious if you have any thoughts or...

00:16:53

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, I think there's less coverage and that's a big obstacle. And then I think, you know, I mean, let's face it. Internet and DVDs and VHS, all those things have had—whether we like it or not or whether we acknowledge it or not—have really had a tremendous impact on society. And socializing, a lot of that's— and email and stuff— email— communication by email, that so many people who are busy, rely upon. It's so dehumanizing, you know. And DVD watching and stuff instead of going out to a theater to see a picture.

00:17:56

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And face it, with the expense, the traffic, the time, everything, if you can see a picture on DVD in your bedroom in your adjust-a-bed, you're going— it's not really a tough decision. And of course, on something as specialized as experimental cinema, all that impacts even much more greatly than on mainstream fare, obviously. I think all these factors play— play into it. Wouldn't you say, I mean, that's just...

00:18:32

ADAM HYMAN

Well, for experimental film, of course, you don't— most of them aren't on DVD, so you still have to go out.

00:18:38

KEVIN THOMAS

Yeah.

00:18:39

ADAM HYMAN

But, of course, it's not prioritized or socialized in the same way. It's not, I mean, those who do go out go out for the scene but— but let me go back to something you raised there, which is— tell me what you think about, like, the importance of your reviews of alternative exhibition.

00:18:55

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, let me answer this in the most modest way I can, is I think that the impact was that the fact that what I was writing— was not so much what I was writing, although was generally enthusiastic. It's one thing in experimental form, you have great freedom because who can challenge your interpretation, you know? You don't have to worry so much about whether you got something or not. You just figure what you could get out of it and express what you got out of the experience of watching it and nobody would really— I don't think I was ever assailed by anything I wrote about in experimental cinema ever.

00:19:42

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

Or Warhol or any of— never. Because it's— it was sort of amorphous and obviously, a number of people who might just glance at my column, you know, Screening Room, and not necessarily mean that they're going to go out and see it. Or maybe they would see something a screening room more mainstream-y and then they would not be interested in that. But I— the power of the paper at— in my day was such that we— I did get feedback that we— we could kind of fill the theater, you know, pretty well. I mean, I think if I got behind a picture that was at Cinematheque 16 or Movies 'Round Midnight, they usually had a pretty— I was— the Cinema was a sizeable enough theater. I doubt whether ever— all the seats were ever filled for Movies 'Round Midnight at the Cinema.

00:20:50

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I can't imagine that that would be the case. But I think Cinema 16 could really, you know, pretty much— and, I mean, I think in *THE LONG MARCH*, for example, I think I got feedback there that they had quite a— good turnouts. I know that in a wider framework, that LACMA and the film— UCLA Film Archive and The American Cinematheque, have always said that any coverage in the *TIMES* was really— had real impact. It was really important.

00:21:33

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

I know Margo Gerber has said that the *WEEKLY* [*L. A. WEEKLY*] also had terrific impact. But, of course, the *WEEKLY* is not as strong as it once was and I don't think the *LA TIMES* is, either.

00:21:49

ADAM HYMAN

And how— what were your relations like with other film critics in town? I mean, we've discussed a couple. We've discussed Gene Youngblood and so forth. But, like, Linda Gross and Mitch Tuchman I know both did other reviews and so forth.

00:22:02

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, Linda's really like a sister to me and I try— I love Linda. I saw her recently. She had a very scary surgery but she seems to be doing just fine. You just remind me I've got to check, actually. She was often our stringer for years until the '80s and did all kinds of things. And, well, I mean, I care deeply for Linda. I always got a long with Mitch. Now, there—this is a wonderful Doug Edwards story.

00:22:52

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

It was the Theatre Vanguard. I think I mentioned this to you once. He had a Michael Snow film. I can't remember the— what the hell the name was. And Doug said, I'm really nervous about this because both of you are volatile guys but I'd like Mitch to be able to see the picture the same time you did. And it was one of those time-lapse bores, I'm sorry to say, where— I don't know. I mean, the camera was on spot and how the shadows shifted gradually over a piece of rock for, you know, 12 hours or something

00:23:58

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And it was driving me up the wall and up the aisle and everything else. And Doug said, do you think— would you mind— do you— would you help me see if we can't get a review by Mitch into the ? Now, I think this is when Champlin was still the arts editor and I had a very close relationship with him. And he was pretty laissez-faire, you couldn't do this now, you know. And I went to him and I said, there's this film that, I must say, I didn't cotton to. But Mitch Tuchman really thinks it's really quite brilliant and it is by an experimental filmmaker who is held in high regard.

