INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Dick Zigun

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Dick Zigun conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on February 25, 2021. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Known as the Permanently Unelected Mayor of Coney Island, Dick Zigun first came to Coney Island in 1979. One of the originators of the study of popular culture, he earned a graduate degree from Yale School of Drama in playwriting, where his productions were influenced by performance art, as well as burlesque, vaudeville, sideshows, and other influences drawn from his childhood in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the home of the P.T. Barnum Museum.

Zigun co-founded the arts non-profit Coney Island USA in 1980. In collaboration with other artists and performers, he organized a day of art installations and performances in Coney Island in 1981, which was followed by numerous other temporary events, including the first Mermaid Parade in 1983. Coney Island USA opened its first season of programming in 1985, eventually focusing on producing a traditional circus sideshow. Sideshow by the Seashore was popular among visitors, engaged the skills and cultural knowhow of older sideshow performers, and preserved a form of American entertainment in danger of disappearance.

For decades, Zigun has been outspoken about the preservation of Coney Island's historic buildings, businesses, and amusements, such as the Parachute Jump, the B&B Carousell, Nathan's Famous, the Grashorn Building, Henderson's Theater, the Boardwalk Childs Restaurant, the Shore Theater, the Coney Island Pumping Station, among others. As a mayoral appointee during the Michael Bloomberg administration, Zigun represented the interests of Coney Island businesses during a divisive period of rezoning that threatened to erase the character of the neighborhood in favor of new real estate development. In this interview, Zigun describes the origin of his interests in preserving popular culture and amusements, and the ways in which he contributed to Coney Island becoming a place where this culture could be experienced and enjoyed.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey | Session: 1

Interviewees: Dick Zigun | Location: remote via video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic | Date: February 25, 2021

Q: Today's February 25, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Dick Zigun for the New York Preservation Archive Project. And we're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic via video chat. And do I have your consent to record this interview and deposit it in the NYPAP archive?

Zigun: Yes, you do. Consent given.

Q: Thank you. So can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Zigun: So my name is Dick Zigun. I'm sixty-seven years old during this interview. My nickname is Permanently Unelected Mayor of Coney Island. I am an artist by training, specifically a playwright. I hail from Bridgeport, Connecticut and I showed up in Coney Island in 1979 by way of introduction.

Q: Thanks. So I'd like to start by hearing a little bit more about your background. So can you tell me about the place where you grew up in Bridgeport?

Zigun: So sure, I grew up in the big city of Connecticut, Bridgeport, which is the bad neighborhood of Connecticut. It is a large blue-collar town of about 150,000. From the 1880s

through the 1960s, it was a major industrial hub, a very blue-collar, working-class city. It is where strikes began. It started—the labor movement for the eight-hour day began in Bridgeport. In the 1930s when the Depression hit, up until the end of the 1950s, Bridgeport had a Socialist mayor. That Socialist mayor lived on my street. So it's a weird beginning there, that when I'm old enough to look beyond my crib or the backyard or my mother or the television set and start learning about the world, the most important person in the city lives down the street from me.

But I find out not only is it peculiar that Bridgeport has a Socialist mayor but one of its earliest mayors and most prominent citizens was P.T. Barnum. My grammar school was next door to The Tom Thumb House, the famous midget or dwarf who worked for P.T. Barnum. My grammar school was right next to his house. My father's and grandfather's furniture store was two blocks away from the Barnum Museum. My first museum was the Barnum Museum. Bridgeport had this wonderful urban downtown that has since been completely demolished. And that even stuck me before I was a teenager, that these famous buildings that were part of our history. There was no landmarking in New York City, no less in Bridgeport, Connecticut in those days. Still, it seemed wrong that these buildings were coming down.

My grandfather's store that my father grew up in got ripped down for urban renewal. Several blocks away, that store got ripped down. They moved a third time. My mother, after her kids were old enough that we did not need full-time attention, went back to work as a secretary. She worked at Bridgeport City Hall as a secretary in their Urban Renewal division. Her boss for many years worked on a project to save two magnificent vaudeville theaters in downtown Bridgeport.

Then we get to the fact that my family was in the used furniture business, which overlapped into antiques and collectibles and the beginning of flea markets and outdoor antique shows. So I grew up with a real sense not only of history and my city, but being concerned about preserving buildings and also aware that stories could be told through objects, and all of that fed into my imagination.

I go from Bridgeport to Bennington College. I am a scholarship student. What was then the world's most expensive college, progressive Bennington College in Vermont, where I begin to work as a playwright. And my big breakthrough is assimilating popular culture and using the mythology of popular culture, as opposed to rewriting classics which bores me to death, or having a Eurocentric view of mythology as opposed to a Mark Twain discovering of the American language. That comes from P.T. Barnum and the circus and even New England, up in Vermont, as well as having grown up in Bridgeport doing graduate work.

Then at Yale School of Drama in New Haven, where I start my three years of post-graduate work in Yale School of Drama. The other playwriting students were accomplished poets or novelists who've dabbled and written one play unproduced but got into the program because they were excellent writers. I was the only one who already had four productions of original plays under my belt and had actually been working onstage as a playwright and having my works there.

I got very influenced by the performance art movement coming out of fine arts and having a lot of friends in the graduate art school at Yale, which was next door to the drama school. Theater

people had very little respect for performance art. I thought I was smart and stealing good ideas from artists fooling around with things that were sometimes quite brilliant, although not dedicated to plot or entertainment or being the show. But theater people got very upset that my plays were about fifty percent stage directions and would call for object manipulation or for certain set elements to be designed and built according to my stage directions.

So all of that ends up right out of grad school. I get picked up oddly enough by the major theater in Los Angeles, the Mark Taper Forum, their largest Off-Broadway regional theater in a plaza equivalent to Lincoln Center, as if Joe Papp's public theater were at Lincoln Center. That's the gravitas and locale that the Mark Taper Forum has in Los Angeles. And I'm thinking right out of grad school, knowing that I'm likely to move to New York because if you're serious about having a life in the theater—with theater in my case, I'm excluding writing for the movies or writing for television, just writing for the stage and doing experimental work for the stage. I'm losing my train of thought just a tiny bit.

So I'm in Los Angeles knowing that I'm going to head back to New York but I'm realizing they picked up on me because there's a lot of Americana in my work and although New York is the capital of the world, Los Angeles is the capital of America. Except after my first show, which was a hit out there and led to them offering more work, when the next play that they commissioned also had a lot of object manipulation, they didn't tell me until I had finished the first drafts, sublet my apartment, and flown out to Los Angeles that they would not let my script be seen by actors because I had drawn pictures in the script. So I got kicked out of regional theater and professional theater and I'm still hanging out in Los Angeles because my New York

apartment is sublet.

And one of the other plays in this program is by another playwright who grew up in Brooklyn, a wonderful playwright named Len Jenkin. He wrote a play that we put on called *Kid Twist* about Murder Incorporated in Coney Island and how Kid Twist from Murder Incorporated was under protective custody, squealing on the Mob, testifying about his colleagues in Murder Incorporated. And when he wasn't in the court room in downtown Brooklyn, he was under police guard at the Half Moon Hotel in Coney Island. After he squealed and told everything he knew including confessing to eight or nine murders himself, the press was full of outrage that he was about to be set free, having given a deal in return for talking. The cops threw him allegedly out of the hotel window when he had basically finished his testimony. Whether they were morally outraged or paid off by other mobsters, we will never know.

