Interview with Len Peterson

LINDA GHAN

Len Peterson was born on the Ides of March in 1917 in Regina. He grew up on the prairies of Saskatchewan snaring gophers, teasing girls, and building dreams on the changing patterns of the clouds. He is an ex-gymnastic champion, an ex-wrestling champion, and ex-quarterback, and an ex-soldier, as well as the father of four children.

Since completing his B.Sc. at Northwestern University in Chicago, he has been turning out plays – for both child and adult audiences – for radio, television, theatre, film, and print. In 1944, he won the Ohio Award for his play, "We're All Afraid," which was voted the best entry in the entire exhibition at Columbus, Ohio. In 1973, he won the ACTRA award as the Best Writer in the Dramatic Mode for the play "The Trouble With Giants." In 1974, he received the John Drainie Award for his distinguished contribution to broadcasting. His published works include Chipmunk, *a novel,* The Great Hunger, *a play, and* Almighty Voice, *a children's play. During the 1979-80 season, "The Joke's On Guess Who?" will appear on CBS television in the USA; "What A Bore, Painted Old At Forty-Four" will appear on the CBC in Canada; "Let's Make A World," "Billy Bishop And The Red Baron" and "Etienne Brûlé" will appear throughout Alberta, the Yukon and North West Territories with the Citadel Theatre; and "They're All Afraid" will appear throughout Saskatchewan with the Globe Theatre.*

At present, he is completing a novel and a number of plays. He is also serving as writer-in-residence at Concordia University, Montreal, where this interview was conducted in Spring, 1979.

GHAN: How have you managed to write over a thousand plays?

PETERSON: I wish I had never mentioned any number in terms of my productivity because people jump on that all the time. I made that statement a long time ago, so God knows how many I've written now. I'm never going to count them. The question is, how come I've been so productive?

GHAN: Right. How come you've so productive?

PETERSON: The thing is, when you have a low threshold of sensitivity, to put it in its best terms, or irritability, to put it in its worst terms, one reacts strongly to a lot of things. I haven't wasted that sensitivity or irritability outwardly – by dressing as a rebellious character or carrying on in the streets or at parties sounding off and creating a spectacle of myself. That saves a hell of a lot of time which I've been able to devote to writing. When you do feel strongly about things, you have a lot of energy, and I have been

blessed with lots of energy and good health, so I haven't had to waste time on being sick. I've also been fortunate in that, despite the fact that I'm probably an unpopular writer, nevertheless, I've always stumbled across publishers and producers and directors and so on who wanted to get into the same kind of devilment and mischief as myself. So I've always felt reasonably confident that somewhere there'd be a market for my fare. That, too, is extremely important for a writer and helps one to be very productive.

GHAN: You've always worked on a free-lance basis – "no visible means of support" is the expression, I believe. Has that insecurity affected your writing?

PETERSON: Yes. It's made me feel very secure, because when you've always been insecure, eventually you stop thinking about it and just roll with the weather. I've always had a lot of fun. Opposition and attack have never really bothered me. In fact, that has frequently energized me, and it's given me some points of reference. What is really awful is when there is no reaction at all.

GHAN: What kinds of things provoked the opposition and attack?

PETERSON: It came from people who were unaccustomed to having people going around and saying the king has no clothes on. We have a very timid society spiritually. Most of us have lackey minds and lackey souls and are terrified of stepping out of line or saying something that hasn't already been said one hundred thousand times.

GHAN: For instance?

PETERSON: Because I did grow up in a society where there was so much bigotry and race prejudice and uptightness about exploring a variety of economic systems in order to solve some of our problems – and certainly the system we were working with economically wasn't working in the 1930's and 1940's – it struck me that it was not a bad idea to explore other systems. Of course, there was a lot of resistance to crying out against bigotry and race prejudice. I can remember the shocked reaction of a lot of people in this country when I first presented a mixed marriage between a white gal and a Chinese fellow. It was just incredible – the reaction from the public and the officials of various kinds and from some people in the CBC. On the other hand, there were people in the CBC who felt that kind of thing should be broadcast, and I was fortunate enough to make contact with them and get a lot of that kind of thing on the air.

GHAN: I understand that the play "We're All Afraid" which won you the Ohio Award in 1944 caused quite a stir as well.

