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Herman Raucher Interview (extended)

May 2002

Herman Raucher of Cos Cob, Conn., is the author of the mostly autobiographical novel Summer of '42 and the screen play for the 1971 film, which was nominated for four Academy Awards: Raucher spoke to columnist/features writer Louis Hillary Park of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers from his Connecticut home:

LHP: Mr. Raucher, hi. How are you, sir?
HR: First, my name is Herman. Can we do that? And no `sirs,' please.

LHP: I was quite young when the movie came out (in 1971), but I remember it as being a very large hit. How did that change your life? And where has your writing and career gone since then?

HR: Let me start back from where we are, because it's interesting.

As we speak, Barnes & Noble has rediscovered the book, and we have made an arrangement as of April, whereas the book is being offered on their web site (www.barnes-noble.com) with a lovely cover and everything.

It's selling very well. And here we are some thirty-odd years later and all sorts of new people are finding the book. It's a very pleasant experience.

That's happening now.

This past year there was a musical version of Summer of '42.

I had nothing to do with it. ... I just kind of stuck around and put my nose in there every now and then. But some very young and talented people did.

We got some sensational reviews out of town. Came to New York and got very respectful reviews, off Broadway, and we ran into Sept. 11 ... (and) we had to close the show.

However, it's being done anyway (in some regional theaters).

There's a lot of interest in it despite the fact we only ran about five or six weeks.

LHP: When someone first approached you about doing a musical version of Summer of '42, what were your first instincts about that?
HR: My first instincts were, 'Well, for God's sake, it's been 30 years.' ... And where are these two young people, who are a fast 30 years old at least, and I said, 'Yeah, go ahead.' ... And they brought it in.

They were very respectful of the piece.

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The high comic moments were big musical numbers. ... And the prose portion and the dialogue were handled very well. And the end just followed the book, and followed the movie, and I thought it did well. We had audiences just loving it and screaming, and crying at the end, which is what we wanted them to do.

.... (Closing the play) was sad to see. The kids were all teenagers. The oldest one was the actress who played Dorothy, and I think she was 28.

So, how did they do with it? I thought they did very well.

LHP: You grew up in New York, correct?

HR: I grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y.

LHP: Tell me about growing up there? What are your most treasured memories of Brooklyn?

HR: Well, it's not the same as it was when I was there. It was green, and we had trees and we had no crime. And if my father gave me a quarter on a Saturday, I would be down at Coney Island all day long, and if I came home at 10 o'clock at night, nobody worried.

It was as different time and a different world.

.... My memories are very clear.

We moved around a lot depending on where my father was working, because we were dealing with the Depression. I was born in 1928, so all those '30s were rather odd years. And yet, we had a strong family, and I am happy to say - this is going to sound odd, but - I miss my parents every day.

I was just one of those lucky kids who had a great family.

LHP: Did you have brothers and sisters?

HR: I had a sister. She's gone. She was a few years older, and completely foreign to me. We had no idea what either of us were talking about.

And I guess that was par for the course, because all of my friends had sisters if that ilk.

LHP: What line of work was your dad in?

HR: Oh, Louis, one day I'm going to write about my father.

He came over from Austria at age 3. At 16 he was in the cavalry chasing Poncho Villa in Mexico. He was in the Fighting 69th, which was a New York State National Guard unit. Then they went immediately to Europe in World War I. Battlefield conditions. Bayonet wound across his forehead.

After that, he was a boxer, a bouncer. ... He also sang lead tenor in an Irish quartet in Brooklyn. ... I suspect he was a gun runner in Cuba.

The shorthand of it is, he made a million dollars and lost it and died at 50. ... When I say lost it, he gave it away.

But they crammed so much into their lives in those days.

He was a great guy.

LHP: What was his name?

HR: His name was Benjamin Raucher, though I don't know what his real name was. They were Austrian Jews, and I guess they had, somewhere down the line, unpronounceable names. And with whimsy the people at Ellis Island would give them names. Raucher in German means 'smoker.'

LHP: I understand Summer of '42 is mostly autobiographical?

HR: Yes, it is.

LHP: So, where was this summer island located?

HR: It was Nantucket.