But the play was full of imagery, the Polar Bear Club at Coney Island. I was drawn and kept coming back to the play again and again. The third time, the playwright, who I had since befriended, took notice and I talked about how the imagery haunted me. And I found myself a few days later in Santa Monica, the beach of Los Angeles, standing on the Santa Monica Amusement Pier, looking at an arcade building for rent at the amusement pier and going oh, if I started my own theater back in New York and want to enjoy American popular culture and give myself a different framing device that people can understand, maybe I should go check out Coney Island and see if I could find a place for rent there.

So with all that background in 1979, I show up in Coney Island and start looking around and

talking to people.

Q: Okay. Let me ask you a couple follow-up questions from what you've just laid out. You mentioned the mythology of popular culture and Americana and I wondered if you could define those things and also the emergence of flea markets and things like that. Could define those things?

Zigun: So in my own lifetime, I've seen the academic tradition evolve to when—even at the graduate level at Yale School of Drama, I was interested in burlesque and vaudeville and sideshows and P.T. Barnum and amusement parks without any specific reference to Coney Island. At that point, that was an unprecedented field of studies. My teachers thought I was pretty much a nutcase, and there was very little research material and little less in terms of analysis or academic critical writing. Now forty, fifty years later from my education, people not only get Ph.D.s in popular culture, they write dissertations on sideshows or burlesque studies. It's an acceptable field and that's mind-blowing for me, as one of the originators of the movement.

So in terms of my field of live theater as opposed to the classical tradition, whether it is Greek tragedies, comedies, whether it is French farce by Molière, whether it is Shakespeare, or whether it is Broadway, which had some popular roots if you're familiar with George M. Cohan. You have an intellectual movement that begins with Eugene O'Neill going and taking a class at Yale that still exists to this day at the Drama School that I took; I believe it's called Drama 57, a playwriting class where O'Neill begins to start imitating Eurocentric classics. And you get a schism in American entertainment between hoity-toity and honky-tonk.

And that is reflected even in the nineteenth century at the Astor Place Riot [of 1849] where gangs compete over whether you do populist Shakespeare or pretentious Shakespeare. And it goes into New York City where Mayor LaGuardia shuts down seven burlesque theaters in Times Square, most of them on 42nd Street, including the famous Minsky's Burlesque. So in terms of popular culture, a lot of these things were considered not only not worth studying but perhaps illegitimate, embarrassing, before there was woke culture, things that should be forgotten, not studied, perhaps even suppressed before somebody like me comes along and says well, wait a minute. We can be smart. We can be intellectuals. We can jettison certain things that are objectionable and reinterpret and change what had been problematic but also widespread through America and turn it in a different direction. So that's the definition of how I look at popular culture.

In terms of flea markets, you have to imagine, before there was an Internet, there was no eBay. There was no way to collect anything that you were interested in easily by having access to tag sales virtually all over America, not the world. If you're interested in a number two sized Fiesta ceramic radiation orange mixing bowl and you're willing to pay about one hundred fifty dollars for it, you can go on eBay this very moment and probably have three hundred to choose from. Prior to 1980 or so, that didn't exist. People would advertise in the local paper for tag sales or a yard sale and set things up in their garage or their front lawn.

In the 1960s, there was the evolution of weekend antique flea markets, which were curated. There were no tube socks. There were no tools or—I'm trying to think of the name of plastic

containers—

Q: Tupperware.

Zigun: Tupperware, yes. They were not selling Tupperware. You had to bring in antiques—by definition, I believe, one hundred years or older, or collectibles fifty years or older. And there would be fields, particularly in affluent suburban towns, where wealthy people would spend their afternoons shopping for decorative antiques or items of furniture. Because my family was in the furniture business and the used furniture business, unlike our physical store in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where it was mostly ovens and refrigerators and mattresses, either new or used, and reconditioned and easy credit terms, we would select vintage items of furniture, put them in my father's large truck, drive for an hour and a half to somewhere in affluent Connecticut or Westchester County or Massachusetts, and set up outdoors, having paid one hundred, one hundred fifty dollars for a booth. And hopefully we had made a profit and didn't spend all the profit walking around buying cool stuff we didn't come with.

Q: That's so interesting. I come from, on both sides, come from people who were trash pickers. I remember going—my grandfather always wanted to go to the dump and my grandmother always wanted to sneak out after it was dark on trash night to see what was thrown away that was perfectly good. So it's really interesting to hear the origin as you described it. What was your relationship to New York City like when you were growing up?

Zigun: So Bridgeport is sixty miles away from New York City. It is a fast train ride in terms of

the New Haven Line. We would take family trips perhaps as often as monthly into New York City and see shows or go to the Lower East Side and buy halava with pistachio nuts or visit tourist attractions or museums. By the time I was a teenager in high school, I was the organizer of the show of the month club and organizing trips where other teenagers like myself would take the train in without adult supervision to go see a Broadway or Off-Broadway show. Although we'd often be running around St. Mark's Place or make some side trips that were not our official parental itinerary.

Q: And did you ever make it down to Coney Island?

Zigun: No. I grew up around a lot of amusement parks. There was an amusement park in Bridgeport itself I grew up going to frequently called Pleasure Beach and I did not know until I was an adult that before Pleasure Beach was Pleasure Beach, it was owned by George C. Tilyou, who started a satellite amusement park called Steeplechase Island. New Haven also had an amusement park. My day camp, Camp Teepee, a YMCA day camp, had four two-week sessions each summer. So kids could go for as little as two weeks. My parents signed my brother and my sisters and I up for all eight weeks, every session. So four times each summer, we would take a day trip to Playland in Rye, New York. And then my father's younger brother, my Uncle Charlie, would take my brother and I to Freedomland [U.S.A.] in the Bronx every summer, and Freedomland was open for four years.

So again, no experience whatsoever in Coney Island until after grad school, but lots of amusement parks, lots of P.T. Barnum, lots of thinking about this same kind of culture without

being at the mother lode in New York City.

Q: And you mentioned that some of your teachers and your fellow students' kind of thought you crazy for having the interests that you did. Who were some people that supported you, teachers or peers and influences, maybe some of the performance art, the elements that you thought were interesting?

Zigun: So when you're at the graduate level and already doing some public work—and I had already had some plays put on as I had mentioned, was doing work Downtown in the performance art world—your mentors don't necessarily have to be at that age where you've already discovered yourself and your work. They don't have to be somebody who teaches you a technique. A mentor could be somebody whose work you admire and had been following for years, who treats you as an equal, and really helps your self-esteem or progress as an artist, that you can talk peer to peer rather than apprentice to master with somebody.

So on that level, in my last year, my third year of grad school, I was delighted to have one of my major influences as a teacher, who was Charles Ludlam of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Charles not only treated me as an equal, and not only was I his pet student if you will, he immediately got involved in my New York City projects when we did Coney Island, USA's very first show, which I think we'll get to a little later on, at the World in Wax Musee. He participated in it and came again and again in advance to film a short silent movie for the event as well as live perform at the event.