PETERSON: "We're All Afraid" is a very simple play about a young lad who discovered in the course of one day that members of his own family were afraid to stick their necks out, that the people at the place where he

worked were afraid to stick their necks out, and that his girlfriend was afraid to go beyond being terribly conventional. When I wrote the play, it struck me as a fairly straightforward and simple play, but the producer of the play, Andrew Allen, got called up on the carpet for it and got some skin ripped off his hide. Later on the play was sent down to Columbus, Ohio, and received, in competition with American networks, the top award in drama, and, in addition, got a special citation as the best submission in all categories. The head of the network was down at this particular convention where these awards were presented. He had to get up and accept it on behalf of the CBC. He was very gracious about it. He said, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I'm going to have to eat crow. I didn't like this play when it was put on our network. I still don't like it. But thank you very much." Canadians being Canadians, getting a stamp of approval from outside the country resulted in the CBC drama department getting carte-blanche to do anything they wanted for some time after that. It was kind of wonderful. But, of course, these blessings eventually wither away, and we went back to the battle to get certain kinds of things on the network. I remember on one occasion travelling across the country, living on farms and on ranches, living in logging camps, spending time in mines and one-room schoolhouses and hospitals and factories; spending time with people and gathering material to write plays about them. Those were the days before there were any tape recorders around and therefore documentary material had to go through the creative process of the writer rather than being a patchwork job. It was a case of my gathering material about people in various walks of life and then creating a drama about it. When I settled down to pounding out the dramas after spending a long time travelling around the country and the shows began to go on the air, I was summoned weekly by the head of the network. His refrain always began, "Peterson, don't you like anything?" He thought I was being ferociously critical about everything that was going on in the country. Actually, I was just doing a very straightforward job of reporting the working conditions and the living conditions of Canadians. It seemed to shock an awful lot of people to discover that a lot of people didn't like the way they were living, a lot of people didn't like the way they were treated, a lot of people didn't like the conditions under which they had to work. I certainly don't blame them.

GHAN: Do you think that the production of plays such as yours helped to effect change?

PETERSON: Things in Canada have improved enormously for a lot of people just through people having a low threshold of irritability about a lot of things and saying, "No, no, this won't do. We have to change things." I did a lot of shows related to workers organizing into unions where they'd have more clout and more say, and there was always a lot of opposition to that kind of thing. On one occasion, I found myself reading about industrial or union spying activities in the United States, and I wondered if the same thing was happening in Canada. So I turned to the yellow pages of the phone book and looked up detective agencies. Sure enough, they were

offering the same kind of services. I thought I'd write a drama about this activity. The main character in the play was an employee in a department store. He had gotten involved with a detective and had been led into a compromising situation where he was being trapped and found it very difficult any longer to refuse to do things that he thought were pretty obnoxious. It made a pretty interesting drama, I thought. It went on the CBC Sunday evening. Monday morning, I got a call from a fellow named Harvey. He spoke in glowing terms about the play that had been on the previous night and said, "You know, that's exactly the way it is." He turned out to be a union organizer in the white collar field. He'd been working to organize one of the department stores in town and, of course, there'd been resistance. He praised me with giving a picture that was very close to the picture as he was living it as a union organizer. I put the phone down. There's a call from the CBC. I'm informed that all hell had broken loose and that this particular department store was accusing CBC and the union that was attempting to organize their clerks with collusion. What I had written was so close to the real situation between the union and the store that I certainly could see their reason for thinking that I'd had close contact with the union. I even had the same number of people fired in my play for union activities as had been fired by the store. Strange coincidence. But I hadn't known that anything was going on at the time.

GHAN: An unusual coincidence?

PETERSON: That kind of coincidence I find happens a good deal of the time. I will write something and then the same day, or the next day, or the next week, I will run across something in real life, or read something, that will corroborate what I've written, even though when I was writing that particular thing I was depending on my imagination and flying by the seat of my pants without really having any solid information. The thing is, when you gather a fair number of facts about something, a lot of other things will fall into place willy-nilly in your head and will match fairly closely with reality.

GHAN: One of your book covers has you written up as a wrestling and gymnastic champion. Do you plead guilty?

PETERSON: I don't know why bookcovers use that nonsense. Apparently it makes writers slightly human. Yeah, I was a gymnast in my youth, picked up a fair number of medals. At 17, I was wrestling champ of Saskatchewan, which really wasn't very much. I played football on a team that had a very crazy name. It was called the "West End Cleaners." It was part of a commercial league, and we'd scrape up a few bucks for gas and travel around and play other football teams. The dirtiest team we ever played was Father Murray's Notre Dame team. They indulged in a lot of shift play, which meant that most of the line would move either to the left or to the right several paces, only they didn't lift up their feet. They would scrape their feet along the ground. This was at the time when the drought

was at its most glorious. Particularly when they had the wind with them, they would do this, and we would lose the team in the dust they had raised.

