

**Interview from the preparation of**

# **Fell's Point Out of Time**



## **Vince Peranio Interview, February 11, 2004**

***Kraig Greff, Interviewer; Jacquie Greff, Camera***

[cut irrelevant intro]

### **[Vince]**

My name is Vince Peranio. I moved here in Fells Point in 1968. I'd just graduated from the Maryland Institute and moved down here with about 8 other graduate students, artists, sculptors and painters. We did it because the rents were so incredibly cheap down here. We had a place on Broadway in the 700 block that was an old bakery. It was 2 rowhouses together, and it was 27 rooms for \$100 a month. I think my rent was \$13 when we were sharing. So it was kind of like a little artists' commune that just came in here and it was mostly, at the time, a Polish community and Greek community. Right down the street was a belly-dancing place called The Acropolis. And it was also a period of Fells Point when it was almost a ghost town because houses were being boarded up by the city. People were being moved out.

### **[Kraig]**

This was pre-road.

### **[Vince]**

This was right when the city was moving everybody out because of the road, buying people out, buying houses out, boarding them up. So, it was like we had the whole place to ourselves. It was almost a little ghost town of just on the waterfront kind of look, very industrial, which is what we liked very much. I think of Fells Point in black and white like on the waterfront when I think about that era. There wasn't a tree in Fells Point. It was very bleak. Most people in the city and in suburbia wouldn't even come down here. They thought it was too dangerous. In its history, it was a dangerous place. It was just ... that people were shanghaied from here in the 1800's or 1900's. It was basically a place of seamen bars. But we were young artists and this was very intriguing to us, and we were sucked from suburbia, and this was very urban and gritty, which is something that I have been into all my life, and in a lot of the films that I've worked on in my life. And I just fell in love with it. I loved the trains coming down the streets, you know, stopping in the middle of the streets. It had a great look to it.

[Cut to adjust mic, 01:02:51;21]

### **[Kraig]**

So, now that you were an artist, moved down here, of course, now that you've worked tons of movies, feature films, what's some of the early movies you worked on down here and describe anything you want to about that.

**[Vince]**

Well, when we first moved down here in Fells Point, I believe we were some of the first college kids to move down to Fells Point and start frequenting the bars here. And drafts were fifteen cents apiece. So, you know, you could walk into a bar that your friends' knew and you could have 6 draft beers in front of you because everybody was buying each other a drink, cause it was so cheap. So, for us it was a big party area. And other friends of ours and other students came down to visit us. They liked Fells Point. People from Hopkins. People from the Institute. The students loved the cheapness of the rents and stuff. And so I think we kind of helped start that student community back in the '70's and '80's before Fells Point got so expensive and gentrified. I think we kind of helped that gentrification get started, but eventually I think it kind of moved most of the artists out, because it became too expensive.

But, the films ... what I was getting at, we became kind of party central in the late '60's, early '70's. And people from all over the city and the country would stop into our little commune or, you know, center. And that's how I met John Waters. And he came one day with Divine and Mink Stole and David Lockery and Susan Lowe and his whole group that had just finished doing the movie "Mondo Trasho." And we became instant friends. And so the next time he was working on a film, about a year later around 1969, he had all of us become part of his troop, "The Dreamland Community". And...

**[Kraig]**

What did you call it? The Dreamland?

**[Vince]**

Yeah, it was Dreamland Productions. And we ... "Multiple Maniacs" is really the first film I've ever worked on and a great deal of it was shot in Fells Point. I think the first job I ever had in filmmaking was with John when he asked me to build a giant lobster. And this lobster held 2 people and it raped Divine. And my brother and I were inside the lobster, moving the arms; I mean claws, and all that kind of stuff. So the first job was raping Divine and that was done at his apartment on 25<sup>th</sup> street and what happens is that, after Divine is raped by this giant red lobster, she goes crazy and she's in this like silver lamay bathing suit and she races out and becomes a monster and starts chasing people and it was like a monster show like "Godzilla" where all the people are screaming and running down the streets away from this monster, and it's Divine in this bathing suit running after them. And that was all shot on a Sunday in Fells Point. I really think it was about 50 friends and old winos and the people we knew in this community. And no permits, nothing. We basically Sunday morning just ran around the block of Broadway to Alice Ann, up Ann, then down Fleet and kept going in that little circle. And it's pretty clear, seeing the businesses and the community there. And so, I think that was Fells Point's first big movie production. Black and white. It was his first sound piece, and quite a bit of it was filmed here.