00:25:01

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And do you think that maybe we could run Mitch's— a review by Mitch? And he said, oh, I don't see why not. And so that's how Mitch Tuchman's review of this Michael Snow film got in the paper. And I had a trouble-making friend who said, well, Mitch Tuchman's going around saying how he's going to take your job away from you. Well, you know, I think that was a crock. You know, I don't think Mitch did that. In-fact, I think finally, Mitch and I talked about that to air it and he said, oh, Kevin, that's ridiculous, you know.

00:25:55

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And Mitch had a job at LACMA but, you know, I've lost track of him. Do you know what's happened to him?

00:26:02

ADAM HYMAN

I don't.

00:26:04

ALISON KOZBERG

Me neither.

00:26:04

ADAM HYMAN

No. And who is he writing for? I don't remember who he was writing for regularly. Who was he writing for?

00:26:10

KEVIN THOMAS

I have no idea.

00:26:10

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah for [unintelligible].

00:26:12

KEVIN THOMAS

At this point.

00:26:13

ADAM HYMAN

Like [unintelligible].

00:26:13

KEVIN THOMAS

[overlapping] But he was very bright and focused and he and his partner bought a house on Mullen Avenue, I think off of Pico and then I never saw him again. Maybe Joan Cullen, Ron Haver's wonderful assistant— Joan is a gem. That's why Ron Haver could do all these outside projects and books on Selznick and *GONE WITH THE WIND* and all that kind of stuff because he had Joan holding down the fort as his key assistant. She is a fabulous woman. And she went into a research service for filmmakers and I haven't seen Joan in quite a while but I think she's still living in Hollywood.

00:27:04

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, I'm not familiar with her at all. Do you recall any— any interactions with, like, the folks from the *LA WEEKLY* back in the day, Michael Ventura, John Powers or who else was there? Ella Taylor didn't really do experimental work, so, I mean then Manhola and Holly but...

00:27:21

KEVIN THOMAS

I knew— I've known Powers over the years to say, hello, how are you and that's it. You know, just a polite exchange. I think John's really— awfully good writer. He's really, really super-smart. Who else did you mention? Michael Ventura, do you know I never met Michael Ventura. He or— no. I once asked him if he would like to join the LA Film Critics association and he— he was incredibly polite in his decline, that he didn't want to belong to organizations.

00:28:15

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And I miss Michael Ventura and the *WEEKLY* like I miss a whole lot of other people because I thought he was a splendid writer. And I'm haunted by a series of pieces that he did for the *WEEKLY* after he had moved to Texas. And he met this sort of brilliant philosopher who was living out there in the desert in a trailer and had sat there and thought about society and the future of society and had come to the conclusion that the only way to have a harmonious world society, you know, that was ecologically and financially sane and end all wars is that every human being earned exactly the same salaries.

00:29:12 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

And it was, like, three pieces— three-part interview with this guy that Ventura did. I wish I had kept it. It was really brilliant and it's really stuck in my mind. And whether Ventura was writing about film or experimental or whatever, I just thought he was great and I miss him from the pages from the *WEEKLY*.

00:29:37 **ADAM HYMAN**

And let me see. Did you have any focused questions for the '70s?

00:29:44 **ALISON KOZBERG**

Just about Peter Vanguard.

00:29:46 **ADAM HYMAN**

Please. [technical]

00:30:01 **ALISON KOZBERG**

I was curious if you remembered anything about Bill Moritz's departure from Theater Vanguard and when Doug Edward started programming??

00:30:08 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I remember it was really nasty.

00:30:12 **ADAM HYMAN**

Can you— oh, tell us what was really nasty?

00:30:15 **ALISON KOZBERG**

Yes.

00:30:15 **ADAM HYMAN**

Since we don't want to hear the question.

00:30:17 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Oh, Bill Moritz's departure. Now, didn't he either recite himself or have someone come in and recite a poem that had gay overtones or something like that? Refresh me.

