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Interview of Sean Scully by Ruth McDonnell recorded by telephone.

09/11/2000

RCMD: Growing up in an extended Irish family in London, what effect did it have on your work?

SS: What effect did it have on my work? Well, I think that it was probably the formative influence on my work because we lived in an enormous house in Highbury, Islington, you know, which was an Irish ghetto, and em, and then at the top of the street was my little convent school and I had my two cousins and they were really like sisters 'cause we were all the same age, you know; we were all born in June. So there was three of us the same age, that we went around together [and then] we had my crazy aunt downstairs, then we has all these itinerant workers coming over from Ireland all the time and they were very sweet, sad men.

RCMD: probably lonely as well...

SS: Yeah, very sweet, sad and soft. I remember them as very soft, lonely men, very... very kind of tender. And, em, and they all came over for all sorts of reasons, not just to work on building sites but to, you know, be accountants and whatever, office workers and hotel porters was a big one wasn't it.

RCMD: Was yours the family in the house?

SS: Yeah, we were in the top...we were on the top floor. In one room there were us four and then across the landing there was another family, and this guy and his wife didn't have children and he was a comedian and, ahh, you know, he had a really big nose. He looked a bit like Samuel Beckett I suppose only much funnier, and he would always come in and pull the door open and play this trick where he'd hold his foot forward and pull the door open and pretend it hit him on the nose - 'course we'd always roll around laughing' - and he used to do it nearly every day, and he was a transvestite comedian and he used to have balloons for his breasts and they used to go down during the performance and he used to feign mock horror- and it was always the same thing. You see my mother was in vaudeville, you see, she was a singer...

SS: ...so you see this addicted me to the idea of, I suppose, the exotic...

RCMD: sounds very theatrical.

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SS: Yeah, my mother is very theatrical; she's a very theatrical person even now and since then, you know, she became a famous dancer in Spain -a tango dancer.

RCMD: I didn't know that.

SS: Yeah, and that's tremendously theatrical. So basically I grew up with the idea of celebrity and everybody in the house being Irish and all thought that they were special. You know my uncle was there and he was a heavyweight boxer; he was a fall-down artist. He used to get knocked out every time because he was too sweet to really sort of kill anybody, so he was always the guy that got knocked out. And you know, my cousin, my other aunt Teresa was there and she was a great beauty -she was married to him- and everybody was somehow exotic so the whole house was like, you know, it was like a giant theatre. I mean it would make a beautiful novel, you know, to write about, and so that's how I grew up.

RCMD: That's very interesting. I haven't read that; it's completely new to me, Sean. I don't get that feeling of theatre or exoticness in your life...in the books I've read.

SS: Yeah, well I've had a very interesting life. Except when I moved to South London and then, you know, my life was flat...

RMCD: it changed.

SS: That's why I had to become a criminal in order to spice it up.

RMCD: Spice it up or survive?

SS: Spice it up!

RMCD: I had another question about your grandmother and your aunt who lived with you. I was interested to know how the women in your life influenced your work. Now, you've already said that but I'm especially interested in your grandmother. Was she an "Irish Grandmother?"

SS: Oh, yeah!

RMCD: What was she interested in? I mean, what hobbies did she have, or did you notice?

SS: She didn't have any hobbies; she worked eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. That was her hobby, you know. She had seven daughters and my father -no, six daughters and my father 'cause one died, and no husband 'cause her husband died, and

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then she left Clonmel and she went to Dublin. And that didn't work out; basically she worked her way towards London and then she rented this house from an Irish butcher on Holloway road for five shillings a week. I mean the house is a giant house on Highbury Hill, you know...

RMCD: Is this the one that is described as a Victorian house?

SS: Yeah, you know, Highbury Hill has since become very groovy: that's where Sade lives; she has a flat at the top now.

RMCD: oh, really?