[01:07:41;06]

**[Kraig]**

Next question. Keep going, just some more of the movies that you've worked on down here. And why they chose Fells Point as the location?

**[Vince]**

Fells Point has always been, for years, has been great for filmmaking, especially for period pieces. Two of the films I worked on, they decided on Fells Point specifically for its historical nature. The one was an NBC film called "Liberty". It was the history of the building of the Statue of Liberty. And Fells Point was really a very good match for the docks of New York in the 1800's, which no longer exist of course. It's like Wall Street and everything else, but we still had that old look. So, we created the wharfs by just doing all signage and lighting and making a Market Place, and we had 3 including the first "Pride of Baltimore" you know, sailing ships to be parked there, and then with CGI we put in more masts and things like that. And we filmed all over Thames Street, Lancaster Street, and turned it back into like the 1850's. We had a little bit of Ellis Island, the Recreation Pier, under the big arch was like a little immigration area and stuff. And ... I haven't seen that movie in years but it was a huge production, and Fells Point was a major player in it.

Then another show I worked on a couple years later was an afternoon children's special and that was Fells Point in the 1700's. It was a much smaller production, but once again we got to turn Fells Point back again to that period, and it lent itself very well.

**[Kraig comment]****[Vince]**

I love creating a time warp. It's great, 'cause I make worlds... whether they're modern worlds or old worlds, that's the fun of it, when you work on this thing and all of a sudden it becomes a different place than what is really is, or it goes back into a different era. I love all the signage and all the history, the horse and wagons, all the props... And this was a very nice little piece and I think it did win some prizes. You know, I forgot the name of it. "Out of Time" it was called. And so twice I got to do that with Fells Point.

[01:10:56;23]

Then "Homicide" came along. And I had a business in Fells Point called "Props and Sets" for about 13 years. And right around ... we did tons of commercials, some of these earlier films that I was talking about and it was a scenic house where we built the sets and the props and all that. It was right on Thames and Wolf Street. But Berry Levinson came into town. He was the producer of this "Homicide" show, was going to be a pilot, and Jim Finnerty was his line producer. And Jim called me, since I was kind of the only production designer in town, which has always helped me get jobs... and said they want to do this cop show here. The city has shown them several buildings that the city owns that are vacant for possible use, and he showed me the list and on the list was the Recreation Pier, which has always been one of my favorite buildings in Fells Points. I went to it often when it was a recreation pier in use and always thought that terribly underused and abused building. It was much more important than...

**[Kraig]**

Any quick thoughts on the Recreation Pier? This is off my outline, but since you mentioned it. Since you have the set there.

**[Vince]**

I just want the recreation pier to be restored, the old part to be restored. That it be part of the community and used for the community, and whether the rest of it is cleverly used for offices or condos or whatever, you know, that's fine. As long as it's put back into use, and not abuse, 'cause this place was virtually ignored for the last 30 years that I've lived here.

And, of course, when I saw that it was on the city's list, I took Barry and Jim to the building, it was right down the street from where I worked and was walking distance from my house, and there was a big cartouche that said "BP" on it. I said "Look it says Baltimore Police," BP, you know. And Barry loved the idea, you know. He had used Fells Point before in some of the shows. So, they said yeah. So we got to possess the building as our own for about 8 years. On the second floor, I built the whole "Homicide" set. The first floor were the offices and the different departments. There were tons of little cubbyholes you know, warrens, throughout the while building. One little section of offices would be the Pat Moran and casting companies. And another little section would be the Art Department. Another little section would be the Accounting Department. So, we used the whole building completely, fully, and then underneath, we parked the trucks. For that size show, it worked very, very well. And at that time, too, the community was very accepting. We had a few complaints about parking, about when we did night shots and things like that, but most of the time, I think the community liked the idea that they were picked and they were something special. And this building became very special in "Time" magazine.