00:30:37 **ADAM HYMAN**

Do you remember [technical]

00:30:55 **ADAM HYMAN (CONTINUED)**

He brought in a poet but...

00:30:57 **KEVIN THOMAS**

He brought in a— just...

00:30:58 **FEMALE**

He brought in a performance artist that, I think, Judith— maybe the— in the Los Angeles Times, Judith said that her and the board didn't like this performer. I think his name was Count Fudzini [sp?].

00:31:15

KEVIN THOMAS

Before we record this, we need to know what we're talking about.

00:31:18

ALISON KOZBERG

Okay.

00:31:18

ADAM HYMAN

All right, pause it.

00:31:19

KEVIN THOMAS

I mean, I remember this incident— I don't think I saw their performance but I remember Bill felt that Judith went crazy because it had some kind of gay content. Am I correct about that?

00:31:40

ADAM HYMAN

Don't know.

00:31:41

ALISON KOZBERG

That— that's what Bill said. That's what I've read, as well.

00:31:44

KEVIN THOMAS

I think that's what I remember Bill telling me and I remember Bill was hurt and outraged. And you came across some letter that they sent to me or something? I may have sent a letter on behalf of him. I can't remember at this late date whether I actually saw the performance or not but I was very angered by their treatment of Bill.

00:32:21

ALISON KOZBERG

What was— did you know Judith Stark personally?

00:32:26

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, I met her, I mean, I think she and Edith that— Edith what's-her-name and the Folk and Craft—Folk, Craft, what is it, museum?

00:32:41

ADAM HYMAN

Folk and Craft Museum.

00:32:43

KEVIN THOMAS

Folk and Craft Museum on Wilshire. I mean, they— they struck me both as a lady-bountiful Grande Dame types, you know. I didn't particularly— I only had brief encounters with Judith Stark. But it— I— I wasn't crazy about either of those two women, although Doug managed to get along well with both of them. He knew how to handle them just the right way, you know. But they were a little self-important. Maybe they were entitled to because they were doing something creative for the community.

00:33:28 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

I'm older now and I don't care to rush to judgment quite so speedily. But I really didn't care for either woman in the brief periods I had had contact with them. I mean, they were perfectly polite but, you know. It's very hazy in my mind about all the details of this incident with Bill. But I know I support— I know he was outraged, I know he was hurt and I know he was infuriated. I know I was completely supportive of him. That part, I remember and that's about all I can remember.

00:34:16 **KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)**

Maybe— Maybe this letter to me that you have a copy of— how did you ever get that?

00:34:21 **ADAM HYMAN**

She found it in Doug Edwards files at the Academy.

00:34:25 **ALISON KOZBERG**

He donated all his materials.

00:34:26 **ADAM HYMAN**

Doug Edwards' papers are at the Academy library and this is the letter that's in there from, yeah, Judith and the board to you because I guess you had written something.

00:34:35 **KEVIN THOMAS**

I must have written something to them that I was really upset at his dismissal. That's probably what provoked the letter.

00:34:42 **ADAM HYMAN**

Because they end with this key point-- “We have never refused and will never refuse a film or live performance because of homosexual content but we do reserve the right to refuse a work because it is poor art.”

00:34:59 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Where is Bill these days?

00:35:01 **ADAM HYMAN**

Bill died about five years ago.

00:35:03 **KEVIN THOMAS**

No. Where?

00:35:06 **ADAM HYMAN**

I hear of cancer.

00:35:09 **KEVIN THOMAS**

Where?

00:35:10

ADAM HYMAN

I don't know where. His archives— he was working at The Center for Visual Music at the end with Cindy Keefer, so his papers are at The Center for Visual Music.

00:35:21

KEVIN THOMAS

But where is this place, I mean...

00:35:22

ADAM HYMAN

Downtown LA on...

00:35:24

KEVIN THOMAS

You mean, he was living in southern California?

00:35:26

ADAM HYMAN

Yes. He was living in Southern California in Los Angeles [unintelligible] .

00:35:30

KEVIN THOMAS

[overlapping] I didn't know that. I really lost touch with him, you know.

00:35:35

ADAM HYMAN

Well, he was doing pretty good.

00:35:36

KEVIN THOMAS

A wonderful man.

