
Al Carmines

Al Carmines was Judson's assistant minister from 1961 to 1964 and associate minister from 1964 to 1981.

My experience with Judson House began before Judson hired me. I used to come to the art gallery showings and the parties they had in the lounge in the Student House before I met Howard or anyone. Steve André, a classmate at Union Theological Seminary, was connected with a lot of people at the house. They had happenings in the gymnasium or in the gallery. The parties often lasted till three in the morning, and then I would have to get up at 6:30 to do my field work on Long Island or in Yonkers. But I got excited about avant-garde art—Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine. This was 1959–1960.

I graduated from Union in 1961. I had my interview with Howard Moody because I wanted to stay in New York and get a Ph.D. I had never composed or thought of composing or writing or anything like that. Anyway, Howard told me the church wanted to hire me for two years to start a theater program and also to work with artists. I was happy to take that position.

The summer before I came to Judson in September 1961 I lived with Lyle Guttu and someone else in an apartment on Washington Place. I worked in the library at Union Theological Seminary, probably the most unfortunate job I have ever had. I had to vacuum books. My supervisor was a Chinese man who would say, “Al, if you do it right the first time, you do not have to do it again. Now you have to do it again.” (My vacuuming skills have never been great.)

In the fall I would have an apartment in the Student House, and Lyle also needed a place to live in the fall. Lyle and I have been close friends for over forty years. So I went to Donald Birt, who was acting minister at the time, and asked him if it would be all right if Lyle lived with me in the apartment in the Student House. There had just been a scandal in the church. A former associate minister had told the congregation that he was gay. This was 1961, and the congregation was terribly upset. So Lyle moved into a place on Avenue A.

MY FIRST APARTMENT!

I moved into the Student House on the first floor, on the corner of Thompson and Third streets, and I lived there my first three years at Judson. I was thrilled. I had my own bathroom. I had never had my own bathroom. At home we had five members of the family, and sometimes seven when my two cousins lived with us for a while when their father died. I also had never had a shower—I grew up with a tub. I had my own living room, my own kitchen, my own bedroom for the first time. I could not believe it.

BETTY AND WILLIE MAE

In 1961 the Student House was dominated by two people. One was Betty Murphy, who was the controller of the Student House. She was a lovely woman with a youthful face but prematurely gray hair. She lived there with her husband, Richard, who attended medical school.

At the Judson board meetings, which Betty attended, Howard would say at the end of the meeting, “Betty, what did you have to give them this month?” Betty would say something like twenty dollars or thirty dollars. For months, I had no idea what they were talking about. It turned out that Betty was slipping the sanitation men—this was when Robert Wagner was mayor—some money so that they would pick up all the garbage promptly without letting it build up into a terrible situation. I was shocked when I found out, but Howard wasn’t at all.

The other person was Willie Mae Wallace. She was the cook, a black woman. She cooked two meals for the students and then took over the job of cleaning my apartment. Willie Mae was a fabulous lady. She would make wonderful meals, very good and very fattening, Southern cooking like I was used to. She and I would always gather in the morning. In those days I usually stayed up till four or five in the morning and then sleep till eleven or twelve, because my job was to go to bars and cafes and to meet artists and playwrights. The doughnuts for breakfast were delivered around six in the morning, and I would try and stay up till then. I would have a couple of doughnuts and a couple of cups of coffee or maybe seven cups of

coffee and then go to sleep till about twelve to go to the office and meet with Howard.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

At that time the Student House was a residence for foreign students at New York University. I remember some of them quite well. My closest friend was Kala Pant, an Indian girl. She came from Puna. She was a Brahmin and her grandfather was a maharaja. Back home she had become pregnant, and her entire family took her to the gates of the city and left her. Her lover paid for her to come to New York and to enroll at NYU. Kala Pant typed my graduate papers for Union Seminary.