LHP: Tell me how you came to be in Nantucket.

HR: Well, again, if my father had a good year, we lived nicely. If he had a bad year, we ate the heels of rye bread for dinner. And always around the summer time when we were kids, we would try to go somewhere ... (and) we spent some time in Nantucket.

Now, I will confess, I moved events around, as far as who my friends were and who was with me at the time.

But, yeah, that's where it happened, and it was in 1942, and we were in a war.

LHP: How had the war impacted you emotionally at the time? Was it still a very distant thing or - ?

HR: It was very much with me.

I was listening to a football game on the radio. The Giants were playing the Dodgers - they both had football teams at the time. My father was listening, and I hear over the radio that Pearl Harbor was bombed, and I looked up at my father and said, 'Who is Pearl Harbor?'

And he turned white. And the next day he went down and tried to re-enlist. But he was, like, 42 or something, and they turned him down. ... He was ready to go back. And he was a man with war wounds and diabetic and everything else.

So, it was very real to us. Very, very real.

My sister's fiancée was killed on D Day.

LHP: Oh, my goodness.

HR: You know, when you read (Tom) Brokaw's book (The Greatest Generation), you get a feeling for what those people were all about.

I was too young to go to World War II.

I was in the Korean War, but hardly heroic. But my friends who were just a few years older all saw action (in WWII).

LHP: I see.

HR: And then you're dating older girls.

LHP: That's interesting. I guess all the guys of dating age were gone?

HR: Yes, they were gone.

And some of my closest friends today are women who are a few years older who I used to go out with during the war.

Nothing much happened, but we just became close friends.

LHP: Now tell me about that summer of '42? How did it evolve for you? And how did the relationship with Dorothy evolve?

HR: Just as I wrote it.

There were no cars. There were ferry boats. People usually left wagons and such at the ferry boats, so that when they got off, they could put

whatever they wanted on it. Or they could take it to the grocery and take it to their homes. And she had no wagon. And I just - carried her bags. And we became friendly.

Her husband was there. They were really newlyweds.

It's so hard for me to remember what he looked like. To me he seemed like he was 9 feet tall.

LHP: (laughing) Sure ...

HR: Then he was called, and he was gone, and she was alone, and I would bump into her. And I was, normally, I was a very shy kid, but - I don't know - I just became friendly with her and I would carry her bags, and we would talk.

To this day, you know, I have no idea how old she was.

Actually, I was 14, but when we made the movie Warner Bros. thought that was a little too young, so they made me 15.

She could have been 20, for all I know. But she seemed like an older woman.

LHP: Sure, sure, back then. ... Did she bear any physical resemblance to Jennifer O'Neill?

HR: I doubt it.

Her name was Dorothy, and she packed up and left the island.

LHP: Immediately after - ?

HR: Well, you know, what's eluded to ever so slightly in the book, but not nailed down, which is why I wrote it in the first place.

My friend Oscy was in the Korean War. He was sent overseas and he was a medic. And Oscy was killed while tending to a wounded man, for which he won the Silver Star posthumously.

That was on my birthday. April 13, 1952. And I had never been able to celebrate a birthday since then.

What happened was, that monkey was on my back all these years, and finally I just said, 'I'm going to write about me and Oscy.' And writing about Dorothy was a secondary point.

LHP: Really?

HR: It was not the impetus to write the piece. It was to celebrate Oscy somehow. To let people know who he was and what we did and how we played, and - you know, he was a pre-med at Cornell, and was so smart, and so bright and so brave, and - and a much better soldier than I.

And he was gone.

So, I wrote the damn thing as a screenplay. ... I couldn't give away. Then - I used to write for live television in the early '50s. I was very young but I was selling - and I ran into a director named Robert Mulligan, who came out of Brooklyn, whose father was a cop. Bob was studying for the priesthood, and he was a little bit older than me.

I showed him the script, and he was a hot director (in the mid-1960s). He had just done *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

LHP: Ohhh, yes.

HR: And he put the script under his arm, and he took it to Warner Bros. and they needed product, and they asked him what it would cost to make it. He said, 'A million dollars.' They said, 'Go ahead.'