So Charles Ludlam was a great example of a teacher I was delighted to have. A famous teacher who I got a kick out of but didn't influence me very much was David Mamet. On the other hand, teachers who just didn't get it at all, the famous literary critic Dwight Macdonald who was pretty much an academic old man at that point. And even the wonderful Nobel Prize Jamaican poet, Derek Walcott. So there were some teachers who didn't get it, and then there were teachers whose classes I was not assigned to that I sat in on, particularly the late Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines, who just passed away about a month ago, perhaps had been the foremost experimental creator of New York theater, just a giant. He just passed.

Q: And what about the performance art influences?

Zigun: So when I was still at Yale, I was hanging out with a New Haven clique that had half a foot in the theater world and half a foot in the art world. One of those at the time, the graphic designer for the Yale School of Drama, was James Lapine who went on to create *Wicked* and several other smash Broadway hits, and is a Broadway giant now. But at the time, he was the graphic designer doing posters for Yale School of Drama. And having come from CalArts [California School of the Arts] and the visual arts but being at Yale School of Drama, his first dabbling in theater was to direct a totally obtuse and impossible Gertrude Stein one-page play. He turned it into a show that moved from New Haven to New York and won an Obie Award.

So that clique of people that included James Lapine were meeting monthly in Tribeca at various lofts of a collective of performance artists and Fluxus poets from the Fluxus movement. They had a monthly salon where, if you were working on new work, you could try it out in front of

your peers as opposed to an audience. Charlemagne Palestine, the experimental composer, was sometimes there. A deconstructionist visual artist who would deconstruct clothing into sculpture, Maureen Connor, was another member. So because I was working there, suddenly I was invited to do performance work at places that had nothing to do with traditional theater, such as P.S. 1 [Contemporary Art Center] in Long Island City and the Ear Inn on Spring Street, all the way west of SoHo.

Some of the artists I admired at the time, Paul Zaloom was a puppeteer who did a lot of object manipulation. Michael Smith was performing a lot at The Kitchen, whom I liked, and Charles Ludlam, my mentor, told me about the performance artist, Stuart Sherman, and before I ended up meeting Stuart Sherman, having heard Charles Ludlam talk about this person doing object manipulation on a little TV tray on the Staten Island Ferry, I went home that very evening and invented a type of theater I called tabletop theater, of manipulating objects and telling stories you couldn't possibly fit onstage doing normal playwriting, such as World War II, or Charles Lindbergh flying the Atlantic Ocean.

Q: I see—

Zigun: —I'm sorry. And through one of my friends from New Haven—so a group of us who had known each other for three years in New Haven, some from the Drama School, some from next door, the art and film school, all moved to New York at the same time. One of them, an artist who I had done some performance art with, when she was in college had studied with the feminist art woman who opened the museum of book arts called Franklin Furnace, Martha

Wilson. And through my friend, I got to know Martha Wilson and hang out at Franklin Furnace and did a major production at Franklin Furnace, as opposed to La MaMa or Theater for the New City, like most emerging playwrights would do in New York.

Q: Thanks for adding that. When you came to New York in 1979, let's pick up there.

Zigun: So I'm just back from Los Angeles. I am staying in a tiny cubicle at the Upper West Side YMCA, and I go start visiting Coney Island and talking to people. And I go to the local real estate office, which shares its space with the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce. And they are in a building right across the street from what was the most prominent part of Coney Island. In very difficult days in 1979, the best part of Coney Island was Astroland amusement park. And the building—where the real estate office was and the chamber of commerce—was a three-story, 1890s clapboard building that had originally been Kister's Hotel next to the entrance to Luna Park, so close to the original location of the B&B Carousell that you could hear the band organ music wafting through the windows all day long.

And when I start asking about loft space, they're amazed that a Yale guy wants to come to Coney Island, which is burning weekly, full of arson gangs, stabbings. There's this Yale guy looking for a loft. They finally told me, well, if you can deal with some creepy background—that there had been a murder a couple of years back—the half of the building next door to us, the other side of the chamber of commerce/real estate office on the second floor, plus the entire third floor, was available very cheap on a ten-year lease, which I signed.

I worked an entire summer—about four months—renovating the building. Because I was there and the electricity wasn't on and the water wasn't on, I would take a break every day for lunchtime and go next door to the chamber of commerce when they were eating lunch. And the executive secretary of the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce was an elderly man in his eighties that had the look and humor of George Burns and smoked cigars. I was enchanted with eighty-year-old Matt Kennedy, who sometimes would share his liverwurst on white bread sandwich—Wonder Bread—with me. Most of the time I would bring my own sandwich and I would sit at the feet of Matt Kennedy, as well as a woman, Lillie Santangelo, the owner of the World in Wax Musee, which dated back to 1923, who had this very folk art, bizarre museum. And you might describe her simply as Grandma Moses on LSD.

So just as I had soaked up knowledge and an atmosphere in language, and added to from Charles Ludlam and Lee Breuer, when I got to Coney Island, I was apprenticing myself voluntarily to Matt Kennedy and Lillie Santangelo. Four months into that lifestyle, the building burned down. But oddly enough, I had already become a familiar, friendly, trusted face to all the movers and shakers in Coney Island, not only Matt Kennedy, but all the big shots moving in and out of the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce office. I end up renting a studio apartment in SoHo, which is an easy commute from Canal Street, Downtown Manhattan. One stop from Canal Street to West 4th Street, grab the F train and you're on your way to Coney Island. In those days, that took about forty-five minutes. Although I was in SoHo, I started commuting to Coney Island.

My group of friends, who had moved from New Haven to New York at the same time, and had spent a summer, individuals would come out on various days and visit me or spend a day helping

me renovate at Coney Island. And of course, I would always end the day by taking them to this bizarre weirdo wax museum that just oozed atmosphere. And they were impressed I was that tight with the owner and we could sit in her office and drink sambuca with her. She started asking that group of people to help fix up the place, do volunteer work that turned into restoration work. Finally we're on topic. It didn't start out that way but that group of people ended up doing a full restoration of the World in Wax in 1980, and in 1981, Lillie asked me to literally curate the last installation, which was John Lennon.

At that time, like I said, I'm living in SoHo. I'm an aspiring writer. I have contacts—I get a freelance gig and get paid as a journalist to write an article about John Lennon in wax for the *SoHo Weekly News*. That article leads to my becoming a regular freelancer for *The Daily News* and I get the cover of their Friday weekend section, a full-page cover story on Lillie at the wax museum. At that point, we're all figuring, well, this is interesting and something's happening here. And although my original intent, in my home loft that burned down, was to have a living loft but a living loft with a big open space on the second floor while I lived on the third floor. And the second floor had been intended as a private chamber theater where, once or twice a year, I might do small-time performances. Instead, here I am getting attention already in the New York City press for doing things in Coney Island. I've got this wonderful location. A group of us get together and we create a twelve-hour day of art installations, performances, et cetera and that is the first time—without being incorporated, without actually being a formal not-for-profit—the name Coney Island USA is used and there is talk of starting a not-for-profit arts organization.

