

TRANSCRIPT OF RADIO INTERVIEW BY DAVE HINMAN WITH THOM CHRISTOPHER ON WMT-AM

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Dave: Our guest is a man you would perhaps recognize--but not by his name: Thom Christopher--and that's Thom with an "h." We'll find out the reason for that in just a moment. This man is probably one of the most versatile people that we've ever spoken with. He has appeared in many, many roles including the role of "McMurphy" in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. You have also seen him in Hellinger's Law, and also in McClain's Law. You have seen him in The Eddie Capra Mysteries, Bronk, The Rookies, Cannon, Kojak, Movin' On, and Harry O. Oh, girls, you've probably seen him as "Noel Douglas" in The Edge of Night and as "Earl Merrick" on Love of Life. (I'm sure that's got blood pressures rising already around this area!) He has also been cast as "Dracula," and appeared with Betsy Palmer in Wait Until Dark. My goodness, what an astounding career you've had! And the reason he's in town is he's created and brought to life the role of the incredible half-man/half-bird character, "Hawk," in the Buck Rogers tv series. Thom Christopher, welcome.

Thom: Thank you, thank you. It's very nice to be here.

Dave: Is this your first time in Iowa?

Thom: Yes, I've now been in Iowa...let's see...four hours.

Dave: You know, it was just by chance one evening that I happened to see the Buck Rogers series. It happened to be the episode where Hawk and Koori came back and found their people massacred.

Thom: That would have been the premiere episode.

Dave: Yes, yes--there was this volatile creature who was very strong of character and very determined, and it turned out to be you.

Thom: It was a phenomenal character. John Mantley, the executive producer of the show, was brought in by Universal Pictures to attempt to revamp the previous year's concept of Buck Rogers. Moving it away from the whole cartoon effect, more into human relationships--making it more realistic, involving more pertinent things and the basic relationships between people. One day, it seems, Mantley's son asked him if he had ever read anything about the bird people of Easter Island--which was brought out by Thor Heyerdahl in the book Aku Aku. John started doing some research and that's where he came up with the concept of, basically, an alien being who is the last of his people, and who, like Buck, is out of sync with his time--and in this case is a birdman.

Dave: Yes, the character required a second look because you know, you see this thing with the feathers, and you think "What is this?"

Thom: Oh, it's a very impressive and very exotic-looking costume.

Dave: But there was some real significance to that character., and He felt blood ran hot through those veins.

Thom: Well, that was the challenge for me as an actor! I mean, I normally live in New York and so didn't know anything about the changes being made in the show. I was just talking about this last week--with some people in Los Angeles--and they asked, "How did it all evolve?" What had happened was...I was being interviewed by NBC and Universal Pictures in New York for The Gangster Chronicles. I was interested in doing "Dutch Schultz." This was on a Saturday and I'm meeting NBC personnel, and the powers-that-be, in the casting department. We're all sitting around talking and looking at the Chronicles project. First thing Monday morning, my agent calls saying, "I don't know what happened on the weekend, but NBC is airpouching a script to you about a bird." (Dave: I know--and you said, "What?!") Exactly. I said, "What are you talking about? A bird?!" He said, "They're reviving Buck Rogers, taking a whole new approach to the show. John Mantley is coming in as executive producer." John, of course, has an illustrious background with How the West Was Won and Gunsmoke for all those many years. (Dave: Sure!) I read the script--it was really an incomplete script, but I read the entire character breakdown. What they wanted from Hawk basically, emotionally, was to have a little bit more to him than just the bizarre-visual thing. I got very turned on by it--very, very turned on by it--and I immediately said, "What a wonderful, wonderful acting challenge this would be." I didn't realize at the time, though, what they were going to be getting into, costume-wise. Originally the costume was a little bizarre, and subsequently the actors' strike that occurred in the summer of 1980 helped us to get a nice long perspective on it. I mean I can't go walking around with claws on my hands and feet! We narrowed it down to that very sleek looking breastplate and a black jumpsuit, boots, gauntlets, with the most predominant item being that wonderfully shaped feathered headpiece.

Dave: Yes, that was a marvelous piece of work.

Thom: And my facial structure helped a bit, too.

Dave: I was going to.... I was a little leery about asking you about that.