They never bothered us again.

(During the shoot) it never rained. We had everything working perfectly. The locations were great. We filmed it on the West Coast, (but) it looked like Nantucket. They had vintage cars. Salt-box houses. It was unreal.

And when we finished it, and the film was in the can - by that I mean, it was in post-production, about a year away from release - someone said, 'Why don't you write a book about it? You know, it would help publicize the picture.'

I didn't know how to write a book. I'd never written a book in my life.

They said, 'Well, write anything.'

So, I just wrote steam of consciousness. I wrote the book in about three or four weeks.

Now the book comes out, and gets to be a bestseller before the movie is released. So, when the ads for the movie come out, they say, '... based upon the national bestseller.'

LHP: Wow.

HR: But we all know that the movie was written first, and after that, I just never took anything seriously. I really felt that things were out of my hands.

LHP: My goodness, what a wonderful story.

HR: Well, it's all true, and it's wacky, because the film business is wacky.

LHP: Do you have any idea how much money Summer of '42 ended up making?

HR: Yeah, I do.

In terms of gross dollars, it made something like \$25 million in 1971.

Now, there were pictures that made far more, but if you look at it as a percentage of investment on that picture, \$1 million. We made 25 times the negative cost. That's unheard of.

And then, of course, it gave birth to the book.

... I say this with a certain amount of embarrassment, but Warner Bros. wasn't too anxious to pay me a lot of money for the screenplay, so they gave me a percentage of the film, which they still try to buy back. ... (Summer of '42) has paid bills ever since.

It's just one of those flukes.

And then I had a whole different kind of guilt.

The guilt that prompted me to write it - the fact that Oscy died on my birthday - becomes my big success, and I never would have written it if he had died a day before or a day after.

LHP: My goodness.

HR: You hear about these things, but when they are upon you, they don't seem real, but they don't seem unreal either. You almost walk through it like you would into a new room, where there's nothing to hurt you and nothing to bother you and nothing to reward you, but you go in because it's a room.

That's the way I walked through it.

LHP: What was Oscy's real name?

HR: His name was Oscar Seltzer. And his brother was named Maximillion Seltzer. We used to call them 'Alka' and 'Bromo'.

And (Max) was a dentist, and he was overseas.

And you know what's spooky? When we did the (play) in New York ... (Max's) son, whom he named Oscar, came back stage and introduced himself and absolutely knocked the cast out - especially the kid who was playing Oscy.

LHP: Isn't that something?

HR: And you know what? Just recently, the kid who played Oscy in the movie (Jerry Houser) - he's 51 years old, he called me. He was coming to New York. I hadn't seen him since the movie. He came in with his wife (this spring) and we had dinner in New York.

So, it's been a wild ride - and the beat goes on, 'cause all of a sudden the book is out there again.

And it's nice to know -

You know, I used to get letters from, from girls mostly, teenage girls, telling me all their stories and asking my advice.

LHP: Really?

HR: Yes, more than boys who had read Summer of '42.

LHP: Now, going back and talking a little bit more about the film and the book and how it evolved. Certainly the film was about the relationship between (three teenage boys), but eventually it became this very powerful romantic thing. Did that bother you at the time? Did you feel like - this isn't what wrote? This isn't how I wanted to honor Oscy?

HR: No, because it took on its own form.

And, then, I had a marvelous director.
Mulligan was so special.

And some of the scenes were so whimsical, because the kids had never acted before. And Jennifer had only done (two movies). Some of the scenes that I had written between them never worked, and were never in the picture. And what it achieved was this business of how they would glance off each other. But nothing real ever happened between them until that last moment when Hermie comes in and hears the record on the machine - or the scratching.

And, actually, in the book, (the song) was That Old Feeling.
But, of course, Michelle Legrand wrote the piece for the movie - a different kind of music.

(As far as how it changed from being an homage to Oscy, to being a romantic tale,) it was my doing, because, somewhere, perhaps without thinking, only because I was an experienced writer ... somehow I knew I had to segue into something very strong that would make the point of death in World War II - and loss of innocence.

Warners' was afraid to make it (in 1969-70) because they thought it was a war story and nobody would be interested. I knew it was about loss of innocence.

