

MERCEDES McCAMBRIDGE

Recorded by Mercedes McCambridge
in her home
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Mundelein College
Oral History Archives

M. McCambridge: Hello. I have been asked to set down some of my recollections of Sister Mary Leola Oliver. It's difficult for me for several reasons. First of all, Sister was probably the most influential person in my life. One does not talk lightly about such things. Emotionally — I will probably have a little trouble recounting some of the things. And being Irish, I may elaborate on some of the things that I say about Sister and about me. I make no apologies for that; it's inevitable if you're Irish. You must decorate the truth because the truth is rather tacky, taken on its own terms. But for whatever this is, it is with my admiration and love for a truly great woman, Sister Mary Leola Oliver. No. Sister Mary Leola Graham. I always thought her name was Oliver. See what I mean? There will be discrepancies. I thought her name was Oliver. I even made up a story about how she was a great star in the British theatre and when she came to this country, she was converted to Catholicism and

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entered the BVM order. And that's how come she was so brilliant in the theatre. Actually, I know nothing of Sister Mary Leola's background — where she came from. I only knew her after her emergence in full flower on the eighth floor of Mundelein College in Chicago, at 6363 Sheridan Road. That's where it all began.

In my senior year in high school at St. Thomas Apostle School on the south side of Chicago, my teachers were Dominican sisters. And I was devoted to them. Well, not all of them, but almost all of them. And there was a scholarship exam being conducted at Mundelein College up in the frozen north of the city. And I was entered into it by my elocution teacher. And I entered it and got the second prize. The first prize went to Mary Rose Brown. I will never forget it because at 16, it's hard to admit that somebody is a better actress than you are. It's a scar I carried with me all my life. Darn you, Mary Rose Brown!

Anyhow, as I say, I was devoted to the Dominican sisters and so they kept telling me that it would be fine if I went to Rosary College, their college in River Forest, where they had a wonderful dramatic arts teacher. So, I did that for my freshman year. But, from time to time, during those long journeys out to River Forest, Illinois, I would think about that dynamic little nun who was in charge of the scholarship examinations there at Mundelein that day. She haunted me. If ever I were to become a nun, I thought, that's the kind I'd like to be. I would like to be like that one.

Sister Mary Leola had fire in her heart and in her eyes. She was dynamic to the nth degree. So, after my freshman year at Rosary, I entered Mundelein and they honored the scholarship that I did not accept. It wasn't all that much financially, but every little bit helped in those days. And so began my association with Sister Mary Leola.

She — how do you begin to talk about this woman? She was very petite and her eyes were the most outstanding feature. They sparkled constantly and they probed incessantly. She wore over the ... no, underneath the blouse kind of ... her habit, the part that came up from her waist — she always had little notes pinned to her under blouse. And probably my fate was written on those notes more times than you can possibly imagine when I would be called to account for whatever I had done that day, or the day before, which had so displeased her that she felt I was selling myself short and not living up to what she felt were not only my possibilities but my inevitabilities.

Sister was a, for me, very hard teacher, a task master. But I think my best teachers have always been the ones who have been hardest on me. The ones who kept insisting that I had more to give than I wanted to give. The ones who really believed that it wasn't so important that I would make a fool of myself by overdoing something. They would insist that the important thing was to go ahead — do it! And show me what you can do, not what you are afraid to do because you don't want to have anybody

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notice your lacks. If you lack something, let's see what we can do to overcome it. This is Sister talking. She felt that way particularly about diction. Oh my goodness! And she has certainly handed that to me because I ... I don't know why I have any friends at all. I cannot stand anyone who says, "ninedy" "ninedy-nine". No. Or anyone who says "strenth" or anyone who says "nucular". Oh my goodness! And I can't bite my tongue. I find myself saying again and again, "Don't do that. There's a "g" in length. And there's no such thing as nucular and there's no word that is pronounced ninedy. There's no `t' pronounced in the way you do it. You pronounce a `d'. That's wrong! Don't do that." That's how Sister used to talk to me. And, God help me, that's how I talk to my friends. It's not very nice. It was alright for Sister; she was my teacher. But who the heck do I think I am?

Well, partly that's her fault too. Sister made me think that I was really something. So, if I'm overblown in my self estimation, it's not my fault. Sister did it. [chuckles] Oh, I wish I could talk to her right now. [laughs] She would enjoy this. She'd reprimand me for it, scold me. But then, she'd enjoy it.