Thom: No, go right ahead. Do I have a large nose? Yes I do. (Both start laughing.) It's good it's there!

Dave: It's just that it's an intense look. You have very piercing features. Your eyes are very piercing. As a matter of fact, stop looking at me!

Thom: (laughing) It's safe.

Dave: I suspect you were an excellent "Dracula," too.

Thom: Oh, the Dracula was an incredible production and we had to put it together in two weeks.

Dave: Was this a stage presentation?

Thom: This was a stage presentation. This wasn't Frank Langella's production of Dracula. This was done by Ted Tiller. He had written it and it was a little more realistic in its approach. We had an incredibly good cast performing it and I loved the approach that the director, Bob Baker, allowed me to take with "Dracula"--in making him humanistically tragic. At the end--I played it as a wounded wolf, I mean it became a wounded animal--and when the trap door on the stage was opened to swallow me up, the audience thought I was dead. They then put me in the coffin, and it was interesting to see the audience's reaction when I came alive again. They were applauding and I think that's because they felt so sad that I had to be killed.

Dave: Yes, it wasn't just some blood-guzzling monster.

Thom: Right, right. Which is one of the interesting things. It's a funny play but the basis of it is oh-so-very melodramatic and it wasn't in any way campy. Alice. Drummond was just wonderful--she played the Doctor's sister--and she had the funniest character in the play. One of the wonderful moments in it for me was the seduction scene--the famous rape or seduction scene that is inherent in all the productions. They toned it down in the 1930 films with Bela Lugosi, but Lugosi had that intense quality, too.

Dave: Sure.

Thom: In the film Dracula--he tried not to just make it a pure horror film but to bring that sense of humanistic--I love to use that word with characters like that--humanistic sorrow...humanistic hurt.

Dave: I'm very interested in the fact that you seem to have a real affinity for the characters. I noticed it when you talked about "Hawk," and when you talked about "Dracula." Somebody said you must really love the character to play it well. Do you agree with that?

Thom: Oh you have to--you have to. I've done parts that I had to do because I had no choice--either as an actor, financially--you realize, well... here's a job and it's a thing you've got to do. It's wonderful to reach a point where you don't have to do it for just the financial gains. And, fortunately, my career has progressed to the point that I don't have to do something for just the financial reasons. Starting off in the early part of my work, there were parts that I had to play that I didn't like. But I discovered that you've got to find the thing that you like about the character and if you cannot find that one thing--then you've got to make something up.

Dave: Uh-huh. You're suddenly learning the craft.

Thom: You've got to suddenly make that thing up and incorporate that into it. You just can't go into it negatively because if you do, it reads to the audience. I mean it's like painting Gainsborough's "Blue Boy." If he didn't like the "Blue Boy"--the "Blue Boy" would look very, very ugly. I mean it would just be terrible. (Dave: Sure.) You must love the thing or like the thing you are projecting--taking into the other dimension--presenting to someone.

Dave: Is there, however, an inherent danger that it might consume you in some way? Or it might change Thom Christopher?

Thom: Oh, I think it always does. I really think it does every time.

Dave: That's kind of dangerous, isn't it? That the characters take a piece of you like that.

Thom: It's very interesting because just last week I was talking with a friend of mine, who's gotten her degree in psychology in Los Angeles, and who was writing a paper on the actor/director relationship--and the power play between the two--which I think is fascinating. We went to lunch and we discussed it. She wanted to pump me for some ideas and questions, and one of the things Anita was asking was--"When does the actor stop that psychological/emotional involvement with a character?" I think there's something in yourself--a sounding board inside yourself--that says that's as far as you can take it. Simplified--I played "McMurphy" off-Broadway (where it originally opened--at the Mercer Arts)--it's a wonderful character and I loved the play. Cuckoo's Nest is a wonderful play--it really works. The people were commenting that I, as the actor, had changed. I'd be--not on a frenetic high--but on a very, very wild high all day long--doing things and talking in a type of slang that is not normally my speech pattern. None of it is premeditated, but there's a little thing that sits in the core of the brain that suddenly pops out every so often. I think an actor does get absorbed with it. It carries through. It becomes a psychosis eventually (Dave: Sure.) and it can be terrible if it continues.