Another good friend was a Pakistani guy named Said Said. He and Kala Pant would not eat at the same table, because he was Muslim and she was Hindu and there was great strife between the Pakistanis and the Indians at that time. It got so I would eat my evening meal one night with Kala and one night with Said—lamb and rice with Kala and beef and rice with Said. The cow was sacred to Indians, and of course there was no pork for either.

There were people from every country. It was a wonderful environment. A lot of things changed for me in that year. There was a man from Nigeria who gave me a robe when he left. There were people from Germany, from Italy. There was Marjorie Saunders (who still calls me every six months from Spain, where she now lives). Her father was the headmaster of the Peddy School in Hightstown, New Jersey, and he persuaded Howard to accept Marjorie as an American student, even though the Student House was really for foreign students. There was another American, Bob Sergeant, a North Carolinian. I was very close to him.

Juell Krauter and Beverly Bach lived in a commodious apartment. Chuck Eaton, who worked in the drug program at Judson, also lived in Judson House.

During my first year, Bob Nichols and I ran the theater together. We founded the theater and did plays, and I acted in all of them. I had acted before in college and in seminary. In fact, a producer offered to set me up in an apartment in New York if I would study acting. He thought I would be a great actor.

I BECOME A COMPOSER

A year later, we were doing a play that needed incidental music. Larry Kornfeld, who directed the play, said, "Al, just write some incidental music that we can have between the dialogue." The play was called *Vaudeville Skit*, and it involved three bums in a Becket-like play, so I wrote what I thought was Becket-like music. Jerry Tallmer, who reviewed the play for the *Village Voice*, went ape over the music and wrote something like, "A new composer has been discovered. He writes like no one else writes."

That's how I began my career as a composer. I did not have a piano in my apartment, so I worked in the Student House lounge, which had an upright piano and a recordplayer. I would listen to Bessie Smith and Mozart.

Beverly and Ralph Waite came to the Student House and took Betty Murphy's place. Beverly was another fabulous woman. Ralph was an actor and a UCC minister. They divorced while they were there.

By 1964 Judson House had become predominantly a residence for artists. Many artists lived there: Larry Kornfeld, Marty Washburn, Charlie Adams. It was a vibrant place with painters, sculptors, dancers, filmmakers, students of Merce Cunningham, students at NYU, students from the New School, people who studied with Jimmy Waring.

AN EVEN BIGGER APARTMENT

In 1964 the Judson board decided to take me on full-time as an associate minister. Lew Pressler, who was the head of Judson's personnel committee, took me to lunch. We went to Rocco's, which was down on Thompson Street between Bleecker and Houston. We had a couple of drinks. He was kind of hesitant, but finally he said, "We want you to be our associate minister and the board has decided to offer you a salary of \$3,500 plus an apartment, a bigger apartment in Judson House. We want you to bring up your piano from Virginia, and we will pay for that." I was overwhelmed: \$3,500 is like \$45,000 now, plus the apartment. I said that I could only give a tentative yes, because I really wanted to pursue a Ph.D. I wanted to study with Paul Tillich.

I moved down to the other end of the house and now had two bedrooms, a big living room, and a nice-sized kitchen directly above the gallery.

A STRING OF SECRETARIES

At the church my first secretary was Shirley Cantrell, and then Juell Krauter worked for me for a while. Juell was a good secretary, except that she would get involved with these bums who would come in off the street and ask for money. I was always terrified, but Juell was very sympathetic. She would listen to these long, drawn-out stories about why they needed the money. The bums never frightened her until one day, when I was up in the sanctuary and heard Juell scream. I ran down, and there was this man who had removed Juell's shoes and was sucking on her toes. Juell wanted him to let her toes go. He would not let her toes go and was moving up to her ankle. I called the police—I did not know what else to do. They came and literally had to pull the man off her legs. The police said, "Don't you know who this is? This is So-and-So, the well-known foot fetishist."

