

SELECTION FROM THE INTERVIEW CONDUCTED WITH CARRIE HAMILTON, INTERVIEW EI-1074, WHO HAD BEEN EMPLOYED AS AN ACTRESS AT THE ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION MUSEUM FOR PUBLIC PERFORMANCES FROM 4/1996 THROUGH 10/1999 AND AGAIN FROM 4/1997 THROUGH 7/1997. THIS SELECTION, EXCERPTED FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE COMPLETE INTERVIEW, CONCERNS CARRIE'S PORTRAYAL OF ELDA WILLITTS, INTERVIEW EI-8, IN A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE ABOUT ELDA'S LIFE. THIS PERFORMANCE TOOK PLACE AT THE ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION MUSEUM WITH ELDA WILLITTS AND SEVERAL FAMILY MEMBERS PRESENT ON FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 1997. THE INTERVIEW WITH CARRIE HAMILTON WAS CONDUCTED BY PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR. ON MAY 2, 1999.

SIGRIST: Well, we (he clears his throat), we have about fifteen minutes left and, of course, you and I shared a very special experience...

HAMILTON: Right.

SIGRIST: ...towards the end of your second time there.
(i.e. Ellis Island)

HAMILTON: Yes.

SIGRIST: And I would like you to tell your side of it.

HAMILTON: Okay. The second summer that I was there in about May, I guess...

SIGRIST: May of '97.

HAMILTON: May of '97, Paul (i.e. the interviewer; Ms. Hamilton often refers to Paul Sigrist in the third person throughout her interview even though he is present and conducting the interview with her) got the, summons the actors into the theatre and he said, you know, told us that he had, he had one of the people who had done this oral history for him was going to be coming with her family (i.e. Elda Willitts). At the time there was this exhibit there in the changing exhibit room called "The Children Of Ellis Island." (i.e. "We, The Children Of Ellis Island"; photographs taken by David Passalacqua; exhibit open 4/1997 through 8/1997) And it was a photograph exhibit of, of immigrants who had come through as children. It was pictures of them as they are today. And it was a wonderful exhibit, incredible. So he told us he was going to be doing this and he wanted one of us to sort of take it on ourselves to put together a one-person show of her story. And no one was really jumping up. (she laughs) And, I guess, maybe it was because it was at the beginning of the season and people were trying to learn their roles and, and they're lazy, I don't know. (she laughs) No one seemed to be jumping up and I guess my thought was, "Well, gosh, I don't really Italian. Maybe Susan should be doing this. She looks a little bit more Italian than I do but, oh, what the heck, I'll do it." (she laughs) So, I decided that I was going to do this and, and Paul gave me all the information he had; the autobiography that,, "Teresa?" Is that what it's called? That, that...

SIGRIST: Yeah, well, we should say that we're talking about...

HAMILTON: Elda.

SIGRIST: Elda Willitts, Del Bino, Elda. Actually, her real name is Teresa Elda Del Bino...

HAMILTON: Teresa Elda Del Bino...

SIGRIST: Willitts. And she's EI-8 (i.e. interview number). And she was coming with her family...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...to come see these photographs that David Passalacqua, P-A-S-S-A-L-A-C-Q-U-A, had taken of her and other, others of our interviewees.

HAMILTON: And I believe he had come to Sonoma to take those pictures.

SIGRIST: He did, he did. He came here (i.e. Sonoma, Ms. Hamilton is being interviewed by Mr. Sigrist in Sonoma, California) to take pictures of Elda because she had not been to Ellis Island; I interviewed her in 1990 and then she came in '91 or '92 for a visit and hadn't been back since.