Q: When was that first day of curation?

Zigun: So Tricks and Treats at the Wax Musee was Halloween, October 31, 1981. And not only did *The Daily News* and *The New York Times* give it small coverage, the intellectual theater journal, *The Drama Review*, as it was at the time coming out of NYU [New York University] did a seven-page documentation of the show.

Q: And at that time in Coney Island, are you still a "Yale guy?" Or what's your new persona at that time?

Zigun: Well, that changes things from, "Dick, why didn't you tell us you were doing this? We would have helped." And I had kept it private as an experiment to see what would happen. So at that point, I'm no longer Yale guy looking to live here. I'm suddenly somebody who knows how to do public relations, which they're really stuck on. Coney Island from the mid-'60s into the early '70s had a lot of rioting, a lot of fires, a lot of gangs, a lot of graffiti, a lot of broken glass. Always stayed open, always had huge crowds, was always an amusement park, but it wasn't that family friendly. And when that happened, the only solution the chamber of commerce and the business people gravitated to for the '70s was: let's do casinos like Atlantic City did casinos. Except the legislation did not pass in Albany. Then they were totally lost and had no idea what to do.

Then, soon as I'm there doing things, there's other artists, particularly the Coney Island Hysterical Society, doing visual art. There's this arts movement. And then the next thing I do, because I want to start an arts organization, I want a facility, is to rent a building which takes

money. And you can't raise money until you have a portfolio. So how do you make the point of what an arts organization is in Coney Island when you don't have a building? You take over the entire neighborhood for one day, and that was the Mermaid Parade. After that happened, they hired me to become the public relations director for the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce.

Backing up just a year, before the first—no, somewhere around there, after the Mermaid Parade––I'm sorry, yes, in 1984, I get hired as the public relations director. Don't have a building. That happens 1985, building on the achievements. But in 1984, in addition to running public relations, I start doing street fairs in Brooklyn, like the Welcome Back to Brooklyn Street Fair in Grand Army Plaza. And I'm not only representing the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce and the event series we're doing, I, with a personal collection, start setting up a folding table with a Coney Island postcard museum. And I put out loose leaf binders full of postcards in plastic sleeves with a donation can that says twenty-five cents a peek. And start building a collection and started conversations and educating people through that means as well. So that gets us up before there's real estate.

Q: And I think I read another interview that you did where you mentioned that when you came to Coney Island, you found all of these older small business owners, and I'm wondering what pushed you to the idea of a non-profit arts organization instead of a small business of some sort?

Zigun: So when I had been at the Mark Taper and a few other regional theaters, I had a clear sense that even as a successful experimental playwright, I would be doomed for the rest of my life to the second spaces of a regional theater, the smaller black box in the basement or the

annex. And the potential audience was not in my age bracket and did not share my orientation. I don't think it's politically correct anymore to use the phrase that used to be popular then of the "blue-haired ladies" that would come see shows, but I didn't want to be doing experimental work in the second space for the "blue-haired ladies." At the same time, doing art about popular culture in a performance art loft in SoHo for some very cool with-it people also wasn't what I wanted to do. I really wanted to make popular culture instead of make art about popular culture. So I started a parade. Most people don't do that.

Q: So it wasn't like a commentary or an analysis. It was participating in the creation of popular culture.

Zigun: Yes. And Coney Island, to me, unlike SoHo, unlike the punks in the East Village, unlike the West Village—there were clearly defined Downtown neighborhoods where you could be a wonderful cutting-edge artist and be LGBT or be like post-modern cool or be like punk in a leather jacket and make a name for yourself. But I really enjoyed seeing a beach community of blue-collared entrepreneurs of small businesses who were completely wacko, out of their minds and full of joy and smiles and living very unique, non-conformist lives. It was different than going to Provincetown. It certainly was nothing like going to the Hamptons. I think it's my growing up in Bridgeport, my blue-collar city upbringing. I felt comfortable. And the nickname I've given myself, the Funhouse Philosopher, is self-consciously based on when I was in high school in the late '60s.

There was a best-selling philosopher, Eric Hoffer who was the Longshoreman Philosopher. He

was a fisherman and wore his knit cap and smoked a pipe and talked to the people. That's not of interest to me, but being the Funhouse Philosopher is.

Q: Let's talk about Coney Island USA moving into a space. You mentioned this happened in 1985.

Zigun: Yes, at the time, I had excellent relations with not only the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce but, remember, they share the office with a major real estate broker for the amusement park. And because of the bad reputation of Coney Island and the difficult times, rents were incredibly cheap. I pretty much had pick of anything that was available. So if you can believe that, in 1985, I signed a ten-year lease on an arcade building with ocean frontage on the Boardwalk with a view of the ocean, about three thousand square feet with another two thousand square foot basement, at least the first year, I'm paying less than a thousand dollars a month for that, I think. So I am very sure of myself and very connected to the alternative space movement in the mid-'80s. So that would be The Kitchen in SoHo, Franklin Furnace in Tribeca, ABC No Rio in the Lower East Side, Fashion Moda up in the Bronx. There was The Times Square Show. There was The Real Estate Show. There was all this incredible energy.

There were all these tiny storefront night clubs all over the East Village and I knew I just had to get the place ready for Palm Sunday opening day and set up a performance area. I started paying for weekly ads in *The Village Voice*, which were not cheap, advertising jazz, world music, performance art, dance, all types of things that absolutely nobody would show up and pay for. And that first season, although there were many, many wonderful concerts and performances that

happened and I learned a lot, we came very, very close to going bankrupt. And I found that I had miscalculated. The hip art audience or theater audience or downtown Manhattan audience is not a universal audience. The audience that comes to Coney Island doesn't appreciate irony as entertainment. If they paid a dollar because I was outside, encouraging them to come in for a dollar and see half-man, half-potato, the Human Potato—it was a famous performance artist in Downtown Manhattan in a potato costume telling potato jokes—ninety percent of the audience I had gotten in wanted their dollar back.

So they liked drag when we tried a drag show and it wasn't until the end of the season, before the Labor Day weekend, that this supposed smarty intellectual who would name the venue, Sideshows by the Seashore, we hadn't had anything sideshow until the last four days of the season. There was a line out the door. So I borrowed more money, turned most of the programming I had started into Friday and Saturday night programming, and turned daytime seven days a week into recreating a traditional circus sideshow, which had pretty much disappeared from America, from amusement parks, from carnivals. There no longer was a full-fledged ten-in-one circus sideshow. They were not respectable. They were not studied. They had not been written about. I knew with my theater experience and playwriting experience that, even if I had done the analysis, if it had disappeared and stopped happening in reality, the knowhow would disappear.

So, with not-for-profit structuring, which is a complete departure from what sideshows had ever been, I started working with old-timers in their seventies, back to the old-time mentors who had worked in sideshows for decades, with for-profit sideshows, traveling with major carnivals.

People I had seen performing as a kid in Bridgeport at our Barnum festival ended up working for me. And working with them, over time, we recreated a Yale School of Drama version of what America should remember is the structure and the proper way to do a full-fledged ten-in-one circus sideshow.