When I went to Luther College, I was on their football team. Because I was the only one who'd had very much experience and played with a football at all, they made me quarterback. We had a very light team, but, actually, we did quite well. Somebody sent me some material from Luther College about a month ago, and I was surprised to see that we had won five of our six games that year. I didn't remember being that good, but the other people must have been awful bad, because we weren't any great shakes, either. When I went down to Northwestern, I thought of going for the football team. Then I looked at the size of the guys coming out and I decided, "Oh, boy, this isn't for me." So I went out for the wrestling team and wrestled for the big 10 in the United States. I was in competition altogether seven years and lost one bout in competition. Then I came back to Toronto and, in my idle moments, I wrestled there too and picked up the Ontario wrestling championship. This was at a time when international competition wasn't doing very well because Hitler was creating problems for those who wanted to move around and get involved in international politics. I'm still fairly involved now. I do a lot of tripping with a canoe; I do a fair amount of tennis playing and mindless jogging and swimming. Generally, I don't get tired; I just get bored and quit.

GHAN: When did you start writing?

PETERSON: My first involvement in writing drama was to steal some material from Mark Twain and put it into drama form for a few of my friends in grade 4 or 5. I started off when I first went to high school trying to work on the high school paper, but I got turfed off within a couple of months because of the things I was writing about: students and teachers. Then I attempted to enter an oratorical contest. It was called the Bryant oratorical contest. I had fancy ambitions and thought of myself as the boy orator of Saskatchewan. Unfortunately, I took as the subject for my speech Louis Riel and went to the library for the first time in my life to do some research. I put together a ten-minute speech, but it had to be vetted by one of the teachers before it was exposed to the public. I duly turned it in for vetting. When I got it back, eight out of my ten minutes were blue-pencilled out; I got wiped out even before I got on the platform. It was experiences like that which made it clear to me I'd better look around in other fields, so I concentrated on maths and sciences and athletics.

GHAN: What brought you from athletics to writing?

PETERSON: I got rather tired of the simple plots involved in athletics and thought I wanted to get involved in something a little more sophisticated. Also, I couldn't make any money as an athlete.

GHAN: And you do make money as a writer?

PETERSON: There is a myth in Canada that it is very difficult to make any money as a writer of fiction and drama, but I've been doing it since the late 1930's.

GHAN: How did you get started?

PETERSON: When I first decided to become a writer, I looked around for markets in Canada and there were three visible ones. One was publishers who were publishing novels. That, unfortunately, was a rather ambitious project for me to plunge into. There was *Maclean's Magazine.* They were publishing stories in every issue, although the stories were inclined to be rather sentimental or the "aw shucks" kind of story. Then there was the CBC which was publishing pretty sentimental stuff. Marzipan. Every now and again, they would grow ambitious and do a classic. Unfortunately, I was not interested in the marzipan, and I wasn't a classic, but I thought I would take a whack at throwing things at the CBC and *Maclean's Magazine.* The first thing I wrote for the CBC was a reasonably mild thing; it was inspired by a pleasant romance I had had in college and was even called "It Happened in College." The CBC bought the bloody thing and I thought I was in. But I wasn't. My first year as a writer, I earned $42.50.

GHAN: What did you live on?

PETERSON: I took the odd job. None of them lasted very long. The pay was godawful, but then my expenses were very slight. It cost me two bucks a week for a room and two fifty for food. The room that I lived in for the good part of that first year was at the end of a hall. It actually wasn't a room. It was a closet. It was just a little longer than a cot, and when I stretched my arms out, I could touch the walls on either side. Anyway, there was a roof on the place, and there was enough room for a tiny, tiny table. I could put my typewriter on it, and I worked away pounding things out there. Outside the room, there were a couple of burners, and various derelicts in the place would come around and cook their food on these burners. (I remember on one occasion having to write a fiery letter to *The Star* for a poor, benighted newsman who had one of those corner franchises he was about to lose. He was illiterate and couldn't write. I pounded out an appeal for him.) Then my father sent me a bit of money occasionally. He had made sacrifices to make it possible for me to go through university, but he was still willing to send me the odd buck even after I graduated. After a year, though, I was making money as a writer and continued to do so ever since.

GHAN: There is a popular belief that writers, if they weren't born with a pencil in their hands, were at least born with a book in their hands.

PETERSON: Actually, I did very little reading until after I got out of university. All those people I was involved with did very little reading. I didn't know from nothin' when I got out of university. I walked away with the knowledge of how to use a library, and I got a fairly good reading list

which I pursued very much while I was in university. But, it took me grade school, high school, university to get that. It was a pretty primitive society we grew up in. I read the local newspaper, the *Leader-Post*.

GHAN: So you didn't start your writing and reading until after you left Saskatchewan.