For a brief period I had a male secretary, Søren Agenoux. His mother was Danish, his father French. He did absolutely nothing. He was very aesthetic. He read scripts all day long. I got scripts by the hundreds once the theater was established, and Søren never wrote any of my letters. All he did was read scripts. He would give me ten that he thought worthy of my attention, and he discovered Irene Fornes. I kept putting her off and had not read any of her scripts. Finally Søren said I must read this script, which was the first act of *Promenade*. So I did, and I was absolutely bowled over, and we did *Promenade*.

Kathy Jacobsen was my next secretary, and she was the first full-time secretary just for me. She was wonderful. She lived with the Moodys at Grace House on East 18th Street. One night she asked me to dinner there. I loved going to Grace House, because Lorry is a fabulous cook. Lorry left us alone, and all of a sudden Kathy began to cry. She told me she had to quit. "What do you mean you have to quit? I am very satisfied with your work." She said, "Al, don't you understand? I am pregnant." And I said, "But you can still be my secretary." No, she said, she was going back to Iowa to have the

baby. And so she did. When she was ready to come back, she took up her nursing career again because the pay was much better.

I was desperate for a secretary, and that's when Joan Muyskens came to work for me. This was in 1969. I had a terrible time remembering Joan's last name. John Tungate finally hung a sign in my office that read: "Your secretary's name is Joan Muyskens." (He made another sign with the drawing of a woman, underneath which it said: "There is a bomb in Guillatt.")

LOVE ENTERS THE PICTURE

In 1967 I had my first love affair with a man, Jeffrey Apter, while *In Circles* was being done. Jeffrey was Jewish, small, a poet, dictatorial, impossible, but I loved him very much. I cast him in the shows I did. He had a tenor voice that was fairly good. He and Ira Siff would do tenor duets. I never thought of living with him; it never crossed my mind. He had an apartment on Sullivan Street and I had the apartment on Thompson. Then one morning, Jeffrey showed up. He brought suitcases with him, and clothes and books and records. He spent all day carting his stuff over. And something inside me said, "Let Jeffrey live with you. It will be a lovely experience. But you keep paying for Jeffrey's apartment." I don't know why I thought that in the back of my mind, but I was terrified for some reason.

CAST PARTIES WITH PUNCH

We began having parties in my new apartment for every play—opening parties and closing parties. These parties became wilder and wilder. There would be eighty to a hundred people. I had done a play by Harry Koutoukas called *Pomegrenada* for which I had also written the music, and I had created a punch in Harry's honor called the Pomegrenada Punch. It was a very famous punch. It was champagne and cognac and strawberries and sometimes blueberries. I had no idea it was so powerful.

Albert Poland came to see *Peace* because he wanted to produce it, and I had no idea who Albert Poland was. After the show he wanted to attend the party, and I said great. At that time I stored my liquor in a closet in the church office—I don't know why. I asked Albert to help me carry the liquor to my apartment, and Albert said,

"I am not a livery boy, you know, I am a producer." I said, "I know you are not a livery boy. Now you take this box and I'll take the other, and we'll go to my apartment and make the punch." Albert had an appalled look on his face, but he did take the box over.

The parties were usually wonderful. Everybody came: church members, actors, actors' friends, actors' enemies. There was a good fight at almost every party. There would be fist fights over who got to spend the night with whom. At one party, someone locked herself in the bathroom. Someone else knocked on the bathroom door to be let in, and when the door did not open after a while, this person began banging and using force, knocking the door to smithereens. Willie Mae came the next day to clean up. She said, "Al, what happened to your bathroom?" I said, "Some people got a little carried away." She said, "It looks like the whole party got carried away." She was very upset.

JUDSON DANCE THEATER

The Judson Dance Theater started because of the Judson Poets Theater. The Theater did *What Happened* in 1963, and we used dancers in that play. When the dancers saw the space, they were thrilled and asked if they could start a dance theater using Judson Church. They also wanted to take the name of Judson Dance Theater.

The Judson Dance Theater gave its first three concerts in June. I was terribly nervous. I had been watching their rehearsals in the gymnasium, and I could not believe what they were doing. They were standing still, they were running, they were grabbing people from the audience to join them, they were climbing ladders. They had tape recorders on with moans and groans and sometimes high whistles and flutes and sometimes electronic music. The audience loved it. The dance theater was far in advance of anything else that was happening.