Q: What were some of the specific things that—like you said, the Yale School of Drama version of the circus sideshow—what were some of the specific things that you think you did a little bit differently than the for-profit structure?

Zigun: So there were three to four members we began with, who had been with the sideshow that had traveled with the James E. Strates traveling carnival, the largest traveling carnival still in North America. That sideshow had been performing for decades and, perhaps the dean of all sideshow performers, Melvin Burkhart, the original Human Blockhead among them came and worked for me. A younger fellow who actually helped put the show together and was my collaborator, John Bradshaw, although he was only a year or two older than me. He was a Southerner back in the days when a Southerner from Richmond, Virginia didn't necessarily like Yankees from New York City, especially if they were Jewish. He'd be happy to make a business deal but he thought—his understanding of Jews was they were funny people, like Woody Allen. And we would work together and he would get very upset and we'd have huge arguments about putting seating in for the sideshow. That is something that is Dick Zigun Yale School of Drama, that sideshows had not done. People would stand at sideshows.

He would object to me and my girlfriend and our ticket seller eating salad as opposed to corn

dogs and fried foods. So music cues, bows, stage lights, seating, those were the initial arguments. After we got over those arguments, the next arguments were whether we could get away as a non-profit presenting—with however much dignity but presenting somebody born different. And that was a big deal that went very well and essentially was not controversial because of the presentation. But a handicapped Black man from Georgia, Otis Jordan, had worked most of his life billed as the Frog Boy because Otis, who didn't have much use of his legs and his hands, did the act that some of you had seen in the movie *Freaks* by Prince Randian where, just using his tongue and his lips, rolls and lights a cigarette and smokes it. Otis would do that. Otis was handsome, intelligent, drove his own car from Georgia with handicapped controls, had a powered wheelchair. And in Coney Island, when Otis wasn't on stage, I had no problem with him being out on the Boardwalk, letting people see him. Because instead of presenting him with the very objectionable title of Frog Boy, and him being Black and the word boy, not even Frog Man, we changed him to the Human Cigarette Factory. And anti-cancer advocates might object to that but it was no longer racist. Otis enjoyed it and finished his life performing with us in Coney Island.

So in the second year of the Yale School of Drama Dick Zigun's sideshow, could we actually have somebody born different in a non-for-profit sponsored sideshow? And then the following year is: how do we cross the divide between the elderly Southerners and the modern primitives, if you will? In the mid-'80s, there was a very influential underground periodical called *RE/Search Magazine*. Different themes and very cutting-edge themes. Perhaps their most influential issue was called Modern Primitives, and I believe they coined that expression. One of the modern primitives is the first person in a couple of generations to tattoo his face and exhibit

himself, Michael Wilson, who got heavily tattooed where tattooing was legal in San Francisco, growing up in Haight-Ashbury and the hippie world. But legal tattooists thought it was bad karma to tattoo somebody's face and a lot of quality tattooists at the time, not only in California but anywhere, wouldn't tattoo a face. And Michael, on his own—I didn't know Michael then—without much money, left San Francisco, came to New York on the assumption that if tattooing was illegal in New York City, which it was at the time, then he'd be more likely to find a underground tattooist—and there were many—who would do his face. He got a room in the men's shelter on the Bowery, came out to Coney Island, got hired on the spot.

So you have Michael looking like a cool hipster sideshow performer, if you will, and then our snake charmer leaves and we're looking for a new snake charmer. Mentioned an ad in the show and there's this striking woman in the audience who is Puerto Rican from the South Bronx. She's a hairdresser. Half her hair is pink and the other half is black. She has a bandoleer ammo belt wrapped around her. Her fingernails are as long as Cardi B's and she's shouting from the audience like, "I want that job!" And she's got this look—although she's from Puerto Rico, obviously she has native indigenous Indian blood in her and has this very striking appearance. But she is like South Bronx, tough, New York City gal as can be. So I introduce—John Bradshaw is very uncomfortable with Ruby because in the South, women don't talk much. They certainly don't talk back. And he doesn't like Ruby, and for several years, I keep insisting that he keep Ruby.

So that's another instance of how it begins to change from what had been happening, if you will, the classic 1950s traveling Southern sideshow to a New York City twentieth century up-to-date

post-modern sideshow. But still in the sideshow tradition but not insisting on doing things the way they used to in the 1950s. When John Bradshaw, my collaborator, left at the end of 1991, he left because I had found him a nice apartment in the Far Rockaways in one of the old summer hotel buildings. Not in Coney Island, not in Manhattan, in the Far Rockaways, his three-year-old daughter was hit by stray gunfire in the crazy crack New York days of the late ‘80s, early ‘90s. This guy who’s from Richmond, Virginia and very much charming but very much the kind of guy who sure at home had a Confederate flag somewhere, just said forget New York City. And at that point, I became one hundred percent hands-on without a collaborator as the playwright and director of the shows, and have made additional changes since.

Q: All right, thanks.

Zigun: Where are we at time wise now?

Q: It’s 3:25. I was going to ask about—

Zigun: So my battery is down to eight percent. I could keep going for another while but maybe you should choose the next question carefully.

Q: Do you happen to have a charger handy?

Zigun: I’m plugged in. I didn’t hear the sound you normally hear and I don’t know what to make of that.

Q: Well, I guess we could cross our fingers and move on to the next chapter of talking about the historic preservation, kind of formal preservation of buildings that you've been part of. Go right ahead.

Zigun: So it's strange to—and at the same time, not only strange but a privilege to be the first one in your community to have the preservation orientation. There are rewards, many rewards. There were lots of disappointments when you become the local Jane Jacobs in your town. The rewards are there is always low-hanging fruit and you don't preserve the low-hanging fruit without a lot of work. So somebody has to do that. Although it can lead to many frustrations that many of the things you feel are really worth preserving and are important to preserve, don't get saved, it's hard to keep on doing the good work to get the low-hanging fruit. But those are your rewards and sometimes there's sweet victories.

So things can be thrust upon you. I had come to a neighborhood where thing are burning down, partly because I'm brazen, partly because I'm stupid. I didn't grow up growing to Coney Island and perhaps I really don't understand how dangerous it was. Not having that understanding probably helped make me who I am today. That said, things just—you have to speak your mind when you see things happen. So, at the same time, I'm starting the Mermaid Parade on property that only ever has been an amusement park, the Steeplechase site. But when Steeplechase closed, Donald Trump's father, Fred Trump, bought Steeplechase Park with the intent to turn this amazing landmark-worthy amusement park into a housing development. He rips down the incredible crystal palace, the glass and steel Pavilion of Fun, in the mid-'60s. I believe it's 1966.

You could double-check me on that. But because he doesn't want to spend money and you can't just push over the Parachute Jump with a bulldozer, he leaves the Parachute Jump up at the time when he otherwise clears the property.