**[Kraig]**

It's too bad is still not going on.

**[Vince]**

Yeah, I would still be walking to work. I got to walk to work for 7 years. That's not bad in the film business.

**[Kraig]**

No.

**[Vince]**

And so, of course, Fells Point and the Pier became a major TV star for a good while, and places like the Daily Grind got into it. Jimmy's, Nick at Jimmy's the Greeks was, we use them a lot. We really established visually Fells Point to a good bit of the world.

**[Kraig]**

It's neat to see the onsite things on DVD the re-releases.... I pay attention to see Jimmy's all the time, the waitresses and the arguments between Ned Batey, you know, it's pretty neat.

**[Vince]**

And Fells Point accepted the actors and, you know, people didn't bother the actors. They could just sit at "The Grind" and have their coffee ,and it was their home. They lived down here. A lot of film

people lived down here at that time. And I think it was because of “Homicide” really. And there are still quite a few film people.

I loved it. I did another film there. An HBO movie called, it was Gary Gilmore, “Shot In The Heart”. It was called. Agnieszka Holland, a celebrated Polish director, directed it. And at that time we tore down the old squad room and we made a big prison visiting room.

**[Kraig]**

Was that Tommy Lee Jones?

**[Vince]**

No it was, oh gees, I’m sorry, I forget who. But anyway, so that was the last show I got to do there. I think that now, it’s so congested here in Fells Point it would be harder to do a film.

[01:17:33;19]

**[Kraig]**

My next question: Is it still a good place to make movies? Why or why not?

**[Jacquie]**

He cheated. I gave him the outline.

**[Vince]**

Fells Point is ... it’s still a good place to shoot movies. I mean, things have changed and it’s different kinds of movies, I would think. The Recreation Pier itself, I think, is too small. Most features that come in now need much larger space. Huge warehouses and things like that. A lot of the spaces in Fells Point now have all been converted to residential. It’s much more congested. Traffic-wise, it’s much more congested. So many more people have moved in, so many more condos have been built. I don’t think we could get away with closing down Thames Street every Thursday night, and doing the stuff that we had to do back then. When we were there in the ‘90’s, Fells Point was still in transition... I guess it always will be, but it’s grown an incredible amount now. And they would hate us taking up all their parking places and stuff. I think the film business needs to go out of this community because this has gotten to be a very gentrified and expensive community. As far as location, I think it’s still a wonderful vibrant, beautiful, visual place to film. I’m sure every film that comes into town is going to be looking for Fells Point for some scene or other.

**[Kraig]**

What would it take to bring some new film business here?

**[Vince]**

I think we’re very lucky right now. I mean, in the last 10 years, really since “Homicide,” Baltimore really has been a favorite little place for producers to film in. One reason is because of its east coast look, which is so different from Toronto and LA. And it’s also an easy city to film in. The city cooperates tremendously with filmmakers. We have a good...

**[Kraig]**

What's the hardest city that you've ever had to, the beauty of working with, any city you could remember that was horrible, that wouldn't let you do anything, you know what I mean?

**[Vince]**

Well, I haven't worked in LA or New York, but they're incredibly restricted. They've been so overused and the permits are so high and so hard to get, and every neighborhood has it's own covents, which ... You can't shoot here. You can't shoot this time of night, or whatever. It's much easier to shoot here. Whatever the city can do, whatever the state can do...

[Cut for Delores Delux entry; 01:21:11;04]

**[Vince]**

The city and state are tremendously cooperative to filmmakers. They're trying to do their best to keep film here in this country and not going to Canada. And Baltimore is a fairly cheap place to film. It's got a great look. And I think over the years, we built a very large crew base. And that also brings producers here because they know that they don't have to go out of town for everybody.