Dave: That's what I'm wondering: If a young, unseasoned actor were to attempt a part like "McMurphy"--which has to be totally consuming--there seems to be (in this zeal to be the very best) the possibility that it could just swallow you up and you'd come out a different person somehow.

Thom: I think that would be false. This is one of the questions that, again, Anita and I talked about. I think what would happen first of all is that an untrained, let's not even use the word young, but an untrained actor--an actor who really isn't using all his internal and mental resources to create the part and isn't really delving into his subconscious--wouldn't really be affected by it. It would just be on the surface and he could drop it when he takes the costume off, and if he can hang it up, he wouldn't be affected by it. I like my instrument. I like the way it works. I have fun torturing it sometimes and making it--pushing it--to the extent of: let me see how much more I can open up. I think any good actor, any good creator, i.e., dancer, musician, artist, painter... (Dave: Writers?) Writers. Writers above anyone else are constantly torturing themselves. (Dave: Yes.) Look at a writer you know: Eugene O'Neill. He became everyone of his people. He was Mary Tyrone, he was James Tyrone.

Dave: But writers many times are totally consumed by their work and when it comes to the point they' cannot work any more, they cease to function.

Thom: And commit suicide if the basic psychosis.... Well, I don't want to get into the whole psychological thing but I think that if there is something a little askew in a person's psychology to begin with, then you're much, much more vulnerable.

Dave: You know I'm fascinated by obsessions and there must be an obsession with actors, I think.

Thom: I think there has to be. That's a good word--I'll buy the word "obsession." I don't think obsession means the same to me as it does to you.

Dave: I'm thinking of it in terms of a weightlifter or a body-builder.

Thom: No, that is in my terms an obsession, but it's not a derogatory thing--it's all-consuming. I think it has to be both in some way. I think that one of the problems that we're facing right now in this country (because we move so rapidly within our art, in all forms of art) and the rewards when you "make it," so to speak, are so enormous financially--that people stop short of "all-consuming obsession," and

what you have are very superficial products. My big thing now--and I don't know how many folks are watching it--is Brideshead Revisited, from England. I think it is one of the most astonishing things I have ever seen on television. It is incredibly acted and simply brilliant. I can't even think of a major motion picture that is photographed and designed more magnificently than this production is for television. Now people are saying we can't do that in this country. We're certainly capable of it--we have the most magnificent technicians--I've worked with them. I know some of the most magnificent talent--but there is always a sense of rushing to get it done. Get it done--and in the course of getting it done, you don't allow for the thing to shower you and consume you... become part of you. Maybe what I'm trying to say is we've got "quantity instead of quality"--which is one of the results of having television on 24-hours-a-day--or 24-hour programming. My heart goes out to those people who have to program the networks. I mean that: These men have to think of what to put on the air 24-hours-a-day.

Dave: They're doing something 24-hours-a-day.

Thom: But you're talking about quantity not quality.

Dave: Yes. Perhaps you don't need it 24-hours-a-day.

Thom: We don't: All this to go back to--and I'm philosophizing here--but all this goes back to being consumed by something. I think you have to live dangerously when you're creating something--when you're committing yourself to a character. You have to do it dangerously.

Dave: You've got to give yourself the opportunity to fail at it.

Thom: Oh, the failure is there. Failure is built-in. I never worry about it because I know it's built-in. The point is not to allow it to happen by not trusting and not going as far as you can, and saying "Yes, that's as far as I can go." I'm not a big sportsman in the sense of baseball and football, but I'll sit fascinated and watch when a football player is running with a football. There's something very beautiful when you know that he knows he's going to make it to that goal post. Something happens to the body. That inner thing lifts him a little further. A baseball player running around those bases--when he knows that he's going to make it. It's that thing--I've pushed it as far as I can go. I jog. I mean that is the ultimate--watching a runner. It's beautifully displayed in the new film Chariots of Fire--which to me is a film of nothing but a series of magnificent climaxes. Seeing men at a point of "This is what I've waited for." I know at that moment I've done it. That's the consumption--it's being consumed.

Dave: I hope one day you'll consider doing something on radio full-time. It's marvelous to sit here and listen to you speak. (Thom:(laughing) Thank you. Thank you.) You mentioned earlier that there were a couple of things you did because you had to. (Thom: Yes. ) Did that happen to be the soap opera roles?