SS: Yeah, but when I lived there it was really fabulous, there were no cars really, you know, there were like three or four cars and kids were in the road, and there was all these old ladies and my grandmother was one of them of course, and em, my grandmother, em, would, you know, when she first come over she did ironing, cleaning, house cleaning and took in itinerant workers –and that's how she made it all work by just force of personality. She was a strong woman and I've got a photograph of her, she looks like an American Indian: she looks like an Apache.

RMCD: in what way, in her features?

SS: Yeah, sunken eyes and a big nose, very, you know, she could be either –she could be an Apache, or a Jew or Irish. And she was an extraordinary-looking woman, very striking, you know, very handsome, kind of noble with a deeply sad expression, and she took to –by the time I was about, what, I don't know, four, five- she took to going up to the Barn which is a pub and singing at lunchtime and getting absolutely plastered, and she used to ask us what we wanted. We always said we wanted chocolate buttons. And then we'd play in the front garden on these steps that we had –'cause it was a quite noble house- and then she'd come down a few hours later, you know, and you'd see her weaving her way down from the top of the hill really drunk and having sung for a couple of hours, you know, in the pub, all these sad Irish songs: *'Take Me Home Again Kathleen,'* this kind of business, you know: *'If I Was a Blackbird I'd Whistle and Sing'* and these are the songs that I started singing. And then I started writing my own little songs, I was only, you know, [laughs] age seven and I thought I was a songwriter and then architect and I was given by these women an enormous sense of self-importance.

RMCD: It's a good start for a boy I think, Sean.

SS: I got a pretty positive start I have to say and that –that, it was that formative period in Islington, Highbury Hill, with my granny- used to have a big black cocker spaniel

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called Penny and she used to, like, carve up the food and then whack Penny on the side of the hips, to get her out of the way, with the knife, you know: [Irish accent] “get out of the fuckin’ way will ya,” whack, and then she’d carry on carving up the food with the same knife [laughs], and poor old Penny was like a, you know, like a kind of boat on legs.

RMCD: Once she didn’t run away...

SS: Well, she couldn’t, she could hardly get around she was so fat, and em, and then my granny, when we moved to south London, my granny came over to see us a lot ‘cause she wanted to live with us.

RMCD: She still lived in Islington?

SS: She still lived in Islington with insane aunt and, em, she used to be a kleptomaniac so when she would get up to leave on a Sunday at about nine o’clock, all of these things would fall out of her knickers, you know, like spoons and clocks and any old thing.

RMCD: Were they your spoons?

SS: Yeah, she, she...she’d stolen them like she was in the house, because, you know, it’s a form of possession. So she was quite sweet, and very, kind of, a bit broken as she got older, you know, but she was a wonderful woman. And my aunt downstairs and I never got along –the mother of my two cousins, Anne and Lesley- and so I used to do all wicked things to her, like I would put, you know, empty paint cans or empty jam jar lids on the top of the toilet, outside toilet door, filled with worms or snails or whatever. Or you know I would...slimy substances so it would flip over and land on her head when she went to the bathroom.

RMCD: That was cruel but you knew you’d get away with it, obviously.

SS: Yeah, but one time I did cut up all her knickers when they were on the line with a pair of garden shears ‘cause she’d pissed me off really seriously about something, so between me and her it was quite, em, quite a war; between her and my parents it was quite a war. So the house was very dramatic; it wasn’t all, sort of, rosy.

RMCD: No, I don’t think at that time in London it was, it could have been, really...

SS: No.

RMCD: ...but I didn’t know it was as fascinating as it is.

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SS: Oh, it was fascinating.

RMCD: But then maybe looking back is always fascinating?

SS: And when we'd go to vaudeville every week, so there was basically never a dull moment. And then, of course, I was coming down a lot and I was making...I remember I was down in my aunt Peggy's a lot, because my aunt Peggy had a ground floor flat, you see, and we only had one room at the top and you couldn't swing a cat and, em, so we just lived next door to the comedian at the top and that was great, and then downstairs was my aunt Peggy. And then I would take these Madonnas and these rabbits, you know, and make 'em in these rubber molds. I remember that those mostly were painted down in Peggy's so she couldn't have been that bad...

RMCD: ...cause she let you do what you wanted to do.