PETERSON: I wasn't inspired by the culture, in terms of readin' and writin', that was around there at the time. I think I was fortunate in that I grew up before there was any television around me and so I spent my time, instead of gazing at a television set, gazing at the clouds. I think that is quite a good exercise. One's mind stays very loose and fanciful when you are a kid with all that emptiness. The spirit seems to fill you up, and in a much better way when your thoughts and dreams are concerned with your immediate surroundings rather than being filled in by a lot of commercial hucksters and what they consider it proper fare for consumers that won't divert you from thinking about their product.

GHAN: Do you feel that we have a "Canadian" literature?

PETERSON: One thing that certainly impresses me is that there is so much Canadian literature. But I don't feel that there's enough base in what the authors are writing about. One gets the feeling in so many stories and plays that existence begins when the play begins and existence ends when the play ends. One doesn't feel that the characters are living in a long tradition. Things didn't just start in 1608 for us. Canadians are shaped very much by the experiences of the Europeans and Asians. Even when peasant people, for instance, come to this country and settle, they bring with them a tremendous amount of culture. Even if their children think that they're not paying any attention to the culture of their parents, they sure are. Even if they don't learn the language of their parents, and even if their parents are rather taciturn about their background, an awful lot of that is going to get into their skin and into their marrow.

GHAN: Is that true of you?

PETERSON: In my own case, I grew up in a Scandinavian home. My parents didn't seem terribly concerned about preserving the Scandinavian culture and passing it on. We spoke English except when they had some secrets they wanted to discuss and not have the kids know about. I knew nothing about Scandinavian literature. My father grew up in a fjord not very far from Bergun where Ibsen grew up, but he certainly never mentioned Ibsen's name to me. It was only in later life that I asked him if he'd ever heard of Ibsen and, yeah, he'd sort of vaguely heard about "that fella" but didn't know very much about him. I discovered Scandinavian literature after I'd gotten out of university, and certainly related to it. "Yeah, sure, there's my old man, and there's my mother, and there are some of my relatives." I learned through that experience that I was picking up a lot of stuff, not through the literature of the Scandinavians, but

through the spirit of my parents. God knows how far that goes back, a passing of the spirit from one generation to another. Undoubtedly, there's some of the terrible spirit of the Vikings in me – that I hope is reasonably suppressed.

GHAN: Do you see an influence on your writing as a result of this belief in our long tradition?

PETERSON: It was necessary for me to do a hell of a lot more research about things in Europe than about Canadian things for a play like Étienne Brûlé. I'm working on a novel set on the prairies called *Joe Catona*, but every once in a while I have to drop the writing of it and settle into a lot of research about things European because it's obvious to me that they were shaping things in that particular period on the prairies, 1917-1919. At that time we were getting a tremendous mix from Europe, from Asia, from Africa, from other parts of this continent, and we really haven't explored very much the richness that results from that kind of mix.

GHAN: How do you see our Indian and Eskimo heritage manifested?

PETERSON: The joke is that the whites looked down on the Indians on the prairies because they were nomads and, within a few decades, those whites who settled on the prairies became nomads, too. They keep pitching their tent and knocking it down again and packing their chattels and moving some place else. The white people moved onto the prairie very arrogantly, thinking that you could stake out some land and be the lord of that land. It was yours forever, and you didn't have to concern yourself with anyone else. We've discovered in a few decades, too, that this doesn't work on the prairies. You have to think in much bigger terms if you want to get involved in irrigation, to farm in various ways. There are problems in marketing. It isn't enough anymore to be the lone farmer. The native people, of course, always thought in terms of being in harmony with the spirits that controlled nature. The white man moved onto the prairie and thought he could push nature around. Well, he's bloody well learning he can't. Sure, you can take things like water and organize it. But if you organize it too much, you bring the salt from deep down, the salt that was deposited when the prairie was a sea, so you can't push irrigation on the prairies beyond a certain point. It'll hit back and you'll end up with nothing but arid land. I've spent time talking to ranchers who did a lot of arrogant things with their land trying to push crops for their cattle. Some of them have begun to start thinking again and looking at a mix of plants that was there before they broke the land; they're beginning to suspect that might have been the best cover for the prairies. The buffalo did very well by it.

GHAN: Was part of your purpose in writing the play "Almighty Voice" to express this point of view?

PETERSON: I was fascinated by the affair of Almighty Voice. But I also wanted to get across to kids some idea of what the native culture was: the shape, the meaning, the thrust. I wrote that play some years ago. I'm astonished as I look around to find that there's more in that small children's participation play about the prairie Indian culture than in any play I know which is supposedly about Indians. I worked very hard to get at least the base of the prairie Indian culture into the play. It is somewhat didactic. I feel it's justified. When I look at some of the Greek tragedies, the Greek dramatists weren't afraid to be didactic in making their points through their choruses. So I'm willing to let it stand as is. As a matter of fact, if someone wants to go to the trouble, we might have some fun comparing "Almighty Voice" with some of the Greek plays in terms of the devices used.