Thom: Not soap opera roles that I've mentioned, or that you very nicely mentioned earlier. Roles before that which I had to do because I knew--in the early part of my career--I had to break into television. I had to start building a reputation. Realistically speaking, most actors are faced with doing their work for the business. I mean 80% of the work you do is for the business--the rest is for the public. That's really what it comes down to. I had to establish some kind of credibility--which was only logical--and I did a series of five or six soap operas in New York that were aired in the early seventies. I'd do three or four days, never a major running part as I did with "Noel Douglas" or "Earl Merrick." In some of the cases I didn't want to do them--parts such as playing the bartender, etc.--but then I said, now wait a minute. I've got to find how to make that thing totally my own individual thing, (Dave: Sure.) so the reputation that was created by me and the people who support me: agent, manager, wife, said well, he'll take it and make it totally his own. He'll do it his own way, and it just becomes something totally his. I think that's exciting--that's a lovely compliment. I think that's maybe one of the ultimate compliments: that it's totally your own. That no one else can do it your way--and I think that only comes from pushing something to a dangerous limit.

Dave: For example, if you're watching television and all of a sudden your eye is straying over to the bartender--he's not doing anything, he's just standing there--but he's got presence....

Thom: Well, that's basically what happened. It was primarily CBS. They became like my godparents. Can I say that on the air?

Dave: Of course, we are CBS; have been for many years.

Thom: I was doing CBS soaps and a lovely woman, Jean Arley, (a magnificent producer of daytime television), a wonderful woman who knows the business inside and out, and was a major casting director at one time, was then saying, "Wait a minute, he's not a bartender! Let's take this a step further." Things like "Earl Merrick" and "Noel Douglas"--creative work came out of it. I would never commit myself to a contract, so the parts could've turned into things that would've gone on for years, but I would never commit myself to a contract. I didn't want to. It was just a personal thing. (Dave: Sure.) I just

didn't want to be on a soap for four or five years. Had I been twenty or twenty-one years old, I would have definitely done it. A young actor I've met (as a matter of fact, he's Wilfrid Hyde-White's son) and I were talking. He is in his early twenties, and he has a possibility of doing a soap and I told him he should because it's the greatest training ground for actors. It really is an incredible training ground: getting used to the camera, working with the camera, learning lines quickly, making it not just dull-believable--but making it highly individual-believable.

Dave: When we think of the people we have watched on television for twenty or twenty-five years--it's just staggering: The workload could drive somebody into the ground.

Thom: That's the danger of it. I don't like the idea of accepting anything that long because then my energy goes. I don't get into traps. The longest I've done anything television-wise was, of course, thirteen weeks on Buck Rogers. But I constantly say to myself (these are the dialogues I have with myself--driving in the car, etc. )--"Don't fall into any traps of doing it by the numbers or by rote." Which I think can happen. Especially if you start playing a personality as opposed to playing the situation, the script, or what the writer has intended to do. Whether it's good writing or bad writing is not the issue--it's not a judgmental idea. It's that there is a concept--there's an intent--so play it out--go after the things that you want to bring to it. Am I making any sense?

Dave: You are indeed!

Thom: Don't play by the numbers. You can't paint by the numbers, you can't write by the numbers.

Dave: Well, I think you're also saying don't be so blasted arrogant to think that this is not a role for you or this is beneath you.

Thom: Oh, never. If you've committed yourself to something, then you have no choice but to give it 300% every time. That's one of my pet peeves--I don't like it when an actor gets a role and then doesn't commit himself to it after he's accepted it. That is something I can't even talk about because I don't even comprehend it. I get terribly blank--my brain turns white--I just don't understand it, I can't even discuss it!

Dave: What happened to Buck Rogers? Was the series too expensive?