The city does not give Fred Trump a zoning variance for housing and the property gets rented to another not very upscale amusement operator who's there for a number of years. Then that closes and the city takes title. So what had always been private property used for nothing else but amusements becomes city property. The city intends, in 1983, to turn it into an events space, meaning they will put in sewers, pave paths, put up some fencing and some lighting. But before that even happens, I apply for the very first Parks permit ever given for their new piece of property and get a permit to assemble the Mermaid Parade there in 1983 under the Parachute Jump. About that time, the city announces that they've raised some money and they are going to at least stabilize the rotting Parachute Jump, remove dangling guidewires, some loose sheet metal, make some repairs to stabilize it. And I'm making a speech at the first Mermaid Parade and it's available on YouTube. If you were to go to YouTube and search for 1983 Mermaid Parade or Dick Zigun 1983 Mermaid Parade, you will hear my speech about preserving the Parachute Jump.

A few years later, when the city is going to spend even more money on the Parachute Jump, Fred Trump, who no longer owns the property, goes to *The Daily News* and says he'll put up the money now to rip the thing down that he should have ripped down before. And there's this cover front page of *The Daily News* with a giant picture of the Parachute Jump and the headline is "Oh, Chute!" And it's about how Fred Trump wants to tear it down. I start battling him in the press.

Remember, I know all the important people from the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce, I've worked for them. Our monthly meetings or luncheons were at the famous Gargiulo's Italian Restaurant. That's the same restaurant where Fred Trump, who had an office on Avenue Z near Coney Island, would eat lunch five days a week, and you'd often see the limo with the engine running parked in front of Gargiulo's Restaurant with the license plate FT for Fred Trump. One day when—I think the next day after *The Daily News'* "Oh, Chute," Fred Trump's going to rip down the Parachute Jump, I see him get in his limo and not make the turn he normally does but he turns toward Steeplechase Park, and I run after him and I crash his press conference. On the Boardwalk where Fred Trump tells me "the Parachute Jump is a rusty piece of shit," and I tell Fred Trump I'll see him in the papers. That's the first of the Coney Island landmarks I start defending.

Q: Were you also involved in the Wonder Wheel and the Cyclone being landmarked?

Zigun: No, those had already happened before I had become prominent in Coney Island. But I didn't do the actual nomination but worked with our city council member on the Boardwalk Childs Restaurant, which was the first of Coney Island buildings to get landmarked designation. So in terms of lobbying the important city council member and speaking myself, that was my first success. Then Coney Island USA, during the rezoning period, actually had the money and the knowhow and hired the right architectural historians to do six landmark nominations of buildings. We got two, our own building on Surf Avenue, which is also a Childs Restaurant, as well as the Shore Theater across the street from Nathan's [Famous] that's now being transformed into a hotel. One of the other buildings we nominated was the B&B Carousell. That got turned

down but the Carousell itself—not the building—was bought by the city. It's not landmarked but it might as well be landmarked. It's city-owned. It's a city-owned building on the Boardwalk.

So out of those, I would say out of six nominations we got two and a half. I'd like to think that I'm responsible for the three buildings nominated in Coney Island. I also got very involved when the [Mayor Bill] de Blasio administration came in and the Landmarks Commission decided to go through the backlog of buildings which had been calendared but never had a hearing. And the [Coney Island Fire Station] Pumping Station on Neptune Avenue, I worked very hard to get landmarked and yet it was denied.

Q: And what are the other nominations that you made or have been part of making that didn't get landmarked?

Zigun: So Nathan's Famous, which is in no danger of being demolished, but Landmarks couldn't decided what there is that they would demolish, although there is a new category of social importance. For instance, the gay bar on Christopher Street—

Q: Yes, the Stonewall Inn.

Zigun: It's not an interesting architectural building but, for social historical reasons, it got landmarked. I would think the place that the hot dog was invented deserves the same attention. But then, it's not in Manhattan and that makes a big difference. The other buildings we didn't get is Coney Island's oldest building, the Grashorn Building, which is now slated for demolition.

They turned that down because the building had been altered but now is being demolished. Henderson's Theater building on the corner of Surf and Stillwell [Avenue] was the other.

Q: You used this comparison earlier about the Preservation Commission being hoity-toity, whereas Coney Island was honky-tonk, and I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit more in the context of the process of getting these places preserved.

Zigun: I mean it helps to—what is it, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, do I have that right?

Q: They are now called Village Preservation—yes.

Zigun: It helps to have them on your side. And not only have them on your side when you call them up about something that's coming up for review in thirty days, but have their membership believing and advocating for the same things you think are important, and that's not just the case. Aside from there's the Landmarks Conservancy run by a woman Peg [Breen], is that ringing a bell?

Q: Yes.

Zigun: See, a lot of people who got involved with me and Coney Island USA during the rezoning were wonderful preservationists from the Municipal Arts Society, and they helped us quite a bit, especially the late Stuart Pertz, who had once been a planning commissioner as well as head of

the architecture department at Pratt [Institute]. So not only for saving buildings, Stuart Pertz worked with me as an early advocate for getting ferry service to Coney Island, which is finally going to happen at the end of this year—thank you, Stuart. One of the things he did was use his own money to hire a private ferry and sail it up into Coney Island Creek and prove that it could be done. My job was to have a brass band at the landing site waiting for the Upper East Side hoity-toity people on Stuart Pertz's ferry.

Q: I was just going to ask what role do you think that the programming that you helped bring—programming like the Mermaid Parade and the return of the sideshow and burlesque and vaudeville—what role did that programming have in making these physical buildings a kind of viable consideration for establishments like the Municipal Arts Society and the Landmarks Preservation Commission?

Zigun: So my career has been about saying that Coney Island is culturally important—not just architecturally important, not just recreationally important—but it stands for something beyond the beach in Brooklyn. There's a little bit of Coney Island in hundreds of places in America and around the world, any place there's a roller coaster, any place. You see people internationally practicing the ugly American habit of eating in the gutter, standing up and eating fast food, not sitting down in a restaurant at a proper table with a piece of china sitting on a linen tablecloth. I mean that's disgusting what we created at Nathan's in Coney Island.

The hot dog was invented in Coney Island by Charles Feltman but at least he had the decency to serve his ten cent hot dog in a sit-down proper restaurant. But the common immigrant waiter,

Nathan Handwerker, his bun slicer, got a loan from his buddies, Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor, I kid you not, to open his first hot dog stand. Instead of charging ten cents, he charged five cents and served it from a counter facing the sidewalk, and thus fast food was born.

Q: That's really amazing. I wanted to ask about, I guess, these couple of recent turning points, things that I see as turning points in Coney Island's history. I guess the close of Astroland being one of them, and negotiations with the city and private developers, just the whole changing waterfront, really, of the city. When you think back on that time a little more than ten years ago, how do you recall that time?

Zigun: So some people speak of finding a moment in their lives that they were born for. They were almost divinely selected to steer an event. When the rezoning happened at Coney Island, it was such a big idea by the [Mayor Michael] Bloomberg administration, to just end one hundred fifty years of Coney Island history and change everything. It was a complete do-over, down to the ownership of the land. I decided it was important for me and for Coney Island USA not to have a knee jerk reaction and necessarily do the yelling and protesting that a lot of my supporters themselves wanted me to, or expected me to. If I was in a prominent position, an educated position, and had the sense that something was about to go down, there was no maintaining the status quo; I had to pay attention. And I was open at first to what was put forth—not my version of what should be done, but if I were a teacher, a C minus is a passing grade and a C minus could be acceptable of a new direction.

