

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: John Calendo

Interviewer: Whitney Strub

Date: November 27, 2020

Location: Zoom

Whitney Strub: Let's see here. Okay it looks like I'm recording, so we are now on the record. This is Whitney Strub with the Queer Newark Oral History Project on Friday, November 27, 2020. We're recording over Zoom because of the pandemic of course, and I'm here with John Calendo. And John, if you wanna take it from here and just give an overview of who you are, your life, your background, and then from there we'll launch into the role of Newark in your life. Thank you for doing this.

John Calendo: Okay. My name is John Calendo. I worked as a writer and magazine editor for most of my life. I eventually worked at New York University in administration for Adult Education. I then returned after I — after 9/11. Things changed and I left NYU and I began writing again. I became the editor of a webzine [00:01:06] called *Nightcharm* [00:01:07] and I also began writing a novel that turned out to be four books long.

Whitney Strub: And then you're from New Jersey originally?

John Calendo: I'm from — I was born in Manhattan. I spent my childhood in Brooklyn and Miami. I moved to New Jersey late. My father was here. He needed care but as it turned out, he took care of me. I had lost a job in Manhattan. I was the editor of *Blueboy* [00:01:46], had lost a job. I was looking for a more affordable apartment. I found a beautiful one bedroom here in North Bergen overlooking I see the Hudson River, and I see Morningside Heights from my window.

Whitney Strub: That's a little prettier than my vantage point in Newark of a dumpster in a parking lot. Why don't you talk a little about what Newark meant to you? How you perceived both before you got familiar with it and then what it was like actually experiencing Newark and how it fit into your life?

John Calendo: Well, I didn't think much of Newark but then eventually I heard things about Newark. My impression was that Newark was a Black city, and I should never be there at night. Then I was on jury duty which sent me to Newark, and I saw it was a beautiful, very formal city, much more formal than this ex-urban area where I lived which is a lot of two-story family homes. And I saw it had a college and a music center, and I also saw that it had this charming little place called Little Theatre [00:03:14] and the thing about Little Theatre [00:03:15] is the name alone.

It's suggested like little flower which was a certain Catholic saint, and immediately I saw the twenties and I thought you know, this is like when they did the Ziegfeld Follies [00:03:30] in Manhattan. It may be like a Little Theatre [00:03:34]. Instead of sending twenty girls over they sent three. It was a Little Theatre [00:03:39] and I thought it was so sweet to call itself little. Theaters are usually grandiose especially if they're a movie. The Bijou, the Jewels, the Cameo, [00:03:50] but this was a Little Theatre. It had a sweetness for me.

I didn't realize until I looked up on something called "Cruising for Sex" [00:04:06]. It was a website that was very popular that there were two theaters in Newark. One was the Little Theatre [00:04:16] and the other one was I guess it was called The Cameo [00:04:18] if I recall. [JC clarification: I was eager to check them out because I prefer anonymous sex.]

I lived near a park that was active for a while and I used to go to Feathers [00:04:41], which is I think in Hackensack somewhere. There was a parking lot and an Amtrak, and beyond the Amtrak there was this beautiful, idyllic woodland area, the most beautiful little sex spot.

It was all trees, there was a little bit of water and it was loaded with the kind of men that are attracted to these places. They're often not out. They're often not gay identified and then there are many that are gay identified like me. You know? All my life I've always put career first and never really particularly looked for a boyfriend. So these darkened theaters, these woodland areas were fine for me because they were mysterious, they were sexy. They had that I think men, all of us have a kind of interest in the, you know, unknown, the sex partner, the many sex partners.

That was the appeal of both the Little Theatre [00:05:56] in Newark and Cameo [00:05:58] and this woodland area. But eventually, for whatever reason that was no longer viable, so I finally came to Newark, and I think for a long time I preferred the Cameo [00:06:12]. Now as I recall, my feeling was one theater was more Black-centric, meaning that if you were Black fine. If you were White you were less — you were like — It's like White people dancing. I mean It was not great. I mean you were not what the group was there for. You were just okay, another White guy.

But I think that was the Cameo [00:06:42], and I think the Little Theatre [00:06:44] was a little bit more mixed. [JC clarification: I

had a long history of going to sex theaters, and I was familiar with that classic experience of going from blaring sunshine outside into stumbling blindness as you hit the total darkness within. There were those magical moments when your eyes had to adjust. It was sort of like foreplay, part of the exciting anticipation, these blind moments, as if you were blindfolded in the midst of a wild, transgressive sexual playground. The Little Theater was a bit more genteel because you entered a lobby area that was lit. Your eyes did not have the shock of instant and total darkness.

There were long couches in the lobby, and it would be like entering a Black barbershop because a lot of these guys were just shooting the breeze. It had a social rather than a transgressive vibe. There was a straight quality about it.]

It was like a lot of us are having sex here behind the seats in the back, but it was charming. The Little Theatre [00:07:57] was charming. I remember this.

I went there on a summer day a few years ago and found it was closed and there was a lovely sign. They thanked the patrons and they said we're sorry it's closed. As I left there was another man, and I had seen him but he was on crutches and he was obviously — he might've been my age but age had not been kind to him and beaten him up a bit. He said, "Do you know of any other theaters that are open like this?" I said, "There used to be a Cameo [00:08:33] but I think it's dead now." This was one of the last of these dinosaurs, at least in the Northeast. I don't know about the South.