Thom: I think it was a combination of things. I think the expense was probably way down at the bottom of the list. They were coming back to an audience that was used to the comic concept. I don't say it derogatorily--but I would not have done the show if it had been tailored the same way it was the first year. It was all very brightly lit and done almost on a comic book basis--but that was the choice made by the producers at the time. I think there was an audience perception of the show on those earlier terms and when we came back--poor publicity for the reconfigured series didn't win us a new audience. I'm still convinced that had NBC given it more time--it could have lasted. I would like to have seen it run the course because I was having such a wonderful time with it! There was much talk about the way the character would go in future scripts. The audience was very wise---I mean they obviously picked up on the fact that as the show went on I appeared less and less and less--and that's only because of the fact that I was basically written into three scripts. That's all. I wouldn't want to do a lifetime of playing "Hawk," and it wouldn't have evolved into that--but to do it for two seasons, two years, three years--I could have seen it. I would have had a wonderful time because Gil Gerard, who is a lovely man to work with, and Erin Grey, who is a sheer delight--we really began to throw around wonderful script ideas. We had script concepts that we were going to do.. "Wilma" and "Hawk" suddenly had a romantic involvement and they knew that they couldn't maintain it because of the difference--they were two different races. I wanted to pursue "Hawk's" wife again and I had a variety of script ideas. All of this was highly motivated on the set--everyone was highly motivated to see the show go. Ben Colman, our Director of Photography, was the same Director of Photography they had had the previous year, but where everything was lit with a bright clear light the first year (as I said, highly comic-bookese)--the second year he made it into a painting. I mean the first two episodes are really quite lovely for episodic television and for a show with that kind of budget--which was enormous. According to VARIETY it was the most expensive show on the air at the time. But I think I specifically fault it for its lack of publicity, winning the right audience and also a great deal of pre-empting. I did not know about the latter.

Dave: That's the scourge of television isn't it?

Thom: Yes. We were on this time last year. We were mid-way through March of last year and I had gotten a lot of fan mail. The audience's response was just enormous for me and letters began to say, "Well, we lost the last .episode because a basketball game was aired." With this local type of pre-emption the episode was never aired again, so I felt that that was also a part of the problem. I understand that it has

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been picked up for syndication, and everyone's very excited about that. It's kind of unique. Maybe in a way the gods have said, "Let it just be these thirteen weeks of just sheer fantasy and leave it at that." Maybe it was not meant to go beyond what we did with it. It could have survived with the proper publicity. I don't think it had the right publicity. No one was really quite tuned in on what they wanted the show to be--whether it was going to be a children's show, an adult show, a fantasy show, or a science fiction show--and there is a big difference. (I also think the men at Hartland, who did all the special effects, did an incredible job on it.) It was said to me that I would have had a spin-off had the show gone one more season. I would have done that, but I really would have only done it if I could have gotten a commitment that it would have been geared toward adults.

Dave: Sure--because that's something that could get entirely out of hand. It could have become like Batman.

Thom: Right. No, I would never do all those things ...I would not make that mistake. I don't want to get into all of that now because they are choices that 'an actor makes, or a producing body makes, but I think that the show would have worked as an adult show--purely as an adult show--had they gone into it that way. But it just jumped around a little bit too much and it wasn't consistent, after the first two episodes--and one very good one that I liked: "TESTIMONY OF A TRAITOR," which Bernie McEveety directed. (He's the brother of Vincent McEveety, who directed me in my first Buck Rogers episode, the one introducing "Hawk".) "TRAITOR" was very, very well written. Every so often I go back and reread the script and play it again on tape and it's very well done. That was, I think, maybe the most purely adult show: where "Buck" is held up as a traitor to the entire Federation. I was very impressed by that episode--and if they could have kept that and the "TIME OF THE HAWK" level, I think we would've really made a lot of noise. I have learned that Buck Rogers is very big in England--which is amazing to me--and a very wonderful fan club has started here in the U.S. out of this. (Dave: Oh yes?)

Dave: Now is this a "Hawk" fan club?

Thom: No, it's a Thom Christopher fan club. It was all motivated by the interest in "Hawk" and "Hawk" was the catalyst. It made me sit back

and say, "Hey, wait a minute," when Vicki James first approached me about the club. It made me suddenly say to myself, "Why?" because I didn't think that was going to happen. First of all, it wasn't on the air long enough-- I was only basically on two, two-and-a-half episodes, where I could strut my stuff. But then John Mantely said, "We've got to just show you at times." I was even saying Wilma's lines! Suddenly Erin would say, "Wait a minute. What happened to those lines?" I was given Erin's lines to say because they said, "We've just got to show "Hawk" standing on the screen!" The fan club started because "Hawk" just got so many people excited. Obviously I did my job. (Dave: Of course you did!) I did do what I intended. I did reach out and touch somebody with my subconscious. I always like to think of it in those terms: my subconscious activated somebody else's subconscious. (Dave: Yes. And I think that's a very old term.) Yes. Once those sparks start I'm very fortunate that I have people--friends now--who've done some beautiful creative writing and artwork for the Thom Christopher Fan Club and there's the Hawk Alliance in England and Scotland.