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HAMILTON: So she was going to be coming. And I got this information. I got the oral history. I got the movie, the documentary she had been in, "Little Italy." (oral historian's note: the documentary film was directed by Will Parrinello) I think that autobiography that she wrote, that, "Teresa," I believe, is the title of it, was probably the most helpful. The oral history was extremely helpful because I could listen to her and I could hear her tone of voice and her rhythm of speaking. And I hear a lot, you know, I hear her telling the stories and getting that information there, too. I developed this, this, such this admiration for her before I ever even met her. I, I fell in love with her through reading all of this stuff and learning all of these things. And, and when I wrote the one-person story, I really, I tried to use all of her words the way that she had said them in the oral history and also in that autobiography. So I wasn't, I wasn't trying to make her something that she wasn't. I was trying to represent her as the way that she was, as the way that I saw her to be. And, and I remember the first draft of the, of the story I read to you and there was just a lot of the dates and things like that, making it very, you know, sort of historical and just, you know, boring really. (she laughs) And we cut a lot of that out and it made it a lot more personal. It turned out to be about four pages long and, and a lot of information but a wonderful story. And then the day came, you know. I, I had just been working on this just non-stop since I had found out about it and I had, I'd say, a good solid month before she came. It was the beginning of June...

SIGRIST: June 13th, I think they were there in 1997.

HAMILTON: ...when she, when she came. (Mr. Sigrist clears his throat) And all that day I was a wreck. I was so nervous. I remember I was just petrified. And we wanted all of this to be a surprise and it was so, oh gosh, it was so wonderful. And she came on the, on the staff boat and came to the back of the island. And I was dressed in my civilian, my "civies" (i.e. not in immigrant costume) and went out there with Paul and just represented myself as being somebody who worked with him in the Oral History Project. I was a Park Service employee and I

worked with him and went out there. And, and I remember seeing her, it was just, gosh, it was just incredible to have this woman in front of me that I, I knew everything about and (she laughs) here she was. And her family, of course, was incredible. And, and we went right away to the, to the exhibit and looked at the photographs and it was just, you know, really, and her family, like, they would each come up to me at a different time and, of course, ask me who I was and basically what was I doing there. And...(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Carrie, I remember, now I remember asking you to come with me to meet her...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...and, maybe I'm remembering this wrong, but, but was there an initial hesitation?

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: For some reason I thought you initially said, "No, I don't think I should do that." (he laughs)

HAMILTON: I was scared, I remember. I mean, I was really scared. And then I, I, I know I decided to do it because I remember being there.

SIGRIST: Right.

HAMILTON: I wasn't out there when the actual boat came. I think I was inside. It was rainy, I remember, really rainy and nasty out there.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it was nasty outside.

HAMILTON: But I was, I was just petrified. Then I was really glad to have met them because I felt, it made me feel a lot more comfortable, you know, in talking to the family and just seeing how nice they were. I can't remember exactly how we got them into the theatre. We, I think we said that you wanted to get them all together.

SIGRIST: I wanted to get them all together to speak to them...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...and, of course, at this point they still didn't know that something was going to happen in there other than I was going to welcome them and...

HAMILTON: Yeah. And so I snuck away and put on my immigrant costume and got, you got them all into the theatre and, and some of the other actors came and we were all in there. And, so Paul got up and started speaking to them and just thanking them and glad that they were there and, and I think then that you told them that I, you know, one of the actors was going to do...

SIGRIST: A show.

HAMILTON: ..a show for them. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: A show for them.

HAMILTON: And, uh, (she laughs), had just the one stool up on the

stage. And I went up there and they all kind of went, "Oh," you know. They realized it was me and, oh, I was an actor and (she laughs) and, oh, I'm in this immigrant costume now. And I sat on that stool and I had this thing come over me that I never expected. I just started sobbing and I, there were a few moments I didn't know how I was going to get through this, this thing that I had to do. And I still don't know how I did it. But I had this emotional, overwhelming feeling that I had just, I had been so moved by what I had learned about Elda and by this person and here she was and I was going to do this for her. And, God, I hope she thought it was okay. (she laughs) And she was sitting right there in the front row. And she just had this big smile on her face and she, you know, was just so, you know, accepting. And, and I started speaking and I could tell she didn't realize I was talking about her. She had no idea. (she laughs) And, the, the, it started out by saying, "I have gone through so many changes in my life and what I have learned throughout my life is that change is, is eternal. That you never stop growing. You're always, always searching for a deeper understanding of yourself." And those were her words. And then it went to say more specific, you know, "The biggest changes in my life came when I moved from Italy to America." And I think she realized when I said, "My father's name was Domenico Del Bino," and she, her hand went up to her face and she put her hand on her cheek and these tears just started rolling down her face. And, and her son put his hand on her shoulder (she is moved) and we were all crying. (she laughs) And I had to, I think I had to stop for a couple seconds and kind of get a grip. And somehow I managed to continue with all of it and, and get through it. And I had a few places like that in there, though, where I was like, "Oh, God, I don't know how am I going to get through this." (she laughs) And then after it was all done, she just opened her arms and we hugged each other (she is moved) and it was incredible.