It was a wonderful thing to walk into a theater that was dark and to lose your identity, to no longer be John Calendo or a person or a writer, but to become a body, to become — to be very frank a penis, to become a dick. You knew other people were there for that same reason, and there was a kind of candidness and a certain kind of carelessness about all that that took a lot of the political or emotional or romantic vibration let's say around the sex act away, so it was an experience that was unique.

Whitney Strub:

Wow, that's great. That's such a vivid rendition. I really appreciate that. I should've said at the outside just for the transcript and the record that that was the primary focus of our interview. We were put in contact by a mutual acquaintance who saw the Little Theatre [00:09:57] as a point of connection, and so just for the record that's why we're focusing on that. Let me put my historian lens on just

for a second. Just for chronology, when would it have been that you did first discover these places in Newark?

John Calendo: Well, I think it would've been after I left NYU. I was — I left NYU right — in the year after 9/11 when things changed so 2021 — I mean 2001. That would be spring. I probably didn't go to Newark until I would say 2005. That's a rough guess. You know?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, that works. I love the rendition that you gave of walking into the theater and the light changing and all of that. I wonder if you can just narrate in as much detail as you'd like, just what an experience there was like. You walk in and then what? How do you come off? How do you signify interest in people? Where do you go? Just kind of a granular narrative rendition if you will.

John Calendo: Well, I can only of course speak for myself and I think that as — I used to pick up Marines in Oceanside [California] so you would think this is a real confident guy. No, I was always very cautious. I always was coming from the point of view that — you see for me, I would — what's exciting for me is that someone is interested in me, that's where certain friends as they got older went to rent a boy. What was it called, rent a guy — whatever it was. They would hire hustlers and I always thought was very sophisticated, but I always felt that wouldn't be interesting to me, that it was so obviously not about sex but it was a different — it was a business transaction.

I forgot why I got into that. We were talking about going in. So I wasn't aggressive as you might think. So I'd walk through the door and the lighting is dim but endurable, and the downstairs part of the Little Theatre [00:12:27] is straight films which of course who cares? It was always like all right. I would walk in and be — coming in from the world of reality I would of course be a pilgrim made, be very, very proper and I would be still John Calendo for a while. And I would check out the — what is it called, the back space behind the seats. What would you call that?

Whitney Strub: I always think of it as a baseball dugout. Now I can't think of it.

John Calendo: But anyway, it's before — it's right as the theater begins and then there's a space and then the seats begin with these chairs. So in this space there were a lot of men and I remember hanging out at the edge and watching what was going on, and always being — taking me a while to get going. For one thing, I would've preferred it to be darker but — so there was that and then we would pass through it and sometimes someone would touch you or feel you up.

Because I was not an anal bottom that would not be interesting. Someone touched me on the behind it was like yeah, no. Yeah, I'm too old for that, give me a break. I'm in my forties or whatever it was. You know? There was that then there was walking along the sides of the theater to see men, and if a man was sitting on the last seat then there might be some action. If they were sitting in the middle then they were really there to see the movies.

So you'd walk around and in the Little Theatre [00:14:31] as I recall, it kinda was eh okay, nothing much is happening. There were a lot of men in the back. Many were older than me at the time, and so I wasn't that interested. Then there was this narrow staircase where you would walk up the stairs to where there was a room really, a long room where the gay films were shown on a television. It was so wonderful, and I would walk up those steps and there was always something strange about one of the steps that in the first few times going down I missed it and someone would catch me, like you'd miss one step before the landing.

So I went up and I would sit there in little seats. They were sitting there and sometimes I would sit down and sometimes people would come over to me. It wasn't until years later that I discovered the room behind there was an absolutely pitch-dark room which is really what I liked. What I liked about The Cameo [00:15:41] was that it had pitch black men's rooms and things were going nuts in those rooms. So my way of cruising was often to eventually go into those black rooms in which then I shed my identity, and I could be much calmer.

There were silhouettes. Sometimes some idiot would come in with a cell phone lighted up and everyone would see. It's like the party's over. Don't you know it's a masquerade? You're not supposed to take off your mask so there was that. How am I doing?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, this is great. This is great. Just keep going please.

John Calendo: Well, that's the experience that I can remember of that theater. The Cameo [00:16:32] had a different experience. You want me to go into The Cameo [00:16:37]?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, although actually before that I did wanna ask again, just a historical question. When you first encountered this around early 21st century you're in your forties at that point, ballpark or —

John Calendo: Let's see. I was born in '48, '58, '68, '78, '88, no, '88, '98. I'm over 50.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

John Calendo: But I've always been — I was carded up until the age of thirty-five. Of course in L.A. people look different and so they weren't used to northeastern Italians, but I would say that — now I'm seventy-two. I could pass for somewhere in my sixties, and when I was in my fifties I could pass for someone in their forties. I must've been around middle fifties, fifty-five to sixty.

Whitney Strub: Okay, then you said the crowd in general skewed somewhat older as well or —

John Calendo: Well they visually looked older. Maybe they were my own age. I had my hair. I was thin. So you know, you saw certain silhouettes that were older. You also saw very large Black men that was very attractive. I don't mean — I mean strapping rather than over — heavy. There was a sort of comfortable atmosphere there that was very nice. People didn't push you away. Too old, too heavy. That didn't go on. There were theaters in my life where that went on I thought where do you think you are? We're in a sleazy theater. You can smell the pine Lysol every time you went into the bathroom 'cause they were so particular about — let's talk about the bathrooms.