Dave: Good heavens!

Thom: It's quite exciting and it's quite extraordinary and every so often I say to myself, good heavens! (Dave: Yes, what's going on?) But the work--the intent--that went into it was to show and to share this enthusiasm. What has evolved is a great deal of enthusiasm--people doing a lot of wonderful creating! People writing things that they've never written before. I think it's one of the beauties of being an actor--when you know that you can affect people this way. That is maybe the ultimate--Olivier talks about that a great deal.

Dave: This was such a sudden burst and then that particular character was gone.

Thom: Yes, and it might have helped. It might have, I don't know, I really don't know, and I don't question it because it's out of my province--it's out of my control. It's karma now--it's beyond me.

Dave: Do you really enjoy going to these scientific conventions?

Thom: Yes, I do. I attended my first con over July 4th weekend in 1981 and it was absolutely wonderful. I'm looking forward to this one very much.

Dave: It's gaining a reputation.

Thom: Yes, it is. I like what we've ,got in store for the weekend. I'm looking forward to meeting Jesco (von Puttkamer). Jimmy (Doohan) and I just had dinner and, of course, I know his work--but the wonderful thing we discovered over dinner is that he and I both went to the Neighborhood Playhouse. Did he talk about that? I didn't hear his interview. He was a student there with Sandy Meisner so his background is really incredible. (Dave: Yes, it is.) Sandy Meisner was one of the best acting teachers in the country. He's ill now, but I think Jimmy got him at a very good time. He wasn't teaching when I went, but we both also studied with Martha Graham and a gentleman named Louis Horst (now deceased) who taught pre-classic form dancing. This all came out over about two hours over dinner.

Dave: That's great. We'll be back and talk a bit more with Thom Christopher in just a moment.

We're speaking with Thom Christopher who is an incredibly diverse, talented man. The only other time I have seen Thom with an "h" is for the guy with the shoes: Thom McAn. (Laughs.) I'm sure that did not inspire you.

Thom: Well, I want you to know it did! (Laughs.)

Dave: You've got to be kidding!

Thom: No. I'm serious. I always knew I wanted to be an actor. I knew that I was going to be on the stage and in acting/dancing. That's all I ever wanted to do all my life and I was fortunate that when I went to Performing Arts High School....

Dave: That is the same high school that the series Fame....

Thom: Fame. Right. A lot of it wasn't far off the beat, exactly. It's a little\_bit fantasized but that's what our lunch hours were like. When I was attending school I had a senior acting teacher who also taught the senior class. He was a very handsome, attractive, leading-man type of actor. He would go away to. summer stock and playa leading man at a theatre called Cragsmoor Playhouse in Ellenville, NY. One day I was literally moving a piece of scenery in this tiny little area by the lunch room (I was in my sophomore year at the time) and he was on the phone. He said, "What's your name," and I told him. He said, "Do you want. to go to summer stock?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He replied, "I can get you a scholarship to summer stock--don't worry about it." I said, "Yes, I want to go." It seemed that the producer, Elaine Perry, needed another apprentice and right then and there I said yes and took the subway home, told my mother and

my father that I was going to go no matter what. We go up that summer and for me to get the scholarship--so they will pay for my room and board--I had to be in charge of the art gallery. That meant going out during intermission and hanging around the barn these paintings that a local artist did. It was a very beautiful barn in the upper Cragmoor mountains in Ellenville, NY. They were going to put my name up there with "Art Exhibit Managed By:" and here I am, 14 years old--and a big ham--because I had landed a role in everyone of the shows coming up. (No other apprentice had that--there were ten shows and I had a nice role in everyone of them. At that point, if I had even one line and walked across the stage it was wonderful!) I sat there looking at the spot where my name was going to be and I said, "I don't like Tom," and all I could think of was Thom McAn (laughs), Thom McAn shoes. So I said try T-h-o-m and it's stayed with me ever since. So I've just dispelled all romantic ideas or anything else about its origins. I was the first actor in Screen Actor's Guild with it spelled that way. (Dave: I was hoping for something...) No, nothing. I couldn't lie about it or be super dramatic. It actually comes from Thom McAn shoes.