SIGRIST: Yeah, I remember very distinctly, as you say, the beginning was, was shaky and...

HAMILTON: Yeah. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: ...and really what I remember most were the, were the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren talking and...

HAMILTON: Yeah. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: ...and just not paying attention. (Ms. Hamilton laughs) And then I'll never forget the moment when Elda realized what was happening and you say, you know, a hand went up to her face...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...I think and I was behind her but I saw the whole thing. (Ms. Hamilton laughs) And from thereon in it was a very different experience...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...because suddenly even the kids, shhh, were quiet...

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...and, and, and everyone was just riveted to what was going on.

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then, of course, what happened afterwards, I mean, the two of you just (they laugh)...

HAMILTON: Oh, God.

SIGRIST: ...crying and hugging. (Ms. Hamilton laughs)

HAMILTON: Oh, it was so wonderful. And, and, I remember her saying, "You know my life better than I do." (she laughs) And I, and I said, "Yeah. You know, I think I, I feel like I do." And they were, it was wonderful. Paul and I had gone to the National Archives and we had found the ship's manifest sheets that had her mother and her sisters and herself on them when they came in 1916. And, and then we also found the ship manifest sheet from 1912 when her father and oldest brother had come. And I had put them in a scrapbook for her. And she, I, it was wonderful being able to give that to her and to see her, that meant a lot of her. I mean, to see those, those names and, and, you know, that was a long time ago. And it's incredible that they've got all of that information. But it was wonderful to be able to give that to her. And I went out to this Italian restaurant with all of them for dinner and I felt like a part of the family. They were all calling me "the second Elda." And they just, they just took me right into their family and made me feel so loved and appreciated. And, gosh, we even played that, at that Italian restaurant, what's that game that's almost like bowling, with the little...?

SIGRIST: Bacci.

HAMILTON: Bacci. We played bacci. (she laughs) It was wonderful.

SIGRIST: Tell me what that experience was like, first from an actor's standpoint.

HAMILTON: Wow, I don't think that I ever realized I would have an opportunity to do something like that. Oh, gosh, I, uh...

SIGRIST: What were the challenges in doing it from an acting standpoint?

HAMILTON: Well, I didn't, I didn't really take on the story as if I was portraying Elda so much as, as telling her story, I guess. I didn't, I didn't do an Italian dialect. You know, Elda doesn't have an Italian dialect. She was five [sic, seven] when she came here. And I didn't feel so much like I was trying to portray her as much as, as, like I said, tell her story. And I, I love, and as an actor, for me, when I, when I am developing a character, it's so nice to have all the facts. It's like putting together a little puzzle. And, you know, most plays, when you develop a character, so much of that comes from your imagination. And you've got what the writer has given you and you take those little facts that they gave you and then you kind of have to add on to it and fill in the blank spots. But with something like this, you know everything. It's just putting it all together. It's like little pieces of a puzzle and, and you put it all together and, and it's, it's so exciting. And, you know, when I look at the story now that I've written it, it, it, you know, in the, a few years have passed, it really wasn't written that well. (she laughs) It could

have been written better. But I think under the circumstances and with the amount of time that I had, it's okay. I did, I did an okay job but it, it definitely could have been written in a more dramatic way and to, you know, to tell the story. It was a little bit more factual the way that I have it and, like I said, I tried to use her words and kind of put them together in a way that made sense and, and made a cohesive story. But it was wonderful. And I was so thankful that I decided to open my mouth and say, "I'll do this." And it was such an incredible experience. And she has been, she was, she has been wonderful in my life. She's one of those people that has such a rare, she has such an appreciation of life and everything that she has been given. And I wish that more people had that outlook on life. And it's very nice to be around. You just want it to rub off on you because it's so beautiful. And it's so refreshing and I want to be ninety years old and, and to be able to have those smile lines on my face and to be loved the way that she is loved. She has created such a beautiful family and they're all, you know, it's beautiful. It's just incredible. These people are so (she laughs), you know, they're, they're just so supporting of each other and so loving and so appreciate and, and they enjoy life and that's the way that it should be. You know, it should be that way.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your relationship with Elda since this has happened.

