

Together again for the first time: Bill and Michael Sapsis

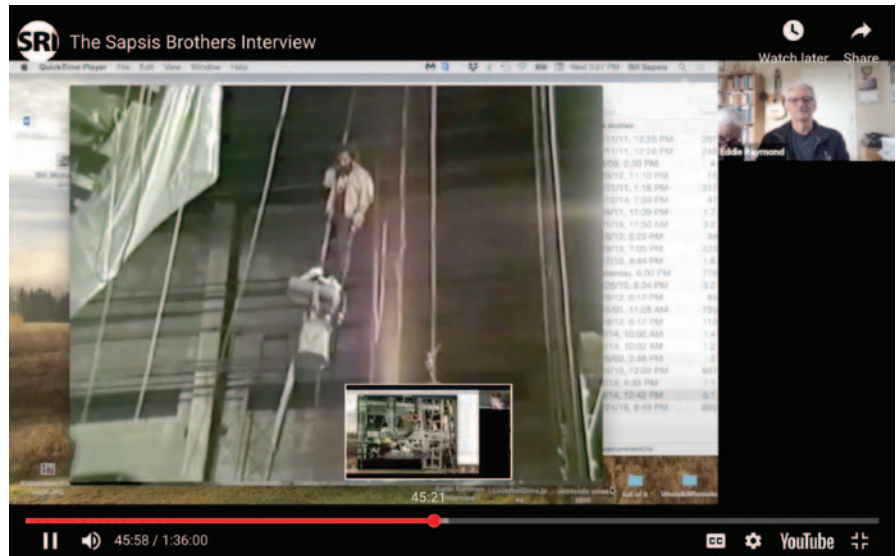
ON DECEMBER 16, 2020, *Uncle Bill's Remote Seminars* hosted an online, remotely conducted conversation between the identical twins, Bill and Michael Sapsis, and moderated by Eddie Raymond. The stories from their long history in the theatrical rigging industry and working together ran an hour and 36 minutes and over 15,000 words. The session here has been edited for clarity and condensed.

Eddie Raymond (ER): I know you, Bill, had a brief stint in college before deciding that there were more interesting things in life. What did you do after high school before Sapsis Rigging came into existence?

Bill Sapsis (BS): I quit school in '72, and I got very, very lucky. I got an opportunity to work at the University of Pennsylvania Zellerbach Theatre. They had just opened the building two years before and they were a producing company, but they also brought in [Broadway] tryouts. I was exposed to some extraordinary theatre and to some extraordinary technical people. Some of you may remember Pete Feller Senior. I got to work with him in Philly and then, when I moved to New York, I got to work with Pete in New York.

ER: [mumble] . . . the hat story.

BS: Oh, the hat story. That's what got me introduced to Pete. Pete would sit out in the house yelling at people, telling them to do this, do that. There's 25-30 people on stage and he kept saying, "Hey, you!" Four or five people would turn around. I was working with a leather hat. It had a chin strap, so I



During the rigging of a video wall at The Palladium, Michael Sapsis rode the chain hoist because the control cable was too short to reach the deck. This was 1985, and the Sapsis brothers would not recommend anyone do this now.

hung it on my back. After a while, instead of saying, "Hey, you!" and having four people turn around, he started saying, "Hey, you with the hat!" So I worked my ass off, but he knew who I was.

I quit Penn and went to work in New York City, moved into my apartment, paid all the bills and stuff, and had \$11 to my name, I went down to the Shubert Theatre, walked on stage, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "I need a job."

He pointed [to his driver] and said, "Get in the car," and up to the Bronx I went. I worked in the Bronx, and then I was among the people who moved from the Bronx up to Newburgh, when he moved the shop up there.

ER: That's cool. Mike [what did you do]

after high school?

Michael Sapsis (MS): It's a more convoluted path. Two years in the philosophy program at Temple University '70-'72. Then '72 and '73, I spent at an apartment in Philadelphia and working, or hitchhiking around the country. Ended up in the University of Cincinnati Engineering School in '74 or '75, and lasted there two weeks because I was in the wrong program. Within a year (without making a big deal out of it) I ended up at the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, in their tech program. I got a degree from them in '78. I left Cincinnati.

I did not go to graduate school. I got accepted to Yale, but had to turn them down. They didn't give me enough money

and I was getting married.

In '80 or '81 I moved to New York and right into the lighting tech, lighting designer—one of the guys at the Savoy [now operating as the Hudson Theatre].

My theatrical work started at the Conservatory. We did really good stuff, but I got to the Savoy and that's when I was introduced to the rest of the world. I stayed there for three or four years. I picked up several tours, went out as a rigger rock-and-roll style. I was already married and had a kid, which made it tough. Got off the road.