In my fifties I of course like many men began to have a prostate problem. As soon as I would go to a buy a ticket I'd say I'd like a key to the bathroom 'cause there were two bathrooms. Always been pee shy, there was the open bathroom which was appropriate filthy and sleaze-ola. And then there was this little bathroom that you could open with—had sliding doors like you were on a ship and you could open it and it was clean and beautiful, and I always felt so — I could get myself ready. I could urinate. I could put my money in my sock and push it down to — because I was a veteran of these places.

I had left the — my wallet in my car which I always knew where to park a few blocks away where there would be parking places. Eventually what I would do, sometimes I would take a half of Viagra and I would have — because I don't like to drink I'd have something like soda and wine and that would get me loose. That would help me in the shedding of the very formal, very important personality of John Calendo. That was what — that was part of Little Theatre. [00:20:25]

Whitney Strub: What about the racial dynamics there? As you mentioned Newark being a Black majority city, did you feel like it was racially segregated or —

John Calendo: No. In sex there is very — everything gets leveled. In sex, all of that social reality gets left in the bright sunlight as you go into this place which is like a bath of darkness and eventually you know everyone's there. Well, of course in the Little Theatre [00:21:05] there were people who were socializing in the lobby, had no reason. I guess they were maybe — they weren't going to a bar but you knew most people were there they knew the score. They weren't gonna freak out because you were gay or put their hand on them or something like that. Now what was the question again? I'm sorry.

Whitney Strub: Just about the general racial dynamics.

John Calendo: The racial dynamic. I felt that there — I felt there was in one of the theaters a preference for blackness, that if you were a Black guy a lot — since the majority of the men in this place were Black, not enormous, not ninety percent. It seemed to me about somewhere sixty to seventy percent, you know, because these theaters were not to be found anywhere in New Jersey or at least northern New Jersey it attracted people like myself, who came from other towns who had never had a reason and had heard very prejudiced, bigoted things about Newark, about being a Black city as if — and then you found out yeah, so what? It's law and order prevails, whatever.

I always found it interesting that there was — you could feel and see and experience a defined preference that if you met a very similar man like yourself who was Black, that person would have much more action and much more people approaching them than would a White person. That at least is my experience. I often had sex with White guys. I often had sex with Black guys. I suppose there were certain White men there you'd imagine who were specifically into Black men, but that was not my experience personally. That was not my projection on other White men there.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, that makes sense. You mentioned just playing off of the law and order thing, was there any fear of a police presence or did you ever see them in the area?

John Calendo: No. All of these in my experience, all of these sex theaters that were there for a while, there never was a raid. Now, I was at the Stonewall riot. I am a veteran of that, and I remember the raids.

The raids for instance at the Stonewall was just a matter of cops coming in, wanting to get paid off, clearing everything out and the bartender telling you to come back in five minutes. And you came back in five minutes and everything was cool.

I never experienced a raid in a theater. I've been in adult theaters in L.A., in Las Vegas, Chicago and Newark, and there weren't ones in Manhattan. There was something in Queens but it seemed that these theaters had already made their peace with the law so I would think that that is a historic and interesting feature because it wasn't through the bars. Of course we're talking about 2000 — well, in this case we're talking about 2005 but my history with adult theaters goes back into my youth, goes when I'm twenty when I'm living in Hollywood. Those theaters had always made some deal with the police.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I do feel like I would be remiss in my duties here as an oral historian not to take a brief tangent and ask about your Stonewall experience. That seems worth including here.

John Calendo: Well I was a college boy. I was at NYU, and I had had — I went to a Catholic all boys school where I was easily spotted as this queer so I became very tough. It made me very tough. It made me very challenging. It made me fight, and because they did that people left me alone. When I was a junior in high school, I thought I'd rather be dead than hate going to school like this and being the butt of jokes.

But I said but rather than kill myself I'll let them kill me. So then I went into school with an attitude of fuck you, you know and it never brought that on. You know? Then I learned — you learn about bullies, that it's all show as we see with our commander-in-chief. Anyway, where was I? It's hard being seventy-two. You got a lot of life. You wanted me to talk about —

Whitney Strub: You mentioned Stonewall.

John Calendo: Being at Stonewall. My first year in college was '66, and I had this chip on my shoulder. But there were certain people I'm meeting usually in Italian class, two boys who became lifelong friends who had to get through that shit and they did. From then, I said there's a dance bar. We can go to a gay bar, and so eventually I went as a college boy to Stonewall. Stonewall was a mix of people from the street, people from college, young boys my own age.

There was also another bar called Julius' [00:27:01] which was very famous and still around. Julius' [00:27:04] had a very preppy crowd. Those people, it was very like let's all pretend we're in the closet until we're drunk, until we get a drink on. It was always loaded with blondes, blue eyes, people from Connecticut and schools that were much more prestigious than NYU, probably Rutgers. That was the old world. You felt this was the 50s.