GHAN: For example?

PETERSON: Almighty Voice's mother, for instance, acts as a kind of chorus. The chorus is used by the Greek tragedians to voice the accepted view of their society. Also, they had a knowledge beyond. I allow Almighty Voice's mother to have knowledge in a sense beyond what she would have in a normal way.

GHAN: What was the native reaction to your play?

PETERSON: When the book *Almighty Voice* was being published, I had the pleasant experience of meeting up with an Indian artist who'd been approached by the publisher to do some illustrations for the book. He was a militant prairie Indian. He approached the book with a certain amount of scepticism and militancy because it was written by a white person attempting to write about Indians. He relaxed as he read through the thing and, in the end, seemed surprised that a white person could get that close to the spirit of the Indians as he knew Indians. He told me stories about his mother and about her having knowledge which seemed somewhat miraculous. She would have knowledge of events that she couldn't possibly know in the normal way. So he related very strongly to the device that I used with the mother in the play of knowing what was happening to her son in other than what we consider normal ways.

GHAN: Did you use these Greek devices consciously?

PETERSON: In writing "Almighty Voice" and some of the other plays, I didn't consciously use old Greek drama devices. One discovers things about works one has written sometime a long time after one has finished them. It was only after going back to the Greeks again that I discovered there were some patterns that were rather similar. The question is whether I picked them up and stored them unconsciously and then used them, or whether it is inevitable when you deal with basic things about human beings that one just stumbles on the same old patterns and devices.

GHAN: Is there any way that you think children's theatre should differ from theatre from adults?

PETERSON: No. I think that the intent in both children's plays and adult plays should be the same: they should entertain; they should inspire; they should inform. In the plays that I've written for children, my approach has been exactly the same as my approach for adult plays. Of course, in popular media, writers are encouraged to write for twelve year olds – for adults. The view of the people who control the top media is that adults intellectually aren't much more developed than a twelve year old, and that their knowledge isn't much greater than that of a twelve year old. Personally, I don't have that same kind of contempt for human beings of any age. My approach is to assume that the person I'm dealing with is reasonably intelligent, reasonably sensitive, and reasonably imaginative. I can accept that they may not have as much knowledge about a subject as I might have, because I have swatted away finding out about it. But then I take the reasonably courteous approach of filling in the reader or audience enough that they can swing with those things I want my audience to become informed about, to experience.

GHAN: So you choose the same subjects that you would for adults, and you write in the same style?

PETERSON: Yes, it's not uncommon for me to start by writing a play for children about a particular subject in an hour form and then, later on, turn it into a full two hour play for adults using exactly the same material. I write participation plays for children that have in them material interesting and intriguing to adults, dealing with subjects that most adults in this country are not informed about, although I feel that they should be. Therefore, I can envision staging some of my participation plays in the round with the children in an inner circle area and participating in the play, and a second ring of adults as audience watching the play – involved in it as watchers in the ordinary fashion of the theatre but having the added entertainment of watching kids participating in participation drama. I can see the adults being caught up as emotionally as the kids in that same drama and perhaps getting not exactly the same things out of the play but, in some instances, additional things.

GHAN: Do you consider your plays immediately accessible to your audiences? Do you consider that a desirable end?

PETERSON: I frequently write plays in which anyone can get the overall thrust – the general information, the emotional and spiritual curve of the thing. But at the same time, I tuck in things that only people well informed in the subject might get. Those who don't get it will still roll with the general line of the thing. The view that it's OK to go to a play by Shakespeare and not get everything unless you're a Shakespeare scholar, but that everything written by a contemporary playwright must be understood by everyone, I find unacceptable.

GHAN: You write a lot of participation plays for children. Do you think this is a better form for them, rather than the spectator sport kind of thing?

PETERSON: I think participation plays can be quite wonderful. At the same time, I see nothing wrong with children seeing the ordinary kind of play, too.

GHAN: You don't write participation plays for adults.

PETERSON: I draw back from that. I remember when there was a great deal of push for having participation plays for adults. I didn't like the idea of the thing. It was all right for me as a playwright or as a director to push for audience participation plays, because we wouldn't be involved in any of the dangers. But it seemed to me that it was not a good idea to expose the poor actor to that kind of thing. I could easily envisage plays that would rouse the audience to the point, if they were encouraged to move onto the stage, of doing damage to actors in one way or another, either roughing up the males or assaulting the females.

GHAN: It wasn't because you were afraid that adult audiences wouldn't participate?