I wrote that by design.

The original impetus was to write about Oscy, but there was just so much I could write, because what did we do? We played football.

We played kickball. We horsed around. And we threw a ball against the wall.

That's about what we did. We hardly had intellectual conversations. So, it had to go somewhere or it would have never been done.

LHP: Your brief time with Dorothy was a first romantic experience for

you, I assume.

HR: Oh, it was hardly romantic. It was terrifying.

If you want to know - I was nominated for an Academy Award for best screenplay, but it should have been, well, for a short subject. I was really scared. ... I didn't know what to do.

LHP: Was it difficult to bare yourself in that way in the book?

HR: No, because it was a kind of catharsis - a ridding myself of the guilt I felt.

The book more nearly gives the proper homage to Osey than the film.

LHP: One thing I remember very vividly from my youth was seeing you on The Mike Douglas Show. You said then that, after you wrote the book and the movie came out, you had numerous letters from women claiming to be Dorothy. What did that say to you psychologically? Did it scare you a little bit?

HR: It didn't scare me, but it surprised me. And what it said to me, is that there are a lot of strange ladies out there. (But) one of the letters was from Dorothy.

LHP: That was my next question in connection with Mike Douglas interview. I remember you saying that.

HR: I recognized her handwriting ... but were talking about 1971, which was almost 30 years after the incident, and I get this letter - and I never knew her last name - and the postmark was Canton, Ohio, and she had remarried.

And, interestingly enough, she was worried about what she had done to me and my psyche.

LHP: Really?

HR: And no one has ever thought about that. Everybody thought, 'Oh, that's interesting. The kid grew up.'

But it was a traumatic event.

And her last sentence was, 'The ghosts of that night 30 years ago are better left undisturbed.'

LHP: Interesting.

HR: She didn't want to tell me who she was. (But) she was a grandmother. She had remarried.

I hope she's still out there. I've never heard from her again.

I didn't know where to write to her.

LHP: In this era when there's so much concern about sexual relations between adults and children, how do you look back on that now? Was it damaging psychologically?

HR: No. Because - oddly enough - we had effected a strange relationship.

She was interested in what I was doing, what I was studying. Was I playing baseball on a team?

And she would tell me a little bit about herself.

There were pictures (of her husband) all over the place.

And I felt like a friend.

I won't say I felt like a (member of the) family, but I felt like a friend.

We became friends.

Beyond that, when it happened, I just saw that she was in desperate need.

She had been drinking - heavily, and I don't think she -
And to segue a little bit, I went on some TV shows in those days, and a lot of people, well, it was quite controversial about whether I made it up or it happened. And I was on a show out of Chicago ... and I was on with (among others) Tennessee Williams and (director) Frank Capra ... and some psychiatrist who wrote a book - Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex. ... And they all agreed that not only did it happen.

I cannot say it as profoundly as Tennessee Williams did, with his deep Southern accent - Why, a'course, the boy went to bed with her, because she had a need, a need to be with someone to prove that she was still alive.

And I suddenly realized - because I hadn't thought about it until then - and he'd nailed it.

And everyone else agreed.

So, in an odd way, I was exonerated.

Oh! Here's something!

After the 9/11 debacle, a friend sent me a column from the Los Angeles Times, in which they had done research that following 9/11, all over the country there was an increase in sexuality that would probably rival the (babies born due to) the blackout in New York during the '60s. And they specifically mentioned, in Summer of '42, how that same thing took place.

And I just showed (the article) to everybody.

LHP: Well -

HR: There are statistics that show that when people face loss and face death, one of the ways they resort to, to prove that they are still alive is to have sex.

So, it took 30 years, but I got off the hook finally.

LHP: Up to that point, had you felt in your heart some guilt about this? That perhaps you had taken advantage of her?

HR: No. No, I didn't at all.

I don't know what I felt.

Again, because we never consummated it. I, uh, we - we were mostly holding.

You know, in the movie, we let you think what you want.

LHP: Right.

HR: Yes, we had no clothes on, but she thought I was her husband. ... She kept calling me 'Pete'.

And I was not of a mind to slap her in the face and say, 'You've gotta cut this out.'

