

# Interview with James Harrell

**Interviewer: Debbie Conn**

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*Begin Tape 1, Side 1*

**Debbie Conn:** First of all, I'd like for you to tell me a little bit about your background and how you ended up at Southwest, or at least here in Texas or Central Texas.

**James Harrell:** Well, I had been born and raised in Waco, and Papa was a professor at Baylor, and I had majored in drama there. Then I went to World War II, and I got out, went to Hollywood and decided I would leave the theater entirely. But, subsequently, Paul Baker, who was running the Dallas Theater Center then, offered me a scholarship to go there and to hire me on the staff after I had an MA degree. Which I did, and I stayed there for ten years, and then my job at Southwest Texas came. Claudette and I had just been married; her folks lived near here, and I loved the Hill Country, so it seemed like a good thing to do. And we've been very happy here. We've been here since 1970.

**Conn:** Specifically at Southwest or—how long have you taught here?

**Harrell:** Since 1970.

**Conn:** So you've been teaching here since you've been here [in San Marcos]?

**Harrell:** That's right, sixteen years or so.

**Conn:** And you've done a lot of professional work in between.

**Harrell:** Well, the university has been very nice. They've suggested this is what I teach, and they want me involved. So I get out two or three times a year and work in the movies and television.

**Conn:** Could you share some of the experiences you've had—some that really stick out in your mind.

**Harrell:** Well, I am a fan of a lot of movie people. They don't disturb me a whole lot, but I suppose Jane Fonda was the only one that I had a little shock when I was playing a scene or two with her. Every now and then in the middle of it all, you realize this is Jane Fonda, and it has an

impact. I'm a movie fan. I'm a movie star liker—lover. So, I enjoy working with those folks, but there's not a lot of shock left. But, Jane Fonda got to me just a little bit.

**Conn:** What was she like?

**Harrell:** She was very nice—quite a lady and I talked to her between shots and had an opportunity to become acquainted with her a little bit; I don't know her, but she seemed quite nice.

**Conn:** And so you've pretty much been working out of Dallas?

**Harrell:** I have an agent in Dallas. There are two casting people. One is Sherry Rhodes out of Dallas, and the other is Elizabeth Keigley, also out of Dallas. And they have been very kind. They are able to put your picture at the right place at the right time, and say a word on your behalf. They both have done so. I have gotten a lot of work through those two young ladies. They've been very kind to me. There are other casting people, but those two in particular have been very kind to me.

**Conn:** Could you discuss some changes that occurred throughout the time that you have been at Southwest or through making movies. I'm sure there have been great changes.

**Harrell:** Well, there certainly has, so far as our business is concerned; there have been a whole lot. Texas has been third, and Hollywood is first, and New York is second, and we began to make films. Preston Smith, when he was Governor, started the Texas Film Commission, and it has been perpetuated as part of the governor's office ever since, and that has been a very good thing for us. But, as an example, when I arrived in Austin in 1970, there was no actors' agencies in sight. So we started one called the Actors Clearinghouse in Austin. Since then, I'm sure there are six or seven in Austin. And there were none in San Antonio, and now I know of three that are operating well, and I'm sure there are others that I don't know about. In Houston, there must be twenty-five or thirty. And I remember there were three when I first came. So, the film industry is a thriving situation here in Texas. They tell me that Texas and Florida and Tennessee are the coming centers of motion pictures and may very well become first as time goes on, but it will be a while before that happens.

**Conn:** What about changes here at Southwest since you have been teaching here?

**Harrell:** Well, we're certain that the student body has grown considerably, and the city has grown according to the growth of the student body. As an example, I was astonished two weeks ago to find I was in bumper-to-bumper traffic in San Marcos, which was a new experience for me. There was a dog that used to be able to lie in the streets, and we'd go around him. Well, not quite that much, but something like that; we were about a six-dog town in those days.

**Conn:** What about class structure or anything that has changed since—you say you started teaching in 1970—

**Harrell:** And it seems to me that the influx, since we've become known as one of the cities along the so-called "Corridor"—the corridor between San Antonio and Austin—they tell us there is going to be solid civilization between the two. And I wouldn't doubt it. It seems to me that since we came, a number of companies have come here. Kroger is one, and there is a valve company, and there is an air conditioner company. There are several national companies who now have offices in San Marcos, and we're growing. You know, Austin is just busting at the seams. It's growing so fast, I think, all along the so-called Corridor. I imagine everybody is experiencing the same kind of, rather, "seven league" boot growth—faster than we can really accommodate. It's making a problem for Austin, and if we don't watch out, we're going to have the same kinds of problems with water and traffic and so here in San Marcos, though our city government so far is being very far-sighted about it. We haven't had any problems yet. So maybe we'll avoid those problems and learn from Austin.