Everyone had the Kennedy haircut as did I 'cause I was a college boy, and then you go into this place where — the Stonewall and immediately you check your coat and the drag queen at that counter liked me. She never charged me and she'd tell me you know, "I'm wanted by the police in Florida, but they're looking for a boy." So that was the kind of people you met. Then you met fabulous, young boys where there were these two, Twiggy and Taffy [00:28:19] or something like that and they were beautiful, beautiful, small, doll-like boys who were in this high, 60s drag that was beautiful. You know?

Whenever our friends would spot them so much and so forth, I also met Holly Woodlawn [00:28:39] before she was Holly Woodlawn [00:28:41] and I think I met someone who told me, you know the Attica riots where the guy is doing it because his boyfriend wants a sex change? I met that guy. I met that guy there and he was very — he was telling me "I have cancer." It was always these fabulous stories and then there would be a drag queen that would come. There was one little drag queen. It was the only time I saw her, but she looked exactly like Diana Ross so everyone went crazy with the big, swooped haircut. Anyway, do you wanna know more about the Stonewall?

Whitney Strub:

Yeah, sure. Sure. Yeah, I feel like this has been —

John Calendo:

I went there for many years. In the 60s it was wild. They did for a while have these beautiful bodied, tall Puerto Rican boys that were go-go dancers. And because it was the 60s, you know those lights where — what were they called? Lava lights? Well, the 60s used to project stuff like that, like gelatin that was like amorphous and they would do it on these two boys. They were dancing to Supremes songs and stuff like that, and it was a great way.

I went there through the college. I happened to be there the night of the riot. It was nuts, and it is true. When people threw them out, the drag queens started to throw pennies at the policemen. That's when things began to get nuts and of course, being careful I didn't stay for all the — all of that, all of the other stuff that is historic, but I

was there and I quickly got out of the way, of harm's way and said I'm not gonna get arrested for this.

Whitney Strub: Wow, that's amazing. From Stonewall to the Little Theatre.
[00:30:43]

John Calendo: It is but a step. [Laughs]

Whitney Strub: [Laughs] Indeed. Actually, there's so much else I'd love to ask you but to pull it to Newark, were you ever at any of the gay bars in Newark or was it just the theaters?

John Calendo: No. I heard there were gay bars in Newark, but by the time I got to Newark I really thought gay bars were for younger men. It seemed to be a waste of time since my goal to go out was to have anonymous sex. And so, you know, I used to love to dance. I was a kid of the 60s, and then eventually somewhere along the line I stopped when I would go to Feathers. [00:31:25] I stopped going to Feathers [00:31:26]. I just went to the parking lot and to the back. You know? It was nice but it was like who cares?

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

John Calendo: You know? It's nice when you have that energy. There's a certain part of it that's tribal fertility dance but after a while it's like I couldn't be bothered. And also, at a certain point in my life if I met someone that wanted to get serious or anything I would put them off. Now this is something that my mother did as well, so there is a lot of psychological reasons for that that are not as interesting as the Little Theatre. [00:32:05]

Whitney Strub: [Laughs] All right, fair enough. Actually just a couple of —

John Calendo: I have to say wait, that I did read your article. I thought it was a scream. When you won't go upstairs and you say does anyone wanna chat about the sociological — you know? I'm like, doesn't he get it? There's the rule of silence. It's as formal and as ironclad as the rule backstage in a play. You don't suddenly burst out into your personality and be real three-dimensional person where everyone there is being a dick.

Whitney Strub: I know.

John Calendo: I did enjoy that.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, and the thing is I knew that and yet —

John Calendo: I thought it was sweet and academic and historian. It's like it's my business. It's what I must do.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, I couldn't think of any other way to start a conversation that wasn't about having sex but was about yeah, academic historical interest so yeah it didn't work very well.

John Calendo: Especially that there were a lot of men who were mostly straight.

Whitney Strub: Right.

John Calendo: Not a lot but there was a certain percentage there that were doing this and felt terrible; shame. Well maybe they didn't feel ashamed but it was something that was really compartmentalized more even for a gay man who does it to be anonymous, but it was deeply compartmentalized. I met people like that all through my life.

Whitney Strub: No, absolutely. I will say I did wind up ultimately chatting to several men at the Little Theatre. [00:33:43]

John Calendo: Oh really?

Whitney Strub: Several of them said they would do oral history interviews but then found one reason or another not to follow through and I totally understand. I understand exactly the dynamic you're talking about. That for some of them this is not part of who they see themselves as being or their sexual identity. I did wanna ask did you ever see women there at all?

John Calendo: Never. Though I had seen women in the theater at Baltimore which was legendary. In fact, John Waters talks about it. I can't remember the name of it, but that Baltimore theater was a lot of hot sex. You know, the south begins in Maryland. It really does. That's why if you remember Lincoln put people in jail because they wanted to go over to the Confederacy and that's where he suspended Habeas Corpus. He just would put — because they wanted to be. He didn't want Washington to be surrounded by the Confederacy because you'd have Virginia on the South and Maryland on the North. Yeah, it was pretty fun.

Whitney Strub: That was on the famous block in Baltimore?

John Calendo: It wasn't on the famous block. It was in the middle of nowhere. It was near someplace called Moravia [00:35:04] and I don't remember the name of the theater, but it was very well known.