PETERSON: No, I was terrified that there would be too much participation. Of course, with adults who are not accustomed to getting involved in active participation when they go to a play or the usual kind of concert, I find that they get very, very embarrassed when they're called upon to actively participate. But in pop music, you get a lot of young, hysterical girls being encouraged to squeal over some pop star, or rush up on stage, or have some kind of crazy experience. At those theatrical affairs staged by Goebbels and Hitler, you had a certain amount of audience participation that was set up in order to start the ball rolling on some pretty horrifying mass action. I can imagine, in this country, creating a stage play that might encourage the audience to participate and result in a kind of mass hysteria. It would end up in people being hurt or killed.

GHAN: Doesn't that contradict your statement that most people are too embarrassed to participate?

PETERSON: They are unless they get caught up in mob feelings. Then they roll with it, and that's a terrible thing. With kids, up to a certain point, you get an openness and a receptivity where their imagination extends out into the world very quickly, and there their minds and the world become one. New-born babies have a total reaction to anything. They hear a sound, and not only does it ring in their head, but all the muscles of the body react: their arms and legs flail, their spine arches and wriggles. You get that total kind of thing with kids at play, too. You give them a stick, and it becomes a doll, a gun, a train. Adults get that educated out of them to the point where they are restrained from showing what's going on inside and, therefore, gradually, unless the mob thing takes over, it's very difficult for individuals to let themselves go in a crowd.

GHAN: Putting your fears of the dangers of adult participation aside, would you like to see adult participation plays?

PETERSON: I view my role as an artist as being one where I make an offering to the spirit and the mind of the reader or audience, and it's up to him to take any action he wishes totally outside of my session with him. Playwriting, initially, is something going on in the playwright's head that is transformed to paper. That then goes to a director and to actors who transform it into a physical thing on stage with the visual and the sound. That goes through the airways back into the head of each individual member of the audience, and the head of each member of the audience then experiences, I hope, what I experience initially. In a way, art is trying things on for size, a more controlled kind of dreaming. When people sit in the theatre, what you have is a lot of people participating in the same kind of dream. It's a gathering together socially to participate in a common dream. But, at the same time, each person brings some things of his own to the dream so that no two people in the audience have the same reaction to a play, or participate in quite the same dream.

GHAN: If we had enough children's participation plays, where they could really use their imagination, do you think that eventually they would become a different kind of audience capable of a more creative kind of participation?

PETERSON: I haven't thought about it at all until this moment. My fears about audience participation have kept me from thinking about that or exploring it. Certainly, you couldn't get anything very sophisticated that way. I can remember years ago going to a fatuous gathering of Youth for Christ being conducted by [Charles] Templeton. His devices for getting you closer to Christ as a collective body were to stand up and take out your handkerchief and shake it three times, or to grasp the hand of the stranger to your left and right and sway. That's pretty bone-headed audience participation, and to get into things that are more difficult than that would be difficult. I've seen a number of participation plays from England – they in a sense were pioneers in this field – and I liked their devices very much, but I didn't too much like their plays which struck me as being too patly moralistic, too much the "boys' annual" kind of thing. Even as a kid supposedly of the age to embrace "boys' annual" reading, I couldn't stomach that stuff.

GHAN: I gather that you don't believe in censorship for children.

PETERSON: I do believe in there being values and taste in art. A certain kind of ineptitude, grossness, or cheapjack tricks in art, I'm against, but I wouldn't want to use any kind of clout to prevent that kind of thing being offered. I've seen very little in plays that I do not think kids have been exposed to in real life. This business, for instance, of protecting kids against strong words – they hear them every day. But I do have some objection to using a string of four-lettered words just for the sake of using four-lettered words.

GHAN: Otherwise, four-lettered words are all right?

PETERSON: I think when they're used properly, it's perfectly OK. But I meet up with a lot of instances when it's used to shock the audiences, or when it's used to be a proclamation on the part of the playwright. "See, I'm really with it, ain't I?" Eventually, endless obscenity becomes a bore. I wish that our authors would work a little harder at making obscenities elegant and wonderful. I've explored that to some extent. I don't think I've been enormously successful, but I've striven a bit.

GHAN: Your plays, "The Great Hunger" for instance, have played to both children and adults. Do they evoke different responses?

PETERSON: No. I find when I play some children's plays at schools that the reaction of the teacher is exactly the same as the reaction of the kids; they laugh at the same points and, afterwards, in the discussions with the kids and later with the teachers, the talk frequently centres around the same things.

GHAN: Do you think that there is a different style of acting required for children?

PETERSON: I think actors are inclined to overact for kids. Hamming and clowning go over very well with kids, but also go over very well for adults. It warms an actor's heart to get good laughs from an audience, whether it's kids or adults, and I think there is a tendency, perhaps even more so in productions for children than in productions for adults, to go out for those laughs. It's a very solid response, and you know it's there. It's more difficult to assess a quietly thinking and feeling audience.