What happened though is that all those people I had known since that first day I had walked into

the real estate/chamber of commerce office in Coney Island would do is that, when an opportunity comes along for families, once in a lifetime, to make a lot of money—and that might mean selling property or closing your business—most families think about their children and their future. And if the money is good—I was shocked at the people who took the money. The position of the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce became all or nothing. Either you rebuild our entire sixty-six acres which, since the ‘60s, what Coney Island’s commercial amusement zone had been shrunken to—from the entire island, at one point, to sixty-six acres. But most of those sixty-six acres were empty. And the idea of shrinking sixty-six acres to rebuild a better amusement park, even a bigger amusement park than the one currently standing, in twenty-seven acres instead of the sixty-six aces, pissed off the property owners. And their attitude is you rebuild everything or we’re selling fully, and they sold. And they sold. And people I thought never would sell, sold. And even Astroland sold. I can’t blame them because all those people who had owned those pieces of property—some of them for over a century the property had been in their families—pulled out.

I found that I was the major spokesperson for the amusement business at Coney Island, oddly enough, even though I didn’t have money, even though I didn’t own property. And on top of that, when there was this Coney Island Development Corporation, which developed a plan, that initial group of directors did not have a single person from the amusement park on the corporation. Bloomberg nominated me as a mayoral appointee. I have communications skills. And I willingly joined, especially when all of my friends, all the people I had been working with for decades, pulled out. The plan was basically finished. I defended the plan right up to the point when there was a 10 p.m. phone call that went around to all the directors saying, we’re giving

you a courtesy heads-up that tomorrow's *New York Times* will have a front-page story that out of the twenty-seven acres, we're going to develop the city-owned portion. There will be a new amusement park that isn't going to be fifteen acres—it's going to be nine acres. And I resigned. That made things very difficult for me, made things very difficult for Coney Island USA. At last, we did get a major grant from the city, and that speaks awesome to the city, even giving awarded money to somebody who stops toeing the party line. We got a grant to buy our building. And since then, because we all played our part, and I played my part of making a lot of noise, that nine acres since the rezoning has pretty much been bumped back up to fifteen acres within the twenty-seven acres. It's going to be pretty decent.

What it is, is a radical idea that is rather surprising that it comes from Bloomberg, although it is a tradeoff for real estate development exploitation of the remainder of the sixty-six acres. But Bloomberg had basically adopted my attitude of amusement park socialism, that amusement parks were culturally important and it was proper for the city to spend tens of millions of dollars acquiring property, even using eminent domain to have a city-supported quality amusement park in Coney Island. The build-out of it and the choice of operator has been excellent and I stand by it. I just want to see the build-out finished. It was delayed last year by COVID and the shutdown and people having to stay in. I still want it finished right away because you want the amusements built before the residential developments fill up with tenants who complain about the noise and decide they'd rather change the plan.

Q: What has happened to the other buildings that have been landmarked, or I should say the buildings that have been landmarked and preserved by the city?

Zigun: So the Childs Restaurant on the Boardwalk was purchased by the city, specifically as a legacy project of Brooklyn borough president, Marty Markowitz, who wanted to leave an amphitheater in Coney Island. So he funded, together with the city council, buying that building, renovating the building, including a big parcel of land that the development corporation originally intended for a park for the residential units. Childs Restaurant on the Boardwalk was not supposed to be a popular culture amphitheater with rock and roll acts like Wu-Tang Clan playing. It was supposed to be an upscale supermarket for the residential building. So, as I said, the nine acres got bumped back up to fifteen acres. Part of that is the Ford Amphitheater taking what was supposed to be a park and using some of that property. So that building has undergone about a $65-$70 million renovation, awesome, beautiful. It's a wonderful facility that seats five thousand to go to a concert.

The Shore Theater across from Nathan's has started interior work to become Coney Island's first boutique hotel, a fifty-room hotel. The work stopped about a year ago. I hope that starts soon. It is a landmark. The Landmarks Commission had to approve everything and, because that building is in very difficult shape, the sooner they get back to work, the better.

And then our building, we've not only bought, we've done about $1.5 million—maybe closer to $2 million—of interior renovations while we worked in it. The exterior is not all it could be, but the building is solid and functions well, when we're allowed to have an audience, as Coney Island's arts center.

Q: And a portion of the Boardwalk was also landmarked as well—

Zigun: The entire Boardwalk is a landmark, three rides, the Cyclone, the Wonder Wheel, the Parachute Jump—which, although it's not a functioning ride, is a ride—and the [Coney Island Light] lighthouse at Sea Gate are all landmarks. Nathan's should be a landmark. That pumping station should be a landmark. But at the moment, we have eight.

Q: And what have these efforts for preserving these places, what have you learned from those efforts?

Zigun: Well, it was important to do because if you have an authentic Coney Island, it's okay if a lot of the rides are big brand-spanking new rides, as long as it has the feel of Coney Island. So it's important that it not be enclosed, centrally managed. Different parts of it—although Luna Park is operated by the Zamperla family of Italy, the world's largest manufacturer of rides, so we get the newest rides first here in Coney Island. We're a showcase. We're close to J.F. Kennedy Airport. If you're in China building an amusement park, or Saudi Arabia, you might pass through an airport in New York City more often than you pass through an airport in northern Italy where Zamperla is located. We are the international showroom for the world's largest manufacturer of amusement park rides.

They are building a new park that are not carnival rides, which travel by flatbed truck, trailer mounted rides. They get assembled and disassembled, these are site-specific rides that are being built in place. They cannot pick up and move unless they're totally disassembled. So we're doing

state of the art, but it would still feel like suburban America or a stop off the New Jersey Turnpike if it didn't have a sense of history. And the fact that the Cyclone is here, the world's best wooden roller coaster, the mother of all amusement park rides. The Parachute Jump, it lights up at night like the Eiffel Tower. We have the Wonder Wheel, we have Nathan's. We have the culture of burlesque and circus sideshow. It gives it a historical mix and a specific New York City mix, that when you fill up the neighborhood with Hasids sitting next to homeboys and you have almost a million half-naked New Yorkers here, it feels like authentic Coney Island. Rides have to be maintained. You don't want to attract nice families from Brooklyn or tourists from Japan, families or tourists here on deteriorating rides that aren't well-maintained, that hurt people. And that was the situation with Coney Island and that's not just about purposeful neglect and bad operators. It's also about economics and what you can afford to do.

So having the money to restore the landmarked buildings and having the money to build new rides and bring in things that were part of the history of Coney Island, but missing for decades—like famous musical acts like Aretha Franklin came and performed in Coney Island. The Jackson Five came and performed, Liza Minnelli. Whether it's Wu-Tang Clan or it's Mary J. Blige to name some people—I'm not just rattling off names. These are artists who have recently performed the past few years in Coney Island. You have famous top of the line musical acts, which would have happened on a daily basis at the turn of the other century.

Q: What happened to the people, the families who decided to sell ten, twelve years ago?