There was another theater that wasn't as good that was on a block that was full of commerce. This was again in a Black neighborhood, but all of Baltimore, it was always a riot. There was an interesting thing. As soon as I left the northeastern region, my type which was Italian-American, Northeastern, dark hair, brown eyes, sort of nice bone structure, good face, I was always very popular, Baltimore, Washington, the South, California, you know whereas in the Northeast it was much more of a — it was we've seen you. [laughs] We've seen your type. We've seen better stamps of you and less stamps of you.

Whitney Strub: You're not exotic up here. Sorry, I had a follow up question. I'm trying to remember which stream to follow. One thing I wanted to ask was you kind of mentioned how you weren't really looking for relationships. I'm just curious whether you developed any lasting either sexual or friendly relationships.

John Calendo: No.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

John Calendo: From the Newark, not from any of these anonymous situations. There was — when I was behind the parking lot at Feathers [00:36:35], I might've been in my forties then but there were a few boys that were my fans and wanted to go to the diner or something like that. But I always felt it wouldn't work out. You see, I was a very fat child and because of that, I eventually lost weight, but I am soft. Men don't like that, at least the men I met and I had too many experiences of going home with people because of my face and then seen my body and for whatever reason it didn't work or I was told yeah, I don't feel right or something and I always knew what the story was.

I said don't put yourself up for that anymore. You know what your strong point is, and because I did like anonymous sex I didn't go there because I couldn't do the other but because I said you keep your clothes on. You basically are moving around especially in these dimmer places in theaters on the strength of your face and your size, whereas in the theater you really become more of a silhouette. You know? You become even less of that. The theater I learned was good for being older. Of course, I was into them young, but the theater was good because you — that was wiped away sometimes. As long as you had a thin — if you kept yourself thin, the silhouette of age was a heavier silhouette and a slower silhouette. Like I said it was a masquerade party.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. One more question about the kind of dynamics. Were there regulars that you would pair off with repeatedly or were there always new people? Were they were the kind of guys you would recognize and just do the nod and look at one another?

John Calendo: Only in the “Sherwood Forest” [00:38:36] as it's called, the wooded area behind — near Feathers [00:38:42]. Only in “Sherwood Forest” [00:38:45] would I see regulars, would I chat, would I have my favorites. Usually in these theaters, no. The theaters were not that, certainly not Newark. I don't remember ever having a conversation that wasn't about sex. You know?

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

John Calendo: I'm about to sneeze in a moment but anyway, I never — I imagine people did but I was never looking for that. But there was something about the idyllic surroundings of trees and woods and water, you hear water coming in in the “Sherwood Forest” [00:39:35]. That was a conducive to a more romantic — it was the most beautiful — I've been to the Fire Islands and The Pines and all that but you know it gets very professional when you're out in The Pines or were, and people are in what was called the “meat rack” [00:39:57] which was a part of the deck. What do they call those things where you walk on, runway, whatever. That was more wooded, but “Sherwood Forest” [00:40:06] was a very beautiful, beautiful episode for this type of stuff. But not the theaters. The theaters were about in my opinion, about anonymity.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. So how often would you come to a place like the Little Theatre [00:40:24]? And — sorry, go ahead and answer that one.

John Calendo: Well it would depend. You know I was older. Sex wasn't that urgent. I would say if it was once a month that's much more than it really was. But it certainly was somewhere between six to twelve times a year.

Whitney Strub: Okay. In an average trip how long would you stay? Would it be get in, get off?

John Calendo: It was interesting because time disappears when you're in these places, but I always found that I would leave the Little Theatre [00:41:04] much earlier than I thought it was because I had used up. Either I had had sex or I had just given up. You know there was no interest. So I would say that though I thought I would be staying there for three to four hours I sometimes would leave I guess in two and a half hours.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, so usually though it was either on the days when you give up, it's just giving up. But on the days — on the other days it's basically find somebody, have sex and then leave or linger around for multiple encounters?

John Calendo: Well no usually at my — at the age of 50 once was more than enough. I wasn't a machine, but yeah. Once I had sex it was like let me get out of Newark before nightfall. You know? There was still that idea in my mind as someone who came from a — well now it's very — it used to be Cuban-American. Now it's very south — middle America. Middle, the Spanish places that are between California and South America, what is that called, Ecuador, Nicaragua? I used to — isn't it called Middle America?

Whitney Strub: Latin America?

John Calendo: Whatever. But no. I would not have feared it really if I was there at night, but I just felt like, you know I would — it was interesting. I learned not to go on weekends because on weekends I would feel that there were much more young people there who were into each other, and it was like really? To me, it was better on a Friday. And I'd sort of figure after work, time it for after work. I'd probably get there at three p.m. and I'd probably leave before seven, so three, four five, six, seven. That is four hours, but as I say, you know time, when it comes to sex cruising, when you're in the head, time expands and it becomes very different.

Did you ever see the movie *Eyes Wide Shut*? Now a lot of people don't like that movie. I like that movie a lot. If you remember, it begins where the couple gets stoned, and then Tom Cruise goes out and he has a couple of bizarre things. The guy who's on the counter is coming onto him. These guys in the street, they are — they beat on him 'cause they think he's gay. To me, what that is he is horny, and when you're horny it's this filter comes on, and the whole world suddenly exposes itself as being a gay place. And it feels like everyone is ready to have sex or is coming on to you. That movie did it very well because it just did it very calmly. You know?