[Cut for another Delores interruption; 01:21:47;24]

**[Kraig]**

... Describe some changes in Fells Point since you've been here ... from anything.

**[Vince]**

Well, I definitely moved here because I loved the cheapness in Fells Point – a huge change because it's now quite an expensive community to live in. I loved the tugboats. Thank God, they're still here. But, I miss the big freighters that used to be at the foot of Broadway that towered over the rowhouses, and I miss the trains that would go down Fleet and Thames Street, and they would just stop right in the middle of the street, and then go into Jimmy's and get lunch... This whole industrial look that was really like the '20's, '30's look.

I miss all these factories that were like decaying ghost towns when I lived here. And being a little bit of a archeologist, we used to go in, go through them, and find all these different things and the whole patina and the age of things, I like very much. And, now of course everything is much slicker and newer or cleaned up and shiny, and it's a good thing. I'm glad that Fells Point has been preserved, that the architecture has been preserved. And yes, these things had to fixed up so they last another 50-75 years, before we have to go through the process again. So it's just a process of preservation. But I liked it when it was really more of like a decaying urban industrial ghost town. And I had it all to myself. Now I have to share it...

**[Kraig]**

Now, all the years of doing films, you've got to have some stories. Any interesting funny, pathetic, anything, I mean ... goofiness...

**[Vince]**

There have been a million things, but I have no idea. I don't have any great stories, at least none that I can think of at the moment. There's been too many thousands of them. And it's all gone together now. And now that I'm on vacation, I can't think of anything that happened at work. My mind is a blank.

**[Kraig]**

You've done a lot of things in support of the arts, the Patterson Theatre... Anything you'd like to say about continuing support of the arts at Fells Point. Things you find important, things you find not so important... Things we should look out for. I mean, I'm a musician, and I want to keep things going and one of the complaints I've always got is, "Music, you can't have that. It's too loud." You can have everything. You know, I mean....

**[Vince]**

Don't talk to Delores about that...  
Let me just think one minute...  
[01:25:38;22]

**[Jacquie]**

That quote that I had in there was actually from Lori Guess. She's been the person that worked on "what should we do with the Rec Pier", and she was reacting to somebody that talked about an idea of putting artist shops in the Rec Pier. And her comment was "Artists are not our history. Our history is warehouses...." It doesn't sound like that is strictly true.

**[Vince]**

No, that's an absurd quote. I think the history of Fells Point is still growing, and Fells Point is still making history, and the old docks and the warehouses and the clipper ships were part of its history and so is the whole revitalization, and the artists coming into the community, and the community changing to a gentrified community. It's also part of its history and growing history. Who knows, maybe in 50 years we'll be back to like a slum and artists will move into it again. And the process will start all over or start in a different way.

**[Kraig]**

Anything you want to see happen?

**[Vince]**

As I get older, I don't mind it becoming gentrified. I'm assuming that it won't be long before I'll just be this old person who can like hobble down to the local casino and play the slots and have my free cheap drink and buffet and then come back. So in old age, it doesn't seem too bad. It's not what I expected but... it's certainly not what people want. I'm just being sarcastic.  
[01:27:32;23]

**[Kraig]**

You've done so many films. Why did you never move to Hollywood? To Los Angeles? You've stayed here. You've been a real supporter of Baltimore.

**[Vince]**

You know, I often ask people, why are you here? I was born here. I know why I'm here. You know, I grew up here and I'm a very rooted person. I don't see why people would come from another place to live here. But it's a great city. I'm very close to my family, and I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. I didn't want to have to move to L.A. or New York. I didn't want to go to a strange place. And I was very lucky in that just the time and the people I met enabled me to have a career in film full-time and live in Baltimore, and it's almost unheard of. But it's like people like Barry Levinson and John Waters and all the film people in this community that didn't move out have made this possible. And we have a vibrant new industry in the city that ... it's not a dirty of polluting industry. It's interesting. And I hope that it grows. But I never wanted to move out of Baltimore, and when I moved to Fells Point, I really loved it. I loved being by the water, you know, not on the water...