I took over Judy Collins [tour] as a road manager somewhere in like '85 or '86, and did that for about five or six years. During that time I moved back to Philadelphia. I was sharing time between Sapsis Rigging and Judy. I guess it was by '90-'91 I was full time at the company [Sapsis Rigging].

BS: I want people to know that Michael is actually the person who's responsible for me getting into the rigging business. Michael was in Cincinnati. I'd hitchhike out from Philadelphia to Cincinnati every once in a while. You were doing some work for Beck Studios, a counterweight rigging install in a high school. You called me up and said, "Come on out. You can make some money, you know."

ER: I know, Bill, you had a couple of stories about what it was that convinced you that you wanted to be in the live theatre industry.

BS: I did a production of *Peter Pan*. My girlfriend at the time put it together. She was Peter. We were in a lecture hall at the University of Pennsylvania. We had no money and we had no space. The targeted audience was under-10-years old. I managed to get some scaffolding, put up a couple towers and ran pipe across. For the flying effects I hung rope from the pipes and they had a foot-loop, so if you were going to fly you put your foot in the loop and you swung. For Peter, we put a tire swing, and that was the flying effect. In the pirates' cove, we did water: we had blue fabric that a couple of kids waved. The audience ate it up. We were supposed to do it for two

weekends; we did it for five. They just kept coming, and I went, "Oh, wow! This is really cool."

I'd just started working at Penn and it was coming up on Christmas Eve; all the local dance companies would do recitals. I got tapped to stage manage those things. I was calling the show. It was this endless stream of little kids doing their dances. Then we got into the older kids. They did a duet to Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. As they started to get to the end, I realized I could

Conservatory was *Wizard of Oz*. It had a six thousand pound flying set. The entire Oz flew in, the monkeys flew. It was one of those technologically marvelous shows. We had a blast. That's what started it. While I was at the Conservatory, to pay for stuff I was taking calls with Local 5 around town.

ER: Summer stock in Philly. I understand Michael was the master carpenter and Bill was working for you.

BS: It was summer stock in the round Philadelphia Playhouse in the Park. The



Eddie Raymond

do something. We started taking the lights out and I brought a followspot up so that they were just in the followspot. Then as the music and they both stopped, we slowly irised into their heads and went to blackout. There was over 700 people in the house. They went crazy—yelling, screaming. I went, "Oh, this is cool. I like this."

Those were the two moments that really stand out for me that said, "You have the ability, working in this environment, to make these people really, really happy."

ER: Mike, how did you get into theatre?

MS: I went to the university in engineering. That failed. I moved over to the Conservatory on the advice of some people after they knew what I could do as a carpenter. The first show we did at the

shop was in these barn structures across the driveway from the theatre. That's where I got to work with Peter Foy. He came in and this was my first professional *Peter Pan*. Peter was played by Tovah Feldshuh.

It's in the round so you've got to worry about the audience being able to see and you can't build scenery too tall. Milton Moss, the producer, always worried about making sure the audience would be able to see. He kept getting us to cut that prop down or cut that wall down, make it shorter. It kept throwing off Peter's trim marks. I realized I could help the situation. I remember one time [Milton] said, "Cut the dog house down three inches." So we took the dog house out into the alley, where somebody stood there with a Skilsaw on a two by four, and they cut the two by



Michael Sapsis

four a couple of times. We brought the dog house back in and Milton went, “Perfect.”

ER: How did Sapsis Rigging come about? You guys are building scenery before you were actually doing rigging, right?

BS: Not quite. I moved out of New York City in ‘76. Moved back to Philadelphia, and took a bunch of odd jobs. I had a furniture business for a while, until somebody burglarized the place and took everything. Then I realized I wanted to stay in theatre. I like the rigging stuff. I had gotten Michael’s introduction to it, and had done a couple of other jobs for Clancy. So I started doing rigging. It wasn’t a planned thing, but I started the company in ‘81 and our first big job was at Bryn Mawr College. A couple of days after we started the job, I moved to Taiwan for six months.

ER: How nice of you.

MS: Bryn Mawr was drilling the first concrete arch poured in the country. We drilled I think somewhere between 90 and 110 holes in this arch to put this curtain up. The curtain was double-sided, fit into the arch, designed to separate the stage from the audience so they could do classes on stage and then have something on the other side of the curtain. The curtain was at the peak 57’ high and 90’, maybe 110’ wide. We got it from Rose Brand. They made it incredibly

heavier, and we had to get this thing up.

BS: . . . which is why I stayed in Taiwan.

MS: In all, I think the entire set of curtains got re-hung three times. We finally were happy with everything. We took down the scaffolding, and then after a week of testing we discovered that the curtains would not close because they were rubbing on themselves up at the peak of the arch 57’ in the air. I went up in a block and fall 57’, pulling myself up, to rearrange the curtains, and then re-sew them so the thing would finally close. I made short work of it and said, “I’m coming down now. We’re not coming back up.”