It didn't do it like it was the end of the world, but it is one of the features that marked that film where everyone is excited by Tom Cruise who is just moving through vignette to vignette to vignette, and that's what's it's like in these — when you're in the mood for sex. Times goes away because everything comes into this filter of, I'm on the hunt. Maybe it's something primitive and everything is

about the hunt and getting the game, and that you're wasting time never appears to you until later, until you go back into the sunlit or just as about it's about to get dark and you realize, "Uh huh that was four hours." [Laughs]

Whitney Strub: Yeah, that's really beautifully put. And so the Little Theatre [00:45:27] just abruptly closed. You hadn't seen it coming. You just showed up one day and they're —

John Calendo: I showed up. I didn't see the announcements or anything. I was there shortly after because they did have a date I believe on the sign that it will close or would close and we thank all our patrons. I must've come within a month of that. It was warm. It was summer, wasn't it?

Whitney Strub: Yeah. I think if I recall, June or July I think of —

John Calendo: That would've been it.

Whitney Strub: So The one thing I haven't asked you much about is the other theater in Newark, The Cameo [00:46:05], which is a little less familiar to me. I wonder if you can just walk through that.

John Calendo: The Cameo [00:46:12] was more exciting. I would go to The Cameo [00:46:15] first and then if things didn't work out I'd go to the Little Theatre [00:46:19]. The Cameo [00:46:20], you walked up these narrow stairs and there was always either — there was a slightly overheated quality. Interestingly it was always a woman who was taking the ticket. I felt it was some Black family owned it.

Then you walked into a kind of room. It was like a living room really but not as domestic, but there were couches. There was a television. Sometimes people would sit. Then there was two theaters. There was one theater where it was straight films and then there was another theater that you went through and you had to pass the bathrooms which were way at the bottom. Nothing was going on in those bathrooms, but then you found the gay theater and it had a bathroom that was close to it. Tons of things was going on in that area.

I found that theater wilder, rougher and eventually I heard it's closed because someone got stabbed there. Someone flipped out. Someone lost it. You know, we live in a world where certain people don't really get the obvious facts. I remember that it just

was a more for me, a theater where there was more sex. It was a theater for me where there was more interesting sex.

Maybe that — I think it was the Little Theatre [00:48:04] where was a predominance of a preference for Blacks. I think, but whatever it is that's like — all these things blurred together, I don't remember particular incidents. The Little Theatre [00:48:17] by its very nature and its name already had — I already — my imagination was working as I would approach it and see Little Theatre [00:48:29]. Then when I read your article that it was this place for ethnic Jewish films and then sex films that were of a high quality like *I Am Curious (Blue)* [00:48:43] or whatever it was called in my era, it seemed like okay.

This is a little gem. This truly is a bijou [00:48:50]. This truly is a boutique kind of specialty theater. You couldn't say that about The Cameo. The Cameo [00:48:59] was something that had been converted into a theater from rooms on the second floor that were always a little overheated. Of course, the bathrooms always smelled of Pine Sol and lava soap and things like that. And, you know, in these theaters, whenever you went in the bathroom there was always a little bit of a line at the sink 'cause people wanted to wash their hands. They wanted to gargle. They wanted to do other things including myself.

Whitney Strub: So actually I've only got a few more questions for you, but one of them is actually about this comparative thing. You suggested slightly different sex cultures at the two Newark theaters.

John Calendo: Definitely, yes.

Whitney Strub: I wonder if you could flesh that out a little just more concretely what that entailed.

John Calendo: Well the Little Theatre [00:49:54] as I said was more Black men who were into Black men, often young, athletic Black men who seemed very straight, who seemed they were coming from — not many but there would always be a few and they were like gods. Visually, physically and they would hang around but they would be interested in other Black men.

My memories of The Cameo [00:50:26] were just more of the indiscriminate nature of an orgy. It was much easier and much quicker to become nothing, to become a nobody, to shed your identity in a place like The Cameo [00:50:43] where it was darker. It had more of the qualities of sleaze that when you're in that

heightened, horned up sense like in *Eyes Wide Open* has blossoms with a lot of crazy possibilities, sexual freedoms that you would not even acknowledge being interested in. But it had much more of a wildness about it for me.

That's the only things I can think of that's different is Little Theatre [00:51:23] was the most — at least from the outside, at least from my imagination the most beautiful and unexpected of adult theaters 'cause the ones in Hollywood were often just very a warehouse — not a warehouse but a room, a large — something that might've been a store and they put a screen down and everything. The one in San Diego was like that as well. And, you know, Hollywood would be a place where there would be a lot of really old theaters, but there was only one that was an old theater that was — but they never had any character. They never had names I remembered.

Whitney Strub: Were you ever at the Vista Theater when it was a porn theater?

John Calendo: That sounds very familiar.

Whitney Strub: Up by Silverlake, right where Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood converge.

John Calendo: I know that area. Was there a theater? No. I think I was —there was a theater that was right under — no, that was a bookstore. I was thinking of right under Griffith Park where I was almost arrested. [Laughs] You know I never did well in the daytime in these parks and things like that. It always was like gosh, more nature, more me, sunlight who was like young me and the pilgrimed.

Whitney Strub: Actually — so I said I had only two questions. But now I've got two more but —

John Calendo: I'm not taking count. You know?