I was just going to be Pete as best I could.

LHP: I see.

HR: It was quite a moment for a 14-year-old. I will fess up to that. And the aftermath of that was, I dated every girl I could find whose name was Dorothy.

LHP: Really?

HR: Yes, any girl named Dorothy I would try to take out. That was the only sort of strange reaction I had to it.

I never told anyone until I wrote the book. But Oscy knew without

ever asking me.

LHP: Were you 'in love' with her at the time? At least in the way that a 14- or 15-year-old can be 'in love' with someone older like that?

HR: I was in love with her before the incident ever happened. I couldn't wait to see her. She was the only one who paid any attention to me.

I mean, at 14, when I was a kid, if anybody came to the house, you came into the room, said hello, and got the hell out of there. Nobody wanted you around. ... We were never given a seat at the table (when adults were having serious conversations).
(But Dorothy) treated me like an adult.

LHP: And that was a big deal, even though she was only a few years older than you at the time.

HR: She could have been 10 years older. I have no idea.

LHP: And the letter you got was postmarked Canton, Ohio. Do you have any idea where she was from originally?

HR: No. I'm sure she told me, but I don't remember. I just figured she was from the East Coast.

LHP: What do you remember most about that house?

HR: I've spent summers at Fire Island and in homes like that, that sit on sand and behind dunes and not far from the shore, and they are weather-beaten, and brown, and they stand on stilts as much as they can so that whatever water comes up can go under. Oddly enough, some girl did the cover of the book and put the house on there with a TV antenna.

LHP: Laughing.

HR: And the publisher missed it. And I had to say, 'Hey, fellas. In 1942, we didn't have TV.' But if you get a copy of the original book with the original book jacket, there's a TV antenna right on there.

LHP: Wow. We've talked a lot about Summer of '42 and it's been great, but let me move forward a little bit. You've had other successes as well.

HR: And failures.

LHP: Well, it seems like a lot more success than failure.

HR: Yes, but you wouldn't know that, because we don't talk about the failures. But I read somewhere that 'a bad book is just as loved as a good book because it comes just as surely from the author's heart.' ... But, yeah, you write things and (when they aren't successful) they're like unborn children. They hurt.

But I've been OK, because most of my life I've been in advertising.

LHP: So, advertising has been your bread and butter?

HR: It was. I studied it in school ... (and) I've been in the boards of directors and creative boards of a lot of agencies.

Then, when we moved up (to Connecticut) - this is the first and only house I've ever lived in, which was built somewhere around 1740. And I just hide up here. I go to California.

But I was in advertising. I had a terrific position, and bought a house and bought a car to drive to the station, and give up the (1950s screenwriting) because this wasn't paying so well.

Actually, I had given up the writing. Then I got fired. The day I moved into this house.

... I didn't care. I think I secretly wanted to be fired.

LHP: And what year was that?

HR: That would have been 1965.

And then I said, 'OK. I'll go back to writing.' Because I had done a lot of TV ... (for) Studio One and Goodyear Playhouse and the Alcoa Hour.

They were live one-hour shows. And I mean, you went on live, with no way to come back if something didn't go right. It was great.

LHP: What was your first TV show?

HR: Sydney Lumet directed my first one. It was called Finkle's Comet.

It was a dopey little thing about a guy who owns a candy store and he looks out his only window and he finds a comet that no one else saw ... and (the sponsors) loved it.

LHP: That's great.

HR: Anyway, I've had many lives.

LHP: One of those lives was writing the screenplay for the Deep South, song-inspired film Ode to Billy Joe. How did that come about?

HR: There's an actor and writer and producer and director named Max Baer, whose father was the world (heavyweight boxing) champion. And Max called me because Summer of '42 just knocked him out, and he said, I've got the rights to Ode to Billy Joe.

Now, you have to understand that Ode to Billy Joe was, at that time, the largest selling record in musical history.

I said, 'Max, what the hell do I know about Ode to Billy Joe?'

He says, 'I want you to come out here and meet with (songwriter)

Bobbie Gentry - I'll pay your way out here.'

I said, OK. ... Max and I go to meet her, and I ask her what does the song mean?