Dave: Your career was pretty much decided then, when you were a very young man?

Thom: Yes. I knew that's what it had to be.

Dave: So your secret of success has been through finding that ladder and taking the falls and going through structured organization?

Thom: Oh, yes. It has to be.

Dave: It has to be, that's what I'm getting at.

Thom: In my particular case it had to be that. A philosophy of life that I've adopted at this point is that you cannot go through life on a comparison basis. You are really, really going to be off the deep end if you do.

Dave: Okay. Let me ask you this. Let's say for instance, person "A" from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has never been in a production in his or her life, but he or she can act. Is it possible for them to sit down with Someone.... What I'm saying is--can you just go out and have it happen to you? I mean, can you go out and land a role in a movie or tv series without having gone through all this?

Thom: It happens. But my every core, instinct, my experience and knowledge says you can't sustain it--your work, your craft!

Dave: We hear horror stories about how hard it is to crack the nut even on the minor scale. There are so many people looking for work in this business.

Thom: It is not easy, but once you've made a commitment to it....We were talking about this just yesterday with another actor in Los Angeles. (I came in from Los Angeles and I'll be going back to New York.) He brought up the fact that people talk in terms of time. Again, I use the expression "white brain"--my brain just turns white, blank--when someone says, "If I don't make it by 30, I'll get out. If I don't make it by 40 or 50, I'll get out." The business is not like that. It is not a nine-to-five business. It is not six-days-a-week. You can't do that. I mean it is all-consuming. It is seven days a week. That's why you can't use the expression "I want to lead a 'normal' life." I always chuckle when I hear or read a publicity blurb on such and such a star who wants to lead a "normal" life and have her children. You can't. It's impossible.

Dave: What do you say to a young person who comes up to you and says I really want to do this?

Thom: Learn. Learn. Aldous Huxley said something that was very, very perceptive. "Experience is not what happens to a man--but what a man does with what happens to him." I think that's very truthful. What it means to me is that right now if someone said I want to become an actor, I would tell them: Learn to be. Learn how to use the instrument. Learn everything about yourself that's possible. Everything that you can possibly nurture and feed into you. If you say you want to do it because you want to become a star, that's a result. You don't work for a yacht--you don't work for a 12- or 15-room mansion; no one does. A banker doesn't do it. A high-powered executive doesn't do it. Those are all results. An executive does all the processes necessary in getting to that--am I making any sense to you? (Dave: Yes.) I would say to them that they've got to have a solid technique. They've got to know the instrument. It's got to work. There isn't any "natural born" anything. Picasso was not a natural born artist. The man suddenly realized that, "Wait a minute, I could take this cube and tilt it a little and that would become an eye"--and he perfected it. Baryshnikov gets up and knows his body can do things that no other body can do, or Nijinsky knew his body could do things that no other person could do--and they turned it into a technique. We have to have a technique to live. I mean there is a technique to living. If you don't have that technique, you're in a lot of trouble. That's why we have a lot of psychiatrists and a lot of trouble in marriages, love affairs, mother-child relationships, father-child relationships, mother-father relationships. They miss the technique of living. It's all part and parcel of one thing. You've got to learn technique. You've got to know what you're doing.

Dave: Coupled with a dedication that must say--I'm guessing now--that if anything can stop you let it, because if you can be stopped, you're not going to make it.

Thom: Exactly. Oh yes. Exactly. I like that....

Dave: (Laughing.) You can use that if you want.

Thom: I may steal that (chuckling). I like that. I've never heard it put in those terms. But I've always just said it must be a total commitment as far as I've been concerned.

Dave: With all that we have talked about and all this marvelous talk about performing arts, all of a sudden you come up as a person who is how writing and directing operas. Now how does that fit in? You don't the time to do that.