Whitney Strub: Okay.

John Calendo: We'll go on forever.

Whitney Strub: Just thinking regionally up here in the Northeast, I'm just wondering if you've been to the other theaters that lasted into the 21st century like the King's Highway [00:53:11] in Brooklyn or the Fair Theater. [00:53:12]

John Calendo: I think I was in something in Brooklyn. That was in the middle of — which blew my mind, a very sweet Hasidic neighborhood. And you park the car and you walk and you see fathers and their little sons, all the sons with payots [Hebrew term for sideburns] walking around. You walk into this den. That was a very large theater. It was too large for what it should be, and for all of its depth and everything it was too well lit. it was too much. They didn't get it. You know? I don't know if that's the King's Highway [00:53:54] theater. Is it?

Whitney Strub: I'm not sure, by the time I got out here into the east coast it had partitioned into three smaller theaters although it was a huge building. Once upon a time it had been one screen.

John Calendo: Okay. I remember what I saw in that theater, it was a very — it was in Brooklyn and it was in a Jewish neighborhood which was King's Highway [00:54:19]. I don't remember much more about it.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, I was just curious. The Fair Theater [00:54:26] out in East Elmhurst is also that model of a huge, old theater with a 1000 —

John Calendo: Fair Theater [00:54:31] sounds like something — it's in East Elmhurst? Where's that, New York?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, way out in Queens, and it shows Bollywood movies on a huge screen and then porn movies in smaller.

John Calendo: No, I would remember that.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

John Calendo: 'Cause I would've spent time with the Bollywood. Looked like [unintelligible 54:50].

Whitney Strub: Yeah, it's fascinating. I don't know whether these places will reopen after COVID because I think they were barely hanging on to begin with at this point. But um —

John Calendo: What there is that my friend turned me onto is there is a club in Brooklyn, but it's heavily oriented toward water sports. I have been there and it's mostly men from my generation, but then there are young men that come in there. It's a little bit wild. It could be darker. It's really something that's in a basement of a Brooklyn apartment house, and it's the only thing that remains of — that I know of, that remains of that let's go into this sex club.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. It's definitely a disappearing infrastructure.

John Calendo: In the 60s there were all sorts of sex clubs. I used to go to The Mineshaft [00:55:54]. I used to go to The Anvil. The Anvil [00:55:55] was where the Indian guy from the Village People was one of the go-go boys. He was great. He was always doing that sound that became a disco sound. It was like — [makes sound] [00:56:08] I can't do it any more but it was this weird little sound that started to show up in records. I said that's Felipe.

Whitney Strub: And Ruby Rims, the drag queen.

John Calendo: I remember Ruby Rims. I didn't know her.

Whitney Strub: From Newark actually. We did an interview. I don't think it's up on the website yet. The last question about the sex culture in the Newark theaters that I wanted to ask was about navigating safe sex and safety and whether — what the culture around that was, whether it was —

John Calendo: There was no safe sex in those theaters. Of course, I didn't see much anal intercourse. I wasn't looking for anal intercourse, but it must've gone on. It wasn't like everyone said "oh no." But I was an oral. I'm an oral bottom and I never worried about that. During the AIDS crisis, I was very freaked out about all that to the point where I couldn't see things about AIDS on television. Around that time I went into the twelve step programs for overeating, and part of that I said I will have to volunteer.

So I volunteered at St. Claire's in the AIDS unit to get over it. Said let me handle this. What if I get sick? Someone's gonna take care of me so this is like paying it forward. How did I get into all of that? I forget.

Whitney Strub: Thinking about safety.

John Calendo: Oh if there were safety measures. All through that period, I didn't, but eventually as the cocktail came around I did very carefully have oral sex without anyone cumming in my mouth. Then sometimes when they did, I'd freak out, but usually what happened for me in these places is the oral sex was an aid to masturbation. Once I had cum, the show was over basically knowing that I didn't owe anyone anything and they didn't owe anything to me. I wasn't one of the gay men who really are very focused around semen.

In fact, I had an operation for my prostate and one of the things about it is that you don't cum forward anymore. You do have an orgasm, but for a while I told my doctor I feel — I guess this is what a woman feels like 'cause it's internal. Then I became so happy because as a young man it would go all over the place, and you'd have it on the sheets and you go, "Oh Christ sakes, no. There's a wet spot!" So that was great.

Now, I have a friend who had a similar operation and he mourns the loss of his ejaculate shooting forth. To me, it's like ewww, less to clean up really.

Whitney Strub: [Laughs]

John Calendo: For a straight man it might be a problem 'cause they might still wanna have children. There is a way I was told that you can extract the semen from urination right after this.

Whitney Strub: I actually did not know that.

John Calendo: You wouldn't know that unless you had this condition and had to read up about what I — what operation should I get.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, give me a few years and who knows. I think that covers everything I was gonna ask you. Kind of what I'm thinking here is we can probably stop recording now, and if you're open to it once we get the transcript and if there are follow up questions doing a short second round just to follow up if something —

John Calendo: That would be fine for me. Listen, I don't need to read the transcripts and I won't because I'm busy just as you are but certainly a second round, third round. I would at some point like to meet you when this plague dies.

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

John Calendo: Maybe next year in the summer.