Ahh, let me see. Diction. Body movement. She made us, all of us in the Drama Department who were that much interested, she made us stride and limp and cower and kneel and stretch and bend. Every possible thing that you could think of a body doing while

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it was in motion. It was a wonderful game. She knew everything about stage design. I remember how impressed I was with her miniature stages which we would set up in her office on the eighth floor — where she would map out with her own miniature sets and with all of the furniture in the set. She would map out the scene. And then she would, in her notebook, make notes of how she had moved the actors around and how she had changed the scenery and how long it took. And she would estimate that for the big stage downstairs in the auditorium. It was very difficult to stage things in the auditorium because that's what it was. It wasn't an honest to God theatre. Still isn't. But I loved that place. When I've been there lately — which hasn't been all that often — but I am there as often as I can be — and I always genuflect before I go into the auditorium. For me, it's church. And that's due to this little woman, this tiny woman.

She made me do an entrance in *Twelfth Night* from stage right. That middle entry onto the stage. There's one on the other side of the stage too. It's not actually where the big proscenium is, where the big curtain is, but it's a kind of a little side entrance. And all I'd have to do was to come out — this is rehearsal now — come out and deliver my speech. The one where Viola says about Olivia has made the mistake of thinking that Viola is a fellow. And the speech begins, "I left no ring with her. What means this lady? Fortune forbid, my outside hath not charmed her. She made good view on me, indeed so much me

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thought her eyes had lost her tongue." Anyhow, that was that speech. I was to enter, pause for a moment, gather my wits about me -- Viola's wits about her -- and spout. She made me do it twenty-nine times. She was sitting out there in that auditorium all by herself. Every time I'd come out, she'd say, "Go back. Come in again." And finally, she started calling me "Miss McCambridge". Oh boy, then I knew. What was I doing that was so terribly wrong? Well, apparently, I didn't -- when I came on stage -- she finally made me see and I had to find it for myself. She didn't tell me. She wouldn't do that. She would stay there until hell freezes over, until you got it yourself. Or she would say, "You're just not going to be able to do it" some times. Anyhow, what was wrong with it ... when I came out, I didn't plant my feet and then stand there. What I did was shift from one foot to the other. No. Viola's mood and temper at that particular time in Shakespeare's play would not have wavered. She would have, since she was dressed in her ... Viola's suit, she would have stood there with her legs slightly apart in her knickers or her trousers and she would have put her hands on her hips. And she would have said her lines. Well, Sister ... I thought I'm going to go home and tell my mother I cannot come back to this school any more. This woman is trying to kill me. Some place in her is a really mean satanic streak. And she's just trying to kill me. That's all she's trying to do. Well, I was just eighteen.

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Anyhow, Sister believed in so many of us — not just me. The first speaking choir was her brain child. I think it was one of the finest expressions of college work that I've ever heard of. Eight light voices, eight darker voices, and a solo voice in the middle. And guess who was the solo voice? You bet your life I was.

I'm going to have to stop now and come back to this in a little while because there are things which I must do. Bear with me. Thank you. [tape turned off.]

I am convinced that Sister Mary Leola was indeed my guardian angel. Of course, I was taught when I was small that women couldn't be guardian angels, only fellows. I resented that from the first day I heard it. I didn't want and I don't want some unseen angel of the masculine variety following me around all the time, standing at my side all the time. I don't like that. I just ... It doesn't appeal to me. And I blame it all on St. Augustine. I like to blame a lot of things on St. Augustine. And there was his poor mother, praying so hard that he would be saved, and he was telling her that it was okay, he'd be saved. But not yet. He had a lot of fun that he still wanted to get out of his system. And then he wants all of us to feel guilty and everything. Kind of an earlier day Dr. Laura, I think. No thank you, St. Augustine. Please don't have any fellow angel following me around, standing next to me all my life. I think Sister was

my guardian angel for awhile and then even she had the good taste and the good sense to step out of the picture when my life went on to other realms. But I'm awfully grateful that she was there when I needed her. And she was. [tape turned off]

[trying to resume the tape] Oh gee! This darn thing. You see, when you are taught by someone as artistically wise as Sister Mary Leola. You don't learn anything at all about how to run tape recording machines or how to work a screw driver or what to do with a light socket that doesn't work right. You don't learn any of that stuff. You just learn how to be an actor. That's all you learn. So, you see, even Sister — for all of her perfectness — didn't know everything. She wasn't much of a mechanic, I don't think. Neither am I. So forgive the last outburst. And away we go.

I have said before that Sister usually in her productions would have her eyes set on one of the roles in the play that might have gone to her, had she been a student instead of the teacher. Heaven help the girl who was enacting the role that Sister might have wanted for herself. Sooner or later during rehearsal time, Sister would gather her outer skirts around her, with a great safety pin, and up through her ... not belt. I don't know what it's called. Anyhow, so that she wouldn't trip over herself. And then she would get up on stage while the poor student actor was asked to sit in the auditorium and watch Sister go through the student's part.