00:35:37

ADAM HYMAN

We did a couple shows at Filmforum with him at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions] in, like, 1998 or 1999 and then he was doing, like, archive work at Iota Center and doing some teaching at CalArts.

00:35:52

KEVIN THOMAS

Didn't always quite work.

00:35:55

ADAM HYMAN

No. It was— yeah, it was a difficult one. But, yeah, so now we're at the Egyptian but it's, like, whatever. I send screeners to people. But what were we just saying? Yeah, so we had two shows with Bill towards the end there. Well, then, no, he had a few more years but he was getting more into just, like, archiving as— and working on his Oskar Fischinger book.

00:36:16

KEVIN THOMAS

Did he finish it?

00:36:17

ADAM HYMAN

Yes. It's a lovely book.

00:36:21

KEVIN THOMAS

Oh, good.

00:36:21

ADAM HYMAN

Yeah, you can get it through The Center for Visual Music, as well and— yeah, it's a general— it's called, like, visual poetry [*OPTICAL POETRY*] or something like that.

00:36:29

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, good for him.

00:36:31

ADAM HYMAN

But, yeah, that [unintelligible] and then...

00:36:36

KEVIN THOMAS

I think when I first met Bill, he was married.

00:36:39

ADAM HYMAN

Oh, I didn't know that.

00:36:40

KEVIN THOMAS

I think so.

00:36:42

ADAM HYMAN

In the '60s at some point?

00:36:44

KEVIN THOMAS

Mm-hmm.

00:36:45

ADAM HYMAN

What do you think would— is— what would you see as your primary legacy in your coverage then in this area?

00:37:07

KEVIN THOMAS

I really don't know. I don't— I don't know. I know as Ethyl Merman said, you know, today's paper wraps tomorrow's fish, so... [laugh]

00:37:31

ADAM HYMAN

I don't know. We— I mean, we see you as, like, the primary documenter, in a way, of this whole scene for, you know, 30-plus— well, 40 years, so you're very important.

00:37:44

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, that's really, I mean, quite seriously, gratifying to know. I— I don't— I don't know. I don't know what memory is— I know my friend Myron has been after me for years to write a book, you know. I don't know whether I'm up to that or not.

00:38:06

ADAM HYMAN

Why not? You have all the columns, just put them together. Myron comes to Filmforum shows all the time.

00:38:12

KEVIN THOMAS

I'm sure he does. Myron is a— absolutely remarkable person. He...

00:38:18

ADAM HYMAN

What else has he done?

00:38:18

KEVIN THOMAS

Hum?

00:38:19

ADAM HYMAN

What else has he done?

00:38:22

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, he's an attorney, he has produced a number of films. He did an important documentary on Nicholas Ray in his last years. And I think he was involved in that documentary on Orson Welles about the thwarted Brazilian film he tried to do. I think— I think Myron was involved in that. I'm not 100-percent cer— and he's been involved in other film projects. I'm not surprised that he's a regular.

00:39:08

ADAM HYMAN

Now I have to talk to him at greater length. Do you have any other questions? We only have, like, a minute of tape, so— and do you have any other thoughts or key points? Because we can wrap up otherwise.

00:39:25

KEVIN THOMAS

Well, this all makes me feel very lucky that I had the opportunity to do what I did do. I will say that. It's very gratifying to think that maybe it meant something. If you were a newspaper guy, you know, you realize the ephemeral quality of ephemeral nature of your work, you know. One of my oldest friends in the world said to me one time, Oh, Kevin, I was reading one of your reviews as I was relining the cat's— the cat's sandbox, you know.

00:40:05

KEVIN THOMAS (CONTINUED)

And one time when I lived at The Clark Hotel, downtown Los Angeles, I noticed a piece of the *TIMES* in the gutter. And by God, I looked down and there I saw one of my reviews. But I remember waiting for the signal at the time, waiting for the— a signal to change at, like, Fourth or Fifth and Broadway. And this man looked at me, he looked again and he said, you're Kevin Thomas, aren't you? And I said, yes. You know, so it's really, you don't know, it's...

00:40:48

ADAM HYMAN

All right. Well, let's wrap up here then.

00:40:51

KEVIN THOMAS

Okay.