Whitney Strub: Yeah let's hope. I really appreciate this. Such an eloquent rendition of this history that I've personally been so invested in documenting because it's so ephemeral. Other than this kind of oral history there's absolutely no archive of the story you just told of these experiences that are so ephemeral but that are such an essential part of Newark's sexual history. I really appreciate this. It really, really adds to this collection in my mind and it was just —

John Calendo: Were those theaters really like a vent for gay men? How important were those theaters from your study?

Whitney Strub: Well, you know, I think — kind of tapping into some of the things you were suggesting, I think that they were very central for non-Newarkers who would come to Newark specifically for them. For actual gay men in Newark and especially gay Black men, at least based on the archive that we've amassed, they didn't seem to be as important. I interviewed several guys who — I've lived here for decades and were interested in public sex and cruising and all of that. The theaters don't really play much of a role.

They're familiar with them. They had stopped in but yeah, I think the core culture of the porn theatres in Newark really are — guys who are hard to access through the lens of LGBT history for exactly the reasons you're talking about. Either they don't identify as gay or queer or even if they do they're not as out and public about it. And so it is a strangely elusive world, at least through the lens of an LGBTQ oral history project.

John Calendo: Well, did the Black men of Newark like to cruise each other on the street?

Whitney Strub: Yeah, absolutely. The parks like Washington Square park, right across the street from Little Theatre [01:02:13], across Broad.

John Calendo: Where there's a beautiful sculpture in that park.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, but it used to have more trees and foliage. That's all chopped down now. They —

John Calendo: Was there raids?

Whitney Strub: There weren't raids so much as just urban renewal, cut down all the trees and there's no privacy.

John Calendo: I see.

Whitney Strub: But then Halsey Street as well, parallel to Broad Street just going out from Little Theatre [01:02:39], that used to be a really cruisy, kind of hustler and rough trade kind of street. Again, it was really gentrification and urban renewal that just kind of eradicated that.

John Calendo: Yeah. I came to Newark after all of that had been done which was very — it was a very pleasant place.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. And there were some gay bars in Newark. Murphy's, which was downtown, was there for decades, and there were several other downtown bars in the 70s.

John Calendo: You interviewed a bar owner, right? There's a bar, I guess they owned a theater and a bar 'cause in that article in Little Theatre [01:03:13], you're talking to a bartender, aren't you?

Whitney Strub: I don't think so. There was the diner next door.

John Calendo: Maybe it's a diner 'cause when you said Murphy's that seemed to ring a bell.

Whitney Strub: Murphy's is a little further away. That's over off Market Street coming out of Newark Penn Station.

John Calendo: Now was it a down low bar or was it a gay bar?

Whitney Strub: It was strange. By day it would be a straight business clientele kind of place, and then in the nighttime it was definitely an openly gay bar, one of the first in Newark. It actually won a lawsuit in 1967 to allow people, the phrase "well-behaved homosexuals" to congregate.

John Calendo: Oh great.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. So there were few of those other places and I think in Newark the bars and then also the ballroom scene and voguing.

John Calendo: Like burning? There was a —

Whitney Strub: Yeah, exactly. Then *Paris is Burning* actually has a bunch of people from Newark in it. I think that tended to be much more central to the kind of predominantly Black Newark gay history than the porn theaters themselves per se, at least from what I've found in a decade of doing this now.

John Calendo: Right, interesting.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, so this adds a lot to the picture.

John Calendo: Yeah. I didn't realize that the theaters had a specific kind of clientele.

Whitney Strub: I mean actually it's funny. Some of the Newark gay men who we've interviewed, they're perfectly happy to talk about sex and

cruising. When they talk about the theaters, they're like “no, no, not the theaters. They were sleazy. They were dirty.” So yeah, there's a —

John Calendo: That was their appeal.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, yeah.

John Calendo: To those who liked it, that was the — the appeal was to have a kind of — well, it is the shame, the transgressiveness to use an academic word, the transgressiveness of homosexuality to be in the dark and to have to lose your personality. I guess I'm very much a creature of my time. I was born in '48. I went through my teens in the 60s and I would go to the trucks and everything. As would all my friends. That was the social scene, Christopher Street.

Whitney Strub: Yeah, I can imagine. Absolutely but yeah, I can let you go for now and then I'll try to get this transcribed fairly soon. It takes a little while. We send it out —

John Calendo: Of course.

Whitney Strub: To get transcribed and then I will review the transcript for accuracy, and then I'll hit you for whatever — however you want to be presented on the website, whether it's with a picture or just a picture of the theater, one image you want to represent this interview.

John Calendo: Well, I don't think I want my picture.

Whitney Strub: Yeah that's fine.

John Calendo: I'm going this far.

Whitney Strub: [Laughs]

John Calendo: I might use my young picture. I can't show it to you, can't I?

Whitney Strub: Not here but you can email it to me. Yeah, I'd love to.

John Calendo: I have a picture from when I was fifty. This would be a picture of when I was going to these —

Whitney Strub: Perfect, yeah, absolutely.

John Calendo: I could — yeah. I will email it to you afterward.

Whitney Strub: All right, that sounds good. I'm gonna stop recording. Any final words for the transcript or should I hit stop?

John Calendo: Just that it's been an enjoyable experience.

Whitney Strub: Great, same. Yeah, I really appreciate this. I love it. I'm gonna hit stop here and see what happens.

[End of Audio]