Thom: I don't write operas. I've always loved music, and I think that if I had to have a second life it would be as an opera singer. I sing, and I've done musicals. And I have a tremendous respect for opera singers. To me it is the ultimate art. I think when an individual has to stand on stage and literally risk their whole life on two little muscles sitting behind their adam's apple ..... That says a lot about somebody. Dramatically, I just love the theatricality of it. I had finished doing Jacques Brel at the Rhode Island Arts Festival and the producer at the time knew about my passion for opera. (She was also an opera producer in the winter season.) She asked if I would come back and do her premiere production of Il Trovatore. I agreed and prepared for it for about six months and that was my introduction to my first opera. I'm doing Madama Butterfly this summer at Pine Orchard Arts Festival, in the Catskills of New York State, which will be the second season for them. I knew some of the singers that performed up there last year and they spoke very highly of it and I had also read the reviews and what different people were saying about it. (Opera is the most critical of artistic worlds--more so than any other creative arts world. The desperation is enormous but when someone says it's good, you know you're onto something good.) The Artistic Director had a very good festival. He's coming back and I think that's a very good sign. If he got through the first year, he can get through the second. then when he suggested my doing Butterfly, I got very excited. And I will be going there on my next trip to New York. I will take a trip up to the theatre and start the preliminary scenic design and work with the designer, looking at what we want to do with it, and take pictures of the theatre. It's a whole arts festival for four weeks in Pine Orchard, NY.

Dave: How do you make time for that?

Thom: You make it. You do. There is a clause that I have written into my contract with the opera that up until three weeks prior to going into rehearsal I can get out of this. In other words, the clause is necessary because my life could change--I mean, I've gone off and done a television movie literally on twenty-four hours' notice! I had to bow out of an opera in New York because I had a wonderful role offered me in Rome (a television movie)--I gave the opera to a friend of mine to do. I knew he could pick up where I had started. The acting always does come first. In the case of the opera, though, once I've gone into rehearsal, then I just couldn't leave. I wouldn't.

Dave: Have you ever taken a part because of the shooting location?  
Provided it wasn't an outrageously horrible part, of course.

Thom: No. It's always an added benefit though. My goodness, I had this trip to Rome to do S.H.E.--Marty Bregman's production of S.H.E.--which was a two-hour movie of the week with Omar Sharif. All I did was the prologue. It was very exciting, "Starring Omar Sharif," and "Starring Thom Christopher" right after Omar Sharif's name! I loved that. My god, I'm only saying twenty lines and doing the whole prologue of the film, but we were in Rome for seven weeks. I wouldn't really ever make a decision on a project strictly because of a location, but it was a very wise move to make for many reasons. It was a funny role. I was doing a takeoff on every toughie I knew. It was really good.

Dave: You're a very intense man. Don't you think? Can't you tell that?  
You know that:

Thom: I talk a lot, I don't know...how "intense" I am. Intense? I've always got a lot to say.

Dave: I'll bet when you get mad--you really get mad!

Thom: Oh yes. I do. People call it the "black heat." I get a black look on my face.... You can read that?

Dave: Oh yes, that's coming across. And by the way, I must also say that you look much younger than you did as "Hawk." When I saw the series I made a point of saying to myself, the guy playing that part is probably 45 years old.

Thom: No, I'm not, but that's interesting.

Dave: Well, it's obvious that you're not!



Thom: That's interesting. That's very interesting....

Dave: I don't know what it was but...it was an aging process.

Thom: It might have been the complete blackness of the cowl. It might also have been what I was aiming for, too--within the character--giving him a heaviness, giving him an emotional heaviness.

Dave: I do appreciate your sharing a little glimpse of yourself. A lot of people are not willing to do that. I do appreciate it.

Thom: I've enjoyed myself. Thank you, I've really enjoyed it. And I hope we see you all this weekend.

Dave: Yes, I was going to say...if you want to speak with this gentleman and find out a little more of what he's about and the things he has done--the convention is going on Saturday and Sunday at the Abbey Inn, in Coralville. All right?

Thom: All right so far.

Dave: People can just walk in and pay their money at the door, right, Joni? What time? What time 'does this get started?

Thom : Nine o'clock. Nine o'clock, Saturday and Sunday morning. You can pay at the door. There is going to be a lot going on. There will be exhibits, there will be an art show, there will be some writers there, the three guests will be answering more questions and there will be some very interesting people!

Dave: Thom, thank you very much again.

Thom: Thank you, Dave.

(Transcribed by Joni Gillispie)