GHAN: What kind of actor usually plays for children? Is there a type?

PETERSON: A lot of children's productions have fairly inexperienced actors as performers. A few years ago, nearly all the actors were very young. Certainly, it's wonderful for young actors just out of theatre school or theatre courses at universities to get a job that exposes them intensely and over a long period to an audience. But now one sees more mature actors offering themselves to do productions in children's theatre and to go on tour. I suppose part of the reason for this is that there are a lot of performers looking for jobs, and not many jobs.

GHAN: A lot of people are afraid to work with children.

PETERSON: I've been astonished on occasion to have actors turn up for productions of mine who were terrified of children – absolutely terrified of the unpredictability of playing to children. Therefore, at all costs, they would avoid eye contact. So you'd have an audience of kids sitting in a circle around the performers, and there the performers are, staring out and performing with glazed eyes at the auditorium walls and afraid to dip their

eyes. Of course, I found it necessary to take action and try to win those actors around to taking the view that eye contact and empathy were extremely important to their performances.

GHAN: Have you ever had trouble with directors?

PETERSON: Overly creative directors I find to be a very real problem. Because I've called for the action to take place in the centre of the stage, they have found it necessary to take the climax out of the circle to where the kids can't even see it, when the situation and the whole thrust of the drama has been such that it's so natural and wonderful to have your climax happen in the very, very centre.

GHAN: What part do you take in the production of a play once you've written it and it goes into production?

PETERSON: That varies enormously, depending on who the director is and my relationship with him. Some directors like to have me on hand; we work very closely, and I actually do some of the directing. There might be a problem with a particular actor, and the director might ask me to take him aside and spend some time working with him – either talking to him and explaining, or having him play around with various attacks on the scene. Sometimes directors don't want to see me at all; they like to pretend I'm a dead author. Sometimes I work on a production and the relationship is wonderful to begin with, but it doesn't remain quite as happy. I've on occasion had to get rid of directors. Some directors want me to do a lot of rewriting; other directors don't want me to do any.

GHAN: Do you expect to have to do a lot of writing when a play goes into production?

PETERSON: I actually do a lot of woodshedding on my own. I feel that it is only right that I save the director and performers as much trouble and stress and strain as possible. Why should two, four, or twenty people waste time because the writer hasn't done his work up to that point?

GHAN: Have you found that children's plays get the attention they deserve?

PETERSON: I'm rather astonished at the attitude of a lot of critics in this country who view children's plays of no account and feel that it's important to review adult plays but not important to review children's plays. If you look over the history of literature, you will find a number of works that seem to have been written for children which turn out to be very profound indeed and turn out to be works of long term value, while a lot of adult fare has sunk without a trace. But I am impressed with some actors and directors who take children's drama seriously and approach it in the same way, in terms of production and performance, as they approach the adult plays. However, there are actors and there are directors who feel that they're slumming when they're doing a children's play, who feel that it's not

important work, that it will give them a bit of bread while they wait for that great, wonderful opportunity in the adult world.

GHAN: Is funding of children's plays a problem?

PETERSON: The kind of funding for children's plays in many ways reflects this looking down at children's plays. The amount actors are paid is not really comparable to what they can get in some of their work in adult plays. There are a lot of people working in children's productions who really are making great sacrifices to work in that field. Royalties to the playwright for tickets are in terms of two, three, or four cents per kid. Royalties for adults per ticket are usually ten percent of the box office.

GHAN: Money has always been a problem for writers.

PETERSON: In the 19th century, there were all those wonderful magazines in Europe and North America publishing serial fiction. Writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Thackeray, Dickens, didn't have to invest long working periods to turn out a huge novel in order to get some money back. They just had to turn out a chapter and money would come in; they could pay the landlord and the grocer and spend the next week working on the next chapter. That produced a lot of writing, and good stuff. In the late 19th century and the early 20th on this continent, we also had an enormous number of magazines publishing short stories. That provided a lot of writers with a good training ground and offered them a living while they were learning. Unfortunately, now we don't have magazines publishing chapter after chapter that build up into a novel, and we don't have magazines publishing short stories and paying a reasonable amount for them. It's very difficult for writers to work at their craft.

GHAN: There also used to be patrons of the arts.

PETERSON: Canadian rich men are very mean on that score. We don't have very many private bodies offering funds to artists. They want to be warmed by the feeling that the things they do are terribly worthwhile and moralistic. Therefore, they offer money in the fields of education and health and so on. But to offer money to artists who are very unpredictable and may end up biting you – oh, no, they won't risk that.