**Conn:** We've talked about changes in your professional and your experiences here in San Marcos. How about within the school curriculum, and specifically theater, since that's what you've been associated with.

**Harrell:** When I first came here, there was no motion picture training, and I was interested in having some of that. During the time when Bob Gratz was the head of the speech communication and theatre arts department, he began the actor training for film and television. So it's been running ever since. We are now running two sections per semester. So, it was really new when we started it. I had been wanting to do so, and Gratz officially made it possible, and we've been doing it ever since.

I think it's not too dumb to be an actor and live in the state of Texas. When I graduated in 1940, you either went East or West. An interesting example, I know a man named Bob McGinerland who lives in Arkansas. His son wants to be an actor. He told him he should go to Dallas and get a job. So he became a waiter. I saw Bob the other day. Asked him about his son, he said after one year he was able to quit his waiter job; he's now living off the business. So, it takes maybe a year in a major center until enough people know you and they've had experience with you and for you to become acquainted yourself. But it teaches me that Dallas certainly is a place where you can make a living as a player. And, Houston is, too. Austin and San Antonio will be shortly. And the big news for us is that the drama students can instead of having a "job" job—a waiter job—etcetera—I'm hoping our drama students can make their side-money in the business, making commercials and films and trade films and that kind of thing. Trade films are made, and you don't ever see them on the marquee, but some of the major companies make a film every year. So, I have a feeling that it won't be too long before drama students can do their moonlighting in the business and pay for their way through school. We're looking forward to that, certainly.

**Conn:** Technically, since I've been here, I've been very impressed with the technical aspect of our theater—scenery and the costumes. Has that changed considerably since you've been here?

**Harrell:** Well, certainly, to have this building in the first place is a big step, and since then, despite here and there budget problems, it certainly has. The equipment has certainly come, and then it is one of the better auditoriums around.

We're in good shape so far as the plan is concerned, and I think when the speech communication and theatre arts [department] ultimately separate, it will be good for them and good for us. So, we've both become so big that we need space badly. So, for instance, if we have this entire building, as it looks as though we might, and speech communication will have sufficient space somewhere else, then we will be a lot better off for classroom space and rehearsal areas, etcetera—we're a little cramped at present. We don't have enough space.

**Conn:** What building did the theater used to be in?

**Harrell:** It was in Old Main on the third floor, up at the top. It had been a gymnasium in days gone by. And they made that into a theater. When I first came here, the first year I was here, we frequently had bats flying around during the performances. Bats would fly around during the performances; we'd try and get them out during the intermission. But it was a very good theater. Certainly ours is much better. We had outgrown it. The first year I was here, we were still up there, and then we moved down here. So, it's been great; a very good theater.

**Conn:** So we've been here [in the Speech and Drama Building] since 1971 or '2?

**Harrell:** 1971. When I came in '70, we were still in Old Main; now we're in this building, in September of 1971.

**Conn:** Were you with Speech then also?

**Harrell:** Well, there is one department. The speech communication and theatre arts. So, I came here as an acting teacher. We're still speech communication and theatre arts; we will be, I'd say, for two or three years, certainly. But we'll ultimately separate—I feel sure—and it'll be better for them and better for us, I feel sure.

**Conn:** That's pretty interesting. Are there any other great changes—I guess what we're looking for are things like—you've been in San Marcos for sixteen years, but before then you were in Waco?

**Harrell:** No, I was in Dallas for about ten years prior to coming here.

**Conn:** And were you working professionally there or were you teaching?

**Harrell:** I was teaching in the Trinity University master school, which was the Dallas Theater Center. It was the master school of Trinity in San Antonio. If you wanted an MA in drama, you had to go to Dallas to get it. I was acting and teaching in the master school. It was semi-professional also. The box office was supporting part of the school. So, I was hired as an actor and teacher and stayed there for ten years. It was just before I came here.