She said, 'I made it up. I don't know what it means.'

I said, 'You don't know why he jumped off the bridge?'

She said, 'I have no idea.'

LHP: (Laughing.)

HR: So, I want home and I said to Max, 'This is crazy.'

He said, 'Can you write something?'

I said, 'Tell you what, you give me \$100,000 (up front) and I'll write something, and then we'll make our deal after that.' ... And he sent me a check for \$100,000 and piece of the action - a very nice piece. So I made it up.

LHP: That's interesting.

HR: I'll tell you, it's been a good ride. I have no problems with it. I'm older now and doing things, hopefully with my daughter. I've given her a screenplay I've written. She's been in the business for a while.

I have no intention of stopping.

LHP: May I ask your age?

HR: Yeah, I was just 74.

LHP: It sounds like you're still going strong.

HR: Well, I said I hit 74 but I was doing 90.

LHP: So, tell me a little bit about your family. Are you married?

HR: I am married - to Mary Kathryn Martinet. Since 1960. And we've been married ever since. First marriage for both of us. She was one of the great dancers, and I wrote about she and me in a book called There Should Have Been Castles, which I sold to the movies for a lot of money but was never made.

I have a bunch of those.

... And we have two daughters. One lives around the corner up here. She's a home mother. She has two gorgeous little kids. ... And my youngest daughter, Jenny, went in the business, and she is so pretty it scares me. Everybody thinks that she's an actress. ... Now she's formed her own company and she lives around the corner from (our New York City apartment).

So, we keep the kids close.

LHP: It sounds like your life has really evolved in wonderful ways. But going back to one point we were talking about - in hindsight, in the light of post-millennial America, I'm sure there are people who would say Summer of '42 glorifies pedophilia.

HR: Oh my goodness!

LHP: I'm not saying that, I'm -

HR: No, I hear you.

And I think there were moments when I thought back that she could have been like that girl, (Mary Kay) LeTourneau (who pleaded guilty to the rape of a 13-year-old boy). ...

You know the difference, is, if one was to say, 'What was the lady's motive?'

Right there you have your answer.

(Dorothy) had lost her husband. I think they were married about seven months. And she was alone on an island and drinkin' and playing their favorite song and in walks this kid and - good grief! - that was the last thing in her mind was pedophilia.

She just thought I was him.

LHP: Is there anything - looking back now from your standpoint - that you wish you had done differently? That night? That morning?

HR: You know, I read a book when I was 20, called The Young Lions, by Irwin Shaw. And it was about World War II ... and (Shaw) would cut to (spots) where he would write down snatches of conversation that servicemen were having.

And something jumped out at me, and I've never forgotten it.

Two guys are talking and one says to the other - 'Do you know what the equation of life is?'

And the other says, 'No. What's the equation of life?'

And (the first one) says, 'Man plus his intention equal accident.'

And I've never forgotten that because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I won art awards in high school. I wrote comic books, because I wrote them better than I drew them. And I just found, whenever a door closed, another one opened. I might have had to push it open, but I don't think I'm unusual in that respect.

I think most people - you go forward. You keep moving.

We've had some tough times.

I miss my father. He died when I was 20, and I was left with some responsibilities and all of that, but so what? So have a lot of people. The question is: What do you do about it?

You do what you have to do.

It's not like there's a rule, or a road map. There ain't none of that.

LHP: So that brief time of intimacy you had with Dorothy was not something that scarred or destroyed your life?

HR: No, but I sat on it.

I knew - I knew - not to talk about it.

And, you know, in my salad years, the ladies who favored me, I never talk about them, I never mention their names. ... I'm just grateful to them. Why would I want to tarnish them?

Any woman who decided to favor me, I just thought that was so great - 'Thank you very much!'

LHP: Living there in Connecticut, do you and your family spend any time on Nantucket?

HR: No. We went back once ... back before we had kids. We left the car in the parking lot and took the ferry over and when we came back, we had a dead battery.

That's about what I remember.

LHP: And that's your last memory of Nantucket? Is there a lesson there?

HR: Well, I said, 'You're not supposed to go back there. That's what you get. You get a dead battery.'

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