SS: Yeah. So she was very tolerant of me. I just think that towards her I was very naughty.

RMCD: Well, maybe it was just something to fight against.

SS: Yeah...

RMCD: And I was wondering about that, about the house, you know, the fact that you've been influenced by Van Gogh's painting *The Chair with the Pipe*. I wonder were the floor tiles reminiscent of that house or that painting? Do you ever see, you know, parallels of those kinds of things?

SS: No, not visually, no. My influences were really more emotional. There was a lot of singing, you know, like '*When Irish Eyes are Smiling*,' and I literally believed it. I literally believed instead of feeling inferior about being Irish I felt like, that if I would smile then I would make the world happy, so the world, in fact, was dependant on me. You know, I mean, I really did have an incredibly supportive beginning.

RMCD: It sounds like a very powerful way to begin, doesn't it?

Yeah, and then all that was broken when I left the convent school, you see, 'cause It was all of a one, it was seamless; going up to the convent school, coming down at night, being with Anne and Lesley my cousins and my little brother, and all playing together and then all the women, old women walking up and down the street, you know. Like there was one woman, old lady, she would always give us presents. But they would be,

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like, she would take us down... You know, some people had enormous flats there 'cause real estate wasn't worth what it's worth now.

RMCD: And the houses were traditionally larger; they were built for one family originally-

SS: Yeah, they were enormous. And this lady would take us down into the cellar where she had all these things, you know, 'cause she was a bit cracked- and she would give you, she would give us like a big milk jar with a hole in the bottom as a present. And then another time she'd just give us an old lady's shoe, but it would be one shoe. She'd just give us all these weird things. There was another lady that came down the hill one time and she stopped and she said -she was an old Irish lady, and she was very sweet- and then she said to me, "Could I have a glass of water?" So I said "Yeah of course you can" and then I went rushing to get her the glass of water. I came out and gave her the glass of water and then she sat there for a little while and died...

RMCD: It sounds as if you were in a very supportive group and that there were a lot of Irish people on their own over there at the time.

SS: Yeah, there were. It was a very... it was a very big street culture -not like Latin America of course- but for London it certainly was. And the convent school was a very powerful influence on people. These memories are much more vivid than the memories that follow which is interesting 'cause the memories that followed weren't so nice.

RMCD: Could I ask you about...I know you've mentioned in the book that I've read about the tin church near your school. Was it one of those corrugated building structures?

SS: Yeah, and now it's kind of a community centre and it was very small and humble. It was an in-between period where the church didn't have a proper church so I guess what you could say is that it was the size of the house and it had this tin roof and when it rained it was fantastic, you know- it was like a drum inside. The priest would have to shout his head off about, you know, [shouts] "Try to be good to other people! Don't drink on Sunday!" and he would be shouting like this. And the church, though it was very simple it had...it was a perfect church for a child because it was in proportion. It wasn't scary at all. I saw the Stations of the Cross and that influenced me to be an artist like crazy, those paintings. I mean the paintings weren't particularly special in art but they had colour in 'em and they had a story, and they had this cross that kept changing orientation. Outside was a beautiful plaster of paris Virgin Mary painted in gloss paint. I went about five or six years ago to walk around that area with my friend, you know, and we just found the church intuitively. I remembered it from all those...what, you

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know, that period, and in the front is a chunk of plaster of paris with some paint on it and that's what's left of her.

RMCD: Oh, really...

SS: Yeah, and I almost took it as a sacred object but I decided not to; I left it. I mean if I went past it again I might take it that next time. I was undecided whether to take it, but there it was, a remnant of it. There'd been building work, it'd been thrown in the corner and it was still there. So the thing is that it was very visual, and of course it gets filled out with smoke and...on Sunday during Mass and...

RMCD: What gets filled up with smoke?

SS: The church with incense. And then you have the holy water, you have the nuns in black and white, and it's black and white and red and there's flowers outside at the Virgin Mary painted, the whole thing was extremely visual and sensual and it was fantastic. I loved it.

to finish transcribing----p.11
robin