[01:29:12;20]

And I've been in this little house for 30 years, which has grown and turned into it's own crazy little center...

**[Kraig]**

You have 3 or 4 houses, that's an interesting thing...

**[Jacquie]**

Can you tell us the story?

**[Vince]**

We have 5 houses. They're the smallest houses in the city, really, 'cause they're the alley houses, which were the poorest, where the whores lived, the oyster shuckers, the freed slaves. And for about 5 years we lived in one. And then another one came up for sale. And they were incredibly cheap. Nobody wanted them. People just wanted to tare them down. And me, being a sucker for a ruin, loved them, and saw their potential. And so then we would buy one and then 15 years later, you know, our neighbor would retire and his children would want to get rid of it. Still they would be so afraid of this neighborhood. It was such a bad neighborhood that they would sell the place for practically nothing, and we'd buy the house just so we wouldn't have to have a neighbor. And then eventually... the most fun was that we kept getting a bigger garden and a bigger garden. Delores and I are avid gardeners. And the garden is now 5 houses wide. 3 of the houses are connected. And it's gotten to be quite a little estate for starting in such a small little alley. And you have no idea what is behind these facades, you know, its just a little paradise right in the middle of Fells Point, right in middle of the city. So, that's why I'm staying here.

[01:31:06;29]

**[Jacquie]**

When you first came here were there houses and things on Caroline were all the buildings on Caroline still there?

**[Vince]**

Quite a few. When I first got here there were buildings and properties all the way down to the Inner Harbor, and slowly but surely developers, Paterakis, probably being the biggest one, would buy these old factories and old lumber companies and stuff like that... Usually 1 Sunday a year, one of the properties would burn to the ground, until eventually all the acreage was cleared. And I just kind of saw that over the years. And now it's all cleared and it's going to be the new Inner Harbor East. But it was all, you know ... the train station still had its loading docks and all that. And O'Malley's Lumber, there were a lot of lumber companies, around here and I saw a lot of it destroyed by fires over the last 15 years.

**[Kraig]**

This would be special places ... once it was destroyed it would be just a really nice place to put a condo.

**[Vince]**

I think it was ... my theory, is just that it's the easiest way of getting out of having to renovate something is to have a fire, you know. Or leave the hole in the roof of a building until it's so messed up that it can't be restored. I think that happened to a lot of buildings in Fells Point and I think it happened purposely so that people could tear them down and build more modern, bigger things. And, you know, that's one thing I'm sorry to see about Fells Point. But considering how much it's been restored, I think this community is pretty darn lucky in this day and age.

[01:33:23;02]

**[Jacquie]**

What's your feeling about these places that are redone for the arts? Like the Torpedo Factory, I think there's one up in Toronto that, you know, around the country...

**[Vince]**

There have been groups suggesting that maybe the Recreation Pier could be an art center and there could be galleries. There could be studios and a performance areas and all... And it all sounds very good. But I don't think it would make the money to keep the Recreation Pier happening the way it should. I just don't think it would make it. It takes a tremendous investment to go into the Recreation Pier. And I would like to see it something viable. I would like to see an entertainments area for the public in there, but I think we need a way to make money there, and I don't think the arts makes enough money.

**[Jacquie]**

The arts always requires support...

Do you have any thoughts as to what, I mean, other than what you said before about, you know, it would be OK for offices or whatever? Do you have any thoughts as to what might work in Rec Pier.

**[Vince]**

Well, I just hope that in the Rec Pier that the ballroom is restored. And if, for me, if we get the outside restored and the ballroom restored, I'll let them use any of the rest of it to make money to pay for it... As long as they don't build a huge building on the back of that pier that towers it. I think Struever Brothers, their idea for it, when I saw their design, was a pretty straight forward and pretty sensitive to the building, that proposition I thought was the right one.

**[Jacquie]**

We're about to the end of the tape. Anything else that you can think of?

**[Vince]**

Nah, I'm talked out.