**Conn:** It's probably easier to work in Dallas and teach at the same time. Was it easier as far as living there?

**Harrell:** It's a question of—I got married again while I was in Dallas. For me, I needed to move out and make a little more money. And the question in my mind at that time was whether to go back into the business or to continue teaching, and I enjoy teaching a whole lot. And this job came up. It's near Claudette's folks, and I love the Hill Country, as I mentioned, I think. It sort of was an ideal situation. I prefer to stay near the young folks because it's very exciting to me. And sometimes you can be of some assistance. And certainly, if I continue to operate as a professional, as the situation grows here, I know the agents and the agencies and the opportunities for jobs and so on. You can ease that transition between student and professional, which certainly needs some easing.

So, this department is beginning to do pretty good getting people jobs during the time that they're here and then helping what to do when you graduate. They're certainly suggesting now not to go to Hollywood and New York first off. They should go to Dallas, certainly, first and get in the union, have a credit or two, and then go to Hollywood or go to New York. It's just too big a step to go suddenly unless you have lived there before and so on—it's very difficult to get in a union in Hollywood and New York. And it's difficult to get an agent. It's almost [a] catch-22. If you are not in the Screen Actors Guild, you cannot get an agent. You almost can't get an agent until you're in the Screen Actors Guild. They won't hire you in the movies unless you're in the guild. Well, how are you going to get in the guild in order to get in the movies? And that's very difficult. So, I certainly recommend that people go to Dallas where they can go to the union without that kind of difficulty. And they can get an agent the day after they get there. So then after they have found some work and join the union and have a couple of credits to their name, then when they go to New York, Hollywood, the agents will at least say hello and think about representing you.

I knew one young lady who had been in New York for three years working in a candy store and had not yet found an agent. So, her life is going away; she's not any closer than the day she left, and that's ridiculous. It seems to me to take a job beneath your abilities, just hanging on, hoping to get an agent, and after that it doesn't guarantee you'll get a part anyway; so—I couldn't see that. I thought she should come back to Dallas and get an agent the next day, read an audition, have some credits. Then, if she wants to go back, so that she could get an agent the day she arrives and begin to go out on auditions. A lot of people are doing that, and it's kind of sad.

**Conn:** I guess they feel like that's the only way.

**Harrell:** I guess they felt like that's the way they want to do it. I talked to that young lady, and I didn't even realize she wanted away from her parents more than anything else. And that job in the candy store put her in New York City and away from her parents. It wasn't getting her

anywhere, but at least she was away from her parents. I finally decided that's what she really wanted, and that's what she got.

**Conn:** You've done so much professional work; how come you haven't decided to go out to California?

**Harrell:** I've been there. And I have very mixed feelings about fame. I'm not interested in fame. I'm interested in their money. But I have friends who were rich and famous, and somebody I knew in Hollywood went over there. And I had always wanted riches and fame. I thought I did, and then I got close enough to see it a little bit, and I began to be equivocal about it. I wasn't all that sure. Yes, it would be nice and all, but if you get famous, they give you a lot of money, but what are you selling? And do I want to sell it? How will I do without it? Because it's like once you're rich and famous, I have great pleasure in being a private person. I like to be able to window-shop in the evening. I like to be able to go to the Laundromat if I want to and wash my clothes, or any such private affair, go to the grocery store. And once you get rich and famous, you can't do that anymore. And I got close enough to see it. Friends of mine who are rich and famous—Yul Brynner and Hurd Hatfield, and they were hot as a pistol, and I couldn't quite make up my mind. And unless you have a single purpose, you're not going to do any good. So I began to say, "Well, I do and I don't." I began to go to the beach more than I paid attention to business. And letting it slide, so I just left town—I gave it up. I didn't expect to ever be in the theater anymore. But, life is interesting, and there is destiny to it all, I guess, and here I am back in it, so—

**Conn:** You wouldn't give it back?

**Harrell:** No, I wouldn't want to give it back! I don't need a lot more money than I have. I'm enjoying things.

**Conn:** How long do you plan to stay at Southwest Texas?

**Harrell:** I'm sixty-seven, and we may teach until we're seventy. There is some movement, I'm afraid now, to remove that. But I plan to retire at the retirement age unless something starts hurting before then. So far, I don't feel any signs, so I have told my agent, "I'd like to push it for everything so we can get out of it after I quit teaching. When I'm not teaching anymore, let's hit it." If we get famous and rich at the same time, well, hey!