In 1966 Yvonne Rainer and Bob Morris did the famous nude dance in the sanctuary of the church. Howard and I were both called upon to go to the American Baptist Convention and explain the use of church space for nude dancing. Howard loved a good fight. I wrote a paper that Howard could use in defense. In the paper I said that in Victorian times people used to hide the legs of a piano because it was thought that the legs might excite men and women too much.

Howard met with the Baptist people and we were exonerated or at least we were not thrown out of the convention. The Judson Dance Theater flourished enormously, as did the Judson Poets Theater.

CATWALKS AND A SUNKEN TUB

In 1970 my apartment was renovated. Bruce Mailman, who produced *The Faggot* and who owned the theater where we did *Peace*, took a great interest in me as a person. He told me, "You should really have something done with that apartment. It is wonderful space, but it is so old-fashioned. See if the church will give you a couple of thousand dollars to redecorate." So I asked Howard about it, and Howard said that it was indeed old-fashioned and the church would give me the money.

I planned to be away anyhow to do *In Circles* at Stanford University. I was going to drive all the way, since I was not flying in those days, so I would be gone all summer. I told Bruce everything had to be done by September. Bruce asked, "Are you giving me carte blanche as to how to do everything?" And I said, "Yes, I don't care what you do." Bruce said, "I am going to make it state of the art. You will be in *Time* magazine, *House Beautiful*, everything. I am going to turn this place inside out."

I went to California, and after two months returned home to New York. I opened the door to my apartment, and it was like opening a door into space. The first thing that happened was that I fell. Bruce had built platforms, catwalks, all around the edge of the place, and I now had a sunken living room, which Bruce said was very chic. This huge, sunken space was surrounded by cubes that were covered with gray industrial carpeting. My grand piano was in this space. When I opened the door to the bathroom, there was a sunken tub. I was used to taking a bath in a regular tub. I was never good with my feet—I was never a dancer. I fell into the tub every time I took a bath. I stopped taking baths because I could not get in and I could not get out. Luckily there was still the shower. Once a week I would take a bath and fall in and fall out.

The apartment gave one an Alice in Wonderland feeling, and people were struck by it. No one complimented me, though, which upset me a lot. People would say, "Oh, your place looks so interesting." But they never said that it looked nice. At first, visitors thought

that the gray cubes were temporary until the real stuff came, but they weren't. I never had any furniture other than those cubes. They were very uncomfortable to sit on.

The master bedroom now had a sunken bed. That sunken bed saw more activity than you can imagine. As people would get drunk on the punch, they would fall forward into the bed. They would go into the bedroom to smoke marijuana or something, and they would collapse into the bed. And then, around two in the morning when I got ready to go to sleep, there would be ten people lying on my bed, out of their minds. I would have to wake everybody up and get all except a few people to leave.

At some point the church decided I needed more space, and the space that used to be the gallery was added to my apartment, with a spiral staircase joining the two.

ILLNESS AND SURGERY

One other event that must be mentioned is my aneurism, because that happened in the Student House. At that time I was close to a student at Union Seminary, and he often came to church. We were doing a play, and after one of the shows we had gone to the McBell's restaurant on Sixth Avenue, and he came home with me for a final drink. All of a sudden I blacked out. The student became terrified and called up Paul Rounsaville. Paul came over right away. An ambulance took me to Saint Vincent's. The people in the emergency room determined that I had been drinking too much and told me to go home and sleep it off. For the next three days I was totally out of my mind. I remember nothing except thinking weird thoughts.

I was taken to Roosevelt Hospital, and when they asked me there how old I was, I said twenty-one and John Kennedy is president. Larry Kornfeld, who had taken me, said to the hospital staff, "He is crazy as a loon. He has lost his mind. I hope you realize that." They put me in a bed. After two weeks I was operated on, and that was the beginning of my closure with Judson.

AL CARMINES

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