ER: Bill, what were you doing in Taiwan?

BS: I built a theatre [the Taipei Social Education Hall] for the Taipei City government. It was a Kliegl/Clancy get together. It was a double-purchase house with about 75 counterweight sets. I installed the lighting system and the sound system, and a 50,000-pound orchestra shell that stored in an upstage scene dock. Jack Suesse, who hired me, said it’s about a three-month job. The first trip was six months and the second two trips were two months each.

ER: When you started Sapsis Rigging, what’d you get right and what’d you get wrong? What have you learned?

BS: It felt at the time that we were doing

a lot of things right because we were busy as hell. But, as with most startup companies, money was always tight. I wasn’t getting paid half the time.

I think the thing that I would change—I would have paid attention to the marketing side more. We were getting a lot of work and we were always busy, but there was not much time until the ‘90s to pay attention to the administrative/marketing/advertising side of things.

ER: I have a couple of interesting questions. Actually Paul, that’s Michael’s son, had a question: What would you say to younger generations going into business with their family?

BS: Michael, we should say this on the count of three. One, two, three. Don’t!

MS: Bill and I, being identical twins, up until a certain point, it was he and I, back to back against the world. When we started working heavily together, both in the same room, that’s when we started drifting apart because Bill and I see the world differently. There are plenty of people that get to work with family, and it all works out. This isn’t one of them. We survived—and we broke a lot of coffee mugs.

BS: One of the reasons that we survived was because we both recognized our strong suits and we did them, regardless of what the other one said. I was the guy who wrote the bid—I didn’t even do that half the time, but I made sure the money came in, and Michael took care of putting the production together.

ER: Both of you have done a lot of performer flying over the years, and now Paul [Michael Sapsis’s son] is doing high-speed performer flying all over the world. There’s a necessity to create a relationship with the person you’re going to fly and instill confidence that it’s safe. How do you go about that with people?

MS: We didn’t. We did not do a lot of performer flying. I was the production rigger for Victoria’s Secret for 15 years. The Foy guys flew the angels. I was in charge of getting their rig in the air because they didn’t do the rigging.



Bill Sapsis

BS: Michael, why don't you talk about how you dealt with Naomi Watts?

MS: At the time Naomi Watts did *King Kong*. *Condé Nast Traveler* wanted to do a photo shoot on the gargoyles of the Chrysler Building with the Empire State Building in the background. That's 61 floors up with Naomi standing on the gargoyle, which is 8' long, 3' wide. Typically what happens with

these shoots is the artist gets there and they haven't really been told what's going on. My introduction to Naomi was with harness in hand. She looks at me, she looks at the harness, she looks at me, and goes, "Okay, what am I doing here today?"

We had a piece of truss sticking out a window on the 65th or 66th floor, with wires down to two people. One would be

Naomi the other would be whoever was out there with Naomi, because there's no way she was going out by herself. They would Photoshop that person out. That person ended up being me.

I go out and it's Naomi's turn to come out. She's looking around and she looks up at me. In that very small voice she goes, "You're out of your fucking mind."

[Laughter]

Now to complete the story: We were in jerk harnesses with a dorsal hook that went up, then down to two guys, who were 10' away from us. Everybody could see everybody. They were on belay.

BS: Michael, who was on belay?

MS: Paul Sapsis. Who was the other?

BS: Mitz [Andy Schmitz]

MS: The rigging was there, not as fall protection, but to make sure that nobody went anywhere. There was always tension.

Naomi would go out with one hand on my shoulder, let go of me. When she got too nervous, she would turn to me, collapse in my arms, and we'd go back to the little terrace. We did that twice. Then, Naomi looked over at the camera guy, and said, "Hey did you get it?" The camera guy hesitated, "Yeah, we got it." She goes into the building, around the corner, and talks to the camera guy. She came out and did a third set of shots, which is the one they used ultimately.

[The images are in *Condé Nast Traveler*, September 2006 issue.]

MS: I can't make [it] any more dramatic than that. We tried to make it not dramatic. When it's dramatic, we make the papers and we don't want to make the papers.

BS: We don't want to make the papers. ■

You can find the full-length version of this discussion, a session with Paul Sapsis about performer flying winches, and much more at <https://sapsis-rigging.com/remoteseminars.html>. The sessions are free, but you are invited to make a donation to *Behind the Scenes*.

Raising the Phoenixes

One of the tales told during "Together again for the first time," was the engineering challenges of rigging the two immense assemblages by Xu Bing—Feng, a male Phoenix, and Huang, a female Phoenix—in the nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. The project was covered by Bill Sapsis in the Summer 2014 edition of *Protocol* at <http://estalink.us/summer2014protocol>, but you can hear Michael Sapsis tell the story at <https://sapsis-rigging.com/remoteseminars.html>.