HAMILTON: When I, I saw her one time after that when I came to, as I mentioned earlier, Clovis, New Mexico, that was the name of it.

SIGRIST: Clovis.

HAMILTON: Clovis. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: C-L-O-...

HAMILTON: V-I-S, yeah, Clovis, New Mexico. When I drove to California with that auto drive-away, I had to leave it in Los Angeles. But I picked up another one in San Francisco and drove from San Francisco to Sonoma and spent that evening with her. And it was, really, it was really nice to see her. It was very brief but I got to see her again and we have written to each other and, you know, remained in contact over that time. She has sent me, just shortly after I got back to Asheville [NC] after seeing her that time is when they had the film festival here in Sonoma and they showed the documentary film that she was in [Little Italy directed by Will Parrinello]. And they had taken a picture of her for the Sonoma newspaper and this was a full page article and picture. And the picture itself was half the page, of Elda holding open the scrapbook that I had given to her. And it had, you know, she had it opened to that first page where I had put this postcard of immigrants coming onto Ellis Island. And, so here was Elda with this big smile, you know, a big, colored, half page picture of Elda in the newspaper holding this and it was incredible. And they talked about in the article about her going to Ellis Island and about an actress portraying her in the story of her life and (they laugh) it was neat.

SIGRIST: Well, and here we are, you know, both of us are going to be going to her birthday party today, her ninetieth birthday party, which was actually a couple of days ago, technically. But, uh, in our last couple of minutes, tell me, because you're a couple of years away from the Ellis Island experience now, what kind

of influence did it have on you now?

HAMILTON: Well, I had never enjoyed studying history when I was growing up. I found it very boring. And I had a very pompous attitude about it. I thought these things happened long before I was alive. What difference should they make to me? (she laughs) Ellis Island made me love history and it made, opened my eyes to it and it was an incredible education for me. And it really made me appreciate where I came from. And it made me interested in learning more about that. I miss it very much. I, I loved going to work everyday and I don't think I've ever had a job where I can say that (she laughs) but I loved it. I loved getting on that ferry. I loved going to work there. I loved the people. I loved the show. I loved what I was doing. It was wonderful. I, I look at Elda as this, you know, this amazing thing that I was able to take away from there, this, this friend that I have and this sort of mentor and just a person that I have a very unique bond with. And, and that's very nice to have. It's been very nice to have her in my life and to stay in touch with her. And her letters are always so loving and encouraging and, and it's always nice to hear from her. I've still got all of my, I've got this little file in my file folder. It says, "Ellis Island" and it has all of my, it has my script and my one-person show and it's been, it's been sort of, my friend Michele was, was doing her, getting her teacher's certificate. And she did a, sort of a student teaching unit with Ellis Island. And I sent her my material. And I think she did part of my Annie Moore presentation for that. And, so it's been useful in a few other aspects. But I believe I even done some of the monologues for auditions before, too, and people were always a little stunned. They really enjoyed them. (she laughs) But it was wonderful and I always look back at it very fond, fond memories. I hope that I can go back there and see it again and take Rick [Chamberlain] there to show him. And I loved, you know, when I had little breaks, I would always go wander around those parts of the island that no one else could go to and I just loved going over there. There was such a feeling about it.

SIGRIST: Which now we can't even go over there.

HAMILTON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it's all been blocked off. Carrie, thank you very much.

HAMILTON: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: This has been a wonderful interview. This is unique to the Oral History Collection (Ms. Hamilton laughs) at this point and I suspect that as the history of the Ellis Island Museum, when people become interested in it as an institution...

HAMILTON: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: ...and that will happen someday, that this interview will be very useful to their research.

HAMILTON: Well, I've enjoyed doing it. Thank you.

SIGRIST: Right here at the El Pueblo Hotel!!

HAMILTON: The El Pueblo, with the aqua doors.

SIGRIST: The aqua doors. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with
Carrie Hamilton on Sunday morning, May 2nd, 1999 in Sonoma,
California. Thank you, Carrie.

HAMILTON: Thank you.