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I tell you it was fantastic to watch. She did that to me a couple of times. But I remember most vividly in Ari Guyon's play, *The Comedian*, where I played Paupier. Sister wanted that part. And so one day in rehearsal, she got it. And she was wonderful in it. And I don't know that I ever came up to her performance in it. But at least she was satisfied. She played it once that afternoon in rehearsal. And she was very, very good. She had quite a range. Her voice was wonderful. And her body language, even in her habit, was graceful and spontaneous and fresh. Sister was an actress. And she knew it too. [chuckles] And she knew how to use it. [laughs] Oh boy. Some of us in the Drama Department used to say, "Don't bring your father to meet Sister Mary Leola because he'll never go home to your mother." [chuckles] We didn't mean it irreverently. It was really an appreciation of a very charming, charming little person. And determined. Oh boy; I'll say. [taped turned off]

[fumbling with tape recorder] Boy, I have trouble with this thing. Well, here we go again. Sister had such pride in Mundelein. She believed it was Nirvana as far as an educational institution was concerned. And she knew how to get newspaper space and she ... Well, part of it was her charm. The editors of various parts of *The Chicago Daily News* and *The Tribune* would come out to school and Sister would charm them. And then they would invite her to come down to their offices. And I remember when the verse speaking choir was asked to come down to NBC to

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record one of our poems into the microphones. None of us had ever seen a microphone before. And Sister was there with us. And the executives of NBC were very impressed with these sixteen, seventeen including me, young women all with crosses on their necks and holy, devout halos over their heads and everything there in the evil confines of the Merchandise Mart on the nineteenth floor. And we did our thing into the microphones and a half hour later, Sister Mary Leola's verse speaking choir from Mundelein College was signed to a year's contract for an appearance weekly with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, reading their verse speaking choir stuff. And yours truly was signed to a five year contract with NBC, which, of course, changed my whole life. Sister Mary Leola did that.

She was in a sense a very wise little entrepreneur. She was a politician. She had ambition — not for herself but for her school. Well, maybe for herself. I don't think self-esteem or self ambition is a bad thing, no matter what St. Augustine says! But Sister was actively engaged with Mundelein College making its mark. And indeed, it did. Indeed, it did.

You know, when the *Chicago Tribune* critic wrote about my performance in something or other, that I was the best non-professional interpreter of Shakespeare that he'd seen in a long time, honestly — that wasn't me. That was Sister, through me. So much of my work at Mundelein and since has been Sister through me. She believed that it is vital. She learned this from Sarah

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Sytton. Says that I too. That you mustn't play a part unless you can fall in love with the character — in other words, become a defense attorney for the character. And I used that philosophy, an admonition of hers, to the degree that even doing *The Exorcist* film when I was interpreting Lucifer, I found a sense of compassion for Lucifer. I think that Lucifer is the true prodigal son and I believe that he will come back and ask forgiveness of his father. And I believe if his father does not grant that forgiveness, that his father is not my God. So I found a way to ... not to justify Lucifer in his headstrong actions but to understand how unhappy he was, is. Sister taught me that ... I guess the greatest attribute for anybody, not merely an actor or a writer or a poet or a painter or a musician, but for any breathing thing including dogs and cats and everything else, is compassion. I believe that's the important thing.

Sister and I used to have long talks about things. I'm sure she was guiding me but I liked to think at times that I was teaching her everything she knew. She was proud of her school. She was proud of her order. She was proud of her department. She was proud of Chicago! Oh, my goodness! Sister appreciated things.

The night that I won the Academy Award for the first picture I was ever in — now mind you, I didn't know anything about screen acting, but I had been taught basically by a brilliant

teacher and it served me well. Anyhow, I sent the Oscar to Sister who was then at, I believe, Holy Family School in Milwaukee and she had it put on display in the local theatre. I told her it wasn't a permanent gift — at least not yet — and that I would like to have it back. But how about that?! You know, this humble woman of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary taking the Academy Award down to the local theatre and saying, "Put a display case around this and show it to everybody." Ahhhhhh. Right on, Sister! Right on.

I don't know. I hope these things will have satisfied some of the questions that you have. If they don't satisfy you, I will try to amend them. But I don't feel encyclopedic about it. As I said at the outset, this is an emotional exercise for me in appreciation of a woman who not only changed my life but practically made my life. I thank Sister. I thank Mundelein. I thank God. I thank you. [End of interview]

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