GHAN: There is some government funding, however.

PETERSON: Yes, it's a very good thing. Unfortunately, the way those bodies are set up, it takes so long between the time a writer gets hot about something and the time he can write enough letters and do enough lobbying to get the money, that by the time the grant comes he may be cold on the subject and want to move on to something else. It would be nice if we could set up some kind of hiring hall where somebody gets hot on an idea, and phones in or goes there and says, "Hey, I need one hundred and fifty bucks to write this short story next week." It's very easy to get money in my field as a writer by going out and talking or teaching about writing. But to get

money to write? That's a very dicey thing. One other aspect of artistic funding from government is that the government finds it very necessary to set up a bureaucracy to see that the money is used properly. By the time they finish setting up and paying the bureaucracy to see that the money is used properly, most of it is used up. So you start out with a million dollars supposedly allocated to artists, and it ends up a measly few thousand dollars that actually gets to them. There's also much more funding for those artists who work in groups, in a system, than for the individual artist – who is more likely to come up with something that's a problem: too new, or kinky. It's safer.

GHAN: Many of your children's plays have four or five actors playing different roles. Is that in the interests of economy only?

PETERSON: Throughout most of the history of the theatre, interests of economy have been factors: how plays were written; how plays were performed. Certainly, Shakespeare was forced to do the same thing that playwrights do today, that is, have versatile actors who could toss off a cloak or hat and put others on and run back on stage and play other parts. In Canadian children's theatre, it seems to have become standard – because of tight budgets – to have four actors. Those four actors have usually been one female and three males, or four males and no females, or two males and two females. It's certainly been a rare thing when there are more females than males in a play.

GHAN: Do you feel you've done anything to change that?

PETERSON: I think I can perhaps claim to have written more female roles than any other playwright in this country. I've always enjoyed and been intrigued with my female characters as much as, if not more than, my male characters. I've taken it for granted in life and in the affairs of this world that the female factor is as important as the male factor; the whole dynamic of thinking and feeling involves that mix of male and female, the young and the old. Of course, in Canada, there certainly has been a patriarchal attitude to so many things. In our politics and in so many affairs of the country, the preponderance of males is far more common. Therefore, our writers have been inclined to write plays in which the characters are mostly, if not totally, male. There might be a peripheral female – the wife of some important politician who plays a secondary role in the whole drama. I've sinned on occasion. In my play "Etienne Brûlé," I have four males. My reason for that is that, in historical terms, there really weren't any females around at the time. But writing a play like that kind of irritates me, and disgusts my artistic and humanistic soul. So I am at work trying to do something about my sin there. I'm inviting some female characters into the play in a longer form.

GHAN: You've written mostly, it seems, for radio. Do you prefer writing for one medium than another?

PETERSON: I have no particular preference for any medium. I've probably written more for radio than anything else, but a fair amount for television and for print. I wrote the first television drama for the CBC. That was the show that opened the network. I was considered the prestige documentary writer. But I like any medium that I can get a chance to say my say on, and earn enough money to keep the body going. For a long time, I believed tremendously in what television and radio could accomplish, particularly in Canada, since those two media were the ones that the Canadian populace were most exposed to. I suppose that in that sense I was kind of a populist writer.

GHAN: Have you lost faith in what television and radio can accomplish?

PETERSON: Unfortunately, broadcasting has gone the way of American broadcasting. I think that's a real disaster. We can get plenty of that stuff from the private broadcasting stations in the country, in addition to getting it direct from American stations just across the border since most Canadians live close to the border anyway. The people in this country who run broadcasting feel that they must go into formula drama and get away from drama where what the writer has to say is the most important thing. There certainly isn't too much point in doing more work for radio and television – scripts which will get very little use, if any, from here on. I'm putting a fair amount of time now taking material I have done for radio and television and reworking the material into more permanent form for stage and for print.

GHAN: Do you think this trend to formula drama is going to continue?

PETERSON: Unless we get more enlightened people with some control over broadcasting, I see no reason for thinking that it is going to change. Nobody in broadcasting has much of a share of the market these days, and everybody is frantically trying to grab one more point of the audience. It ends up a mug's game. What we should do in broadcasting is to license various bodies to do very specialized broadcasting. In other words, there should be a station that does nothing but news broadcasts, other stations that give us nothing but rock, others nothing but pop classics, others quality music, others soap drama, formula drama, television drama, and so on.

GHAN: You have done thousands of interviews over the years for your documentaries and plays. Do you like being interviewed yourself?

PETERSON: Not much.

GHAN: Do you read the interviews done with you?

PETERSON: Sometimes. I usually find them pretty thin. I usually think I could have done better myself.