Zigun: Oddly enough, a lot of the people I knew and hung out with—and if you read—I think

you mentioned you read a book where I talked about when I first came I was attracted to this blue-collar bohemian neighborhood of non-conformist weirdoes running small businesses, and what struck me was they were in their eighties and very healthy and still running their businesses. I developed a theory that I maintain is true to this day with my personal experience, that the salt air preserves the body and rots the mind, and we're crazy weird bastards. I'm finally becoming one myself.

So what happened to them? Well, some of those people were older than me to begin with and I'm pretty old now. So they passed. But some of them who didn't pass, it seemed like once they gave up the excitement of the Coney Island season and running their businesses and had money finally to enjoy themselves and take care of their families, a lot of them dropped dead like within the next two years. It seems like when you're old, if you wrap up your affairs and set things just right, you might not have much time to enjoy traveling.

Q: It sounds like the way that you've described that period of change is one in which it wasn't really clear what kind of opportunity would emerge and how Coney Island would change, but keeping your eye on certain elements throughout the process kind of meant that when you came out on the other end of it, let's say, that things were okay. They were different, but okay. Is that accurate?

Zigun: It's very unusual in rezoning, and let me tell you, in the twelve years of the Bloomberg administration, more than half of the neighborhoods of the five boroughs were rezoned. And they were radical restructuring of property, turning them over to residential development because

Bloomberg became mayor right after 9/11. And he wanted to create a new tax base for the city. He successfully achieved that by selling out a lot of neighborhoods to luxury housing.

But that said, most of those neighborhoods—during the rezoning process and the planning, the city will promise you twenty different things they're going to do, and if you get half of them, you're lucky because politics are always changing and what was the plan last week could radically change. Like I said, I'm anxious that the final property get built out in the amusement zone in Coney Island before the governor decides that we should put a hospital there instead because we need a new hospital and it's city-owned land.

So Coney Island was fortunate. And I'd like to think that it's due in part to my efforts, but certainly not mine alone—the good people at Coney Island USA and many other people in the neighborhood. There was a group called Save Coney Island, the Coney Island History Project. There were lots of groups agitating. Coney Island is the rare rezoned neighborhood. We've got every single thing it was promised and that does make a difference.

Q: I read also that you had described Super Storm Sandy as being both catastrophic and an interesting opportunity. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Zigun: Well, I mean, there's so many emotions and feelings wrapped up. Not only were the two buildings of Coney Island USA flooded, my pickup truck was destroyed, and my home was also flooded. And this was three weeks after I had had a major accident and smashed my face. So these were very rough times. Somehow—I'm not going to go into personally my home or Coney

Island USA—but for a lot of the businesses that had been here for awhile and stayed, and were looking a little bit unpolished and in need of some tender loving care, the tragedy of the flood and the money that flowed—it was difficult to get the money, but when the money flowed, it flowed from insurance companies. It flowed from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and allowed many businesses to renovate.

If you go to Nathan's today and you look at the building, then you look at pictures of the building from fifteen, twenty years ago, it pretty much looks identical. The entire ground floor was destroyed and ripped out without a counter left. They had a very good architect, who knew how to use and find modern materials that would look the proper 1916 period, down to new tin ceiling. Often, when you go to a modern building, a renovated building that looks like it has a new tin ceiling, it's really plastic. But whoever the architect—unknown to me—who redid the renovation of Nathan's not only used genuine pressed tin panels for the ceiling, but even used the right white tile on the walls, which are oversized and referred to as subway tiles because they're the same white tiles in the subway system. Somebody did a very good job there. Some of the buildings that had been flooded benefitted rather than suffered from the repairs.

Q: That's good to hear. What are you thinking about the future of Coney Island?

Zigun: I think we're very close to making sure that there is a viable, decent Coney Island. By decent, I mean culturally important, and also a safe place to take your family or take a tourist. Coney Island has a strong foundation to last another fifty years and that's an achievement. I'm determined to see that hotel open because, only with hotels—and there's other hotel sites I hope

will get developed—can you build a year-round Coney Island amusement district that supports nightclubs and bars and restaurants and burlesque and sideshow and concerts. You need those year-round visitors. And for some reason, the same people who will put on a winter jacket—when we're not in the midst of COVID—and put on a winter jacket and go Christmas shopping in Park Slope or in Manhattan, somehow they think Coney Island is way too cold to visit in November, December, January, February, March. Maybe January, February, but I want to see at least one, if not more hotels open and fulfill what is rezoned for the revitalized amusement park.

The city is wrapping up their fifteen acres, as I've said, and doing a pretty good job. So what are the other twelve acres? Aside from Zamperla on the city-owned property, and Deno's Wonder Wheel Park is on some city property too. The rest of the acres are a city-owned amphitheater, the Ford Amphitheater—not operated by Luna Park, operated by Live Nation. A minor league baseball stadium—not operated by Luna Park, operated by the Mets organization. Coney Island USA, not operated by Luna Park. The New York Aquarium, not operated by Luna Park. And then a number of small businesses. We have a nicely developing restaurant row on the north side of Surf Avenue, which, before the rezoning, was full of illegal furniture stores that were inappropriate for an amusement tourist destination, and instead, we have restaurants. That's a good thing.

What still needs to happen is a lot of the property in the middle—not on the Boardwalk where everything is zoned on the city, not along Surf Avenue but in the middle—there are giant parcels owned by Thor Equities. Most of them, fortunately, are activated with some good businesses but they have not been fully developed with indoor retail or indoor attractions or indoor rides or

whatever else will come. I think if we get to the point, then I think it will happen in the next fifty years—not necessarily in my lifetime. If those twenty-seven acres are fully developed, I think you have a very viable tourist attraction that has national, if not international, appeal. And at that point, if it's successful and it wants to grow with the rezoning intended by the high-rise housing, it can't grow—except at that point, you can build a pier out into the ocean and put a thirty-story hotel and an amusement park on a pier. At that point, if it's not successful, anything is viable and the incredible history of Coney Island continues.

Q: Well, that's kind of the end of my questions.

Zigun: I was about to say, that might be a good wrap-up point.

Q: Yes, I think so too, unless there's anything else you want to mention.

Zigun: No, actually, I don't know if it's your questions. Hats off to you or the subject but you got me talking. About fifty percent of that was stuff I've never talked about before on the record.

Q: Great.

Zigun: A lot of the interviews I do, and I do an awful lot of them, are the same stories over and over and over again. I enjoyed this quite a bit.

Q: Great. That's so nice to hear. If anything else comes to you, shoot me an email and we'll

make sure that it gets in the transcript.

Zigun: Okay, and then when I get the transcript, I'll go oh, but I forgot to say—

Q: Yes, absolutely.

Zigun: Great.

Q: Well, thank you so much. I hope if I drained your iPhone battery that at least your own personal battery is doing good.

Zigun: No, this worked. And I hope Brad is happy with it.

Q: I'm sure. I'm sure he will. Thanks so much. Take care. Can't wait to get to Coney Island at some point.

Zigun: Okay, thank you, Sarah. Bye-bye.

Q: Bye, Dick.

[END OF INTERVIEW]