**Conn:** Could you make some predictions as to what direction Southwest might be going in?

**Harrell:** I think that Southwest Texas will level its enrollment off and then I believe the richest and best time will ensure. Because we get money every two years from the legislature, and as long as your enrollment is growing, you're always working with last year's and the year before last's budget, which has been appropriated two years in advance. Then, if the following two years, if the enrollment grows, it amounts to a cut for both those two years. So, the only hope is

if you level it off where you always have the same enrollment. The appropriation—let's say, we stop at twenty thousand or twenty-five thousand—if the state legislature appropriates for twenty-five thousand students and that's how many you've got, then we're not always behind in budget working with always a cut. So, we usually grow a thousand or two each year, so by the end of the second year, it amounts to considerable less money because we've been appropriated two years in advance. So, for a state institution—certainly in this state with two-year appropriations—when you level off your enrollment then, the appropriation is for the number of students that you have, and it's a lot better for everybody. So, I fully expect the university to stop at, let's say twenty-five thousand or so, and just not take any more people than that. Then we can upgrade the enrollment requirements, etcetera—we have acquired now the West Campus, so that there is more space, at last. We're not so crowded as have been before, and I fully expect the quality of all of the academics here to improve considerably when we have a budget that's commensurate with the student body. It'll be a lot nicer for everybody.

**Conn:** Is there any kind of help that the theatre department, as far as when you graduate with a professional degree—I know with a teaching degree placement office is centrally located in the school—but as far as helping students get jobs or agents, or whatever, and how much does the school do?

**Harrell:** Well, that's what I'm trying to do to some degree. And I don't know of any other agency—there is a placement agency—but not for this business. But they really don't need a whole lot of advice; some is enough and next is just hustling. You've got to go to Dallas or some major city and get a job to sustain yourself. Get an agent, start auditioning, and if you don't have—within about a year—if it's not increasing to where you can see you're going to be able to make a living, then perhaps there is a message there, and you need to go into something else. It's not going to work for you.

I know a lot of people who don't. Statistics in this business are pretty brutal. About 90% of the stage actors do not work per annum. And something like 85% of the Screen Actors Guild members in the United States do not work. You might have a job this year and then not work next year. So, you have to have something—you know you're moonlighting in the movies. Some 5% are making all the money—they are the million dollar picture. There's another 10% who are making a good living—\$50–100,000 a year, and you'd have to know them to see them go by. I know some of them, and I see them go by in TV and films, and “Oh, there's ole so-and-so.” If you see them enough, you know they're doing alright. One example is a man named Ford Rainey, who is currently showing national commercials about the National Association for Retired People, and I am sure he made \$15,000 to do the commercial. And I've seen him play everybody's father. The “Six Million Dollar Man's” father during that period of time. He's playing grandfathers now. For a while, he was everybody's father, now he's grandfather in the Campbell's Soup ad and grandfather in some other stuff—and older person. So, I expect Ford is doing fairly well, and he's not famous. You'd have to know him to see him go by. A few people

know him but, it would be, Oh, there's old what's his name, uh, uh, uh—I can't think of his name. But they might recognize his face.

He seems to me to have it the way I would want it. If I were in the trade, I would not want to be famous, but I would be making a good living and not having to sacrifice the private end of your life, as I'm sure he does not. He may be recognized here and there, but not enough to bother him, just enough to be nice. I'm recognized occasionally here in town—the check in the grocery store or some such, and they'll say, Didn't I see you— and I'll say, “Yes,” and “That's nice.” But that's about as far as it goes. But I'm sure Ford is recognized occasionally. And, if I were going to go into the business, that would be the way I would like to do it. I'd like work enough to where I make a reasonable amount of money, but just never get famous.

**Conn:** Can you have some kind of control? It seems, from my point of view, that it's pretty much the business that controls you.

**Harrell:** Well, a lot of it does happen that way, and I don't know what would happen if the opportunity came to me. I don't know if I would have taken them and said, “My oh my, I'm famous, too bad.” It didn't break that way. While I was in Hollywood, I don't know if it would or not. I was there and getting close, and then I got equivocal about it, and I didn't know whether I wanted it or not. And you have to have a single purpose and really be pushing it. I kind of doodled around it and didn't manage myself properly. It's a business, and you have to do business. So, I'm not sure if I would have been able to or not. I didn't give it as good a chance as I should have if I expected to do it. So, we'll never know.

**Conn:** But you seem happy with teaching.

**Harrell:** I'm really pleased with the way things are going. I'm doing what I want to.

**Conn:** I know we're very happy to have you here. That's for sure.

**Harrell:** Well, that's nice to hear.

**Conn:** I really appreciate the time that you've spent with me.

**Harrell:** Well, it's quite alright. If I can be of any further service, just let me know.

*End of interview*