DAVID RAKOFF

A frequent contributor to such estimable publications as *The New York Times Magazine* and *GQ*, David Rakoff began his writerly career on Public Radio International's *This American Life*. He is author of two aching, witty essay collections: *Fraud* and *Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, The Torments of Low Thread Count, The Never-Ending Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems*. He spoke with nonfiction editor Sandra Allen on the telephone. Afterwards, she realized her ancient tape recorder had failed entirely, to which he replied, "Oh, honey, I had to re-interview Mary Tyler Moore once because I wasn't plugged in. I completely understand," and re-answered all her questions, this time in writing.

Sandra Allen,* Wag's Revue*: You began your writing career in journalism (or what you've referred to as faux journalism), writing features essays for various publications. As you've gained the ability to call your own shots as a writer, though, you've continued to produce essays. Though you've read a humorous poem or two on This American Life, you haven't yet done what many writers would do with a bit of attention and convert to fiction writing. Why the essay?

David Rakoff: It's for exactly the reasons you say, precisely because of those words "with a bit of attention." Although virtually no one knows who I am — I've been at parties and such where I run into self-professed rabid fans of *This American Life*, arguably the closest thing I have to a semi-regular gig, certainly a venue to which I owe my career, and one with which I am fairly strongly identified, and when I say my name or describe my work in response to the whole "What do you do?" question, all I get back are blank stares, so I don't want to make it seem that I'm overstating my essentially non-

existent renown — but things do feel a little more public, the bar raised higher, etc. Anything new that I might try is subject to more scrutiny than it was when I was just writing for myself and still holding down my day job.

I don't think I'm unique among writers when I say that writing a novel would be some sort of Holy Grail (the true dream would be to write a play, but it scares me so precisely because of how much I'd love to have done it, so I probably never shall), although I don't read as much fiction as I do non-fiction. And there are times when I am about to go out to report a story when I am overcome by the kind of frightened disinclination that marks most new experiences for me, and I am almost undone by a desire for the talent to stay at home and make it up out of whole cloth from my imagination, but I'm not sure I'm capable of that. I never fail to be struck, when overhearing something on the subway or street, or interviewing someone and they say something, and I think, "I could never have made that up." It's not even something terribly interesting or strange, but it's the specificity of it, and the undeniable separateness from me and my experience that brings me up short a little bit.

As for the essay form, I'm not entirely sure I write proper essays. I think a proper essay proves a point more than I generally do. I meander somewhat and use that old collagist trick of juxtaposing things and hoping that their placement near one another imposes some internal logic and epiphanic purpose. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. And it's my most fervent hope that they do sometimes prove a point. It's the perfect form for me, though, because it requires that I observe the outside world and it allows me to be "present" as a voice, which suits my narcissism, I suppose.

SA: In a 2001 Salon interview, you were asked if you saw the rise of the personal essay or memoir as a negative development, and you said "I think anything I'm involved in, frankly, should be viewed as a negative development." I can't believe that you actually hate the genre, because you're a loyal practitioner of it. Are there issues, though, that you take with the way most people go about writing personal essay or memoir?

DR: I suppose I do take issue with current state of the personal essay and memoir. I tend to think what I write are actually more correctly described as familiar essays, although more on that in a moment. But as for the current mania for personal essays and memoir, I find it vaguely dispiriting for a variety of reasons, chief among them is that story seems now to trump writing. There's an adage that goes, or words to this effect: "Remarkable stories happen to those who can tell them." I don't want to make writing seem like an elite club or a closed and secret society. Quite the opposite. But it is a craft, an art, even, and I can't help feeling that we are living in a current climate where those very notions of craft, of language used deftly, are not even secondary to how harrowing the tale, or how unjudiciously details best kept private are cast out for public consumption. They are almost beneath consideration, those questions of craft.

I know this makes me sound like a hopeless Colonel Blimp (even using the term Colonel Blimp marks me as out of touch. I told an Isadora Duncan joke not too long ago {"Wear the long scarf, dear. It'll bring out your eyes..."} and I realize that it's like telling a President McKinley joke), that I have no understanding of younger people's far more casual relationship to notions of privacy. But I call Total Bullshit on that, frankly. Even in an age where shame no longer

exists, I think people will absolutely *rue* the day they posted or e-mailed masturbating cell-phone pictures. But I'm getting off topic here. Here's what I want to say: there was a marvelous memoir by Kate Simon, called *Bronx Primitive*, if I recall. *Nothing* happens. She wants to go to a dance, her father doesn't want her to...who remembers? But what I *do* remember is the writing. This pitch-perfect evocation of a time and a place and the way people thought. Read any of Sally Belfrage's sublime memoirs. They're out of print but eminently findable. She was brilliant and beautiful and never failed to encompass the world in her writing.

"Remarkable stories happen to those who can tell them."

What can I say? I like language. More than any construction of a persona it is the language that concerns me. I try to be very judicious about which details I disclose (although the book I'm working on right now is a lot more personal than my previous two). I try to write familiar essays, a 19th century term resurrected by Ann Fadiman. Familiar essays begin in the personal but they expand to the universal. That's the hope, anyway. It's nice to have a readership and have people interested in one's work, but there is a danger, as I see it at any rate, in becoming the commodity oneself. I'd like people to be moved by whatever stories I might share, but I'd like it to be because of the quality of the writing, rather than the content of my biography. Even when reading, I need less plot than is usually considered necessary if the writing's really beautiful.

SA: Your work is unique, I believe, in its ability to be both really funny (often scathingly funny) and sometimes heartbreakingly genuine. One of the reasons you've been able to do this, I think, is that you've created a persona of yourself whom you can tease (in a removed act of self-deprecation), so as to lessen the burden on the subjects you encounter. This doppelganger seems like hyperbolic you: he's hyperbolically uncomfortable in most situations, hyperbolically misanthropic, hyperbolically lonely. Is this something you've done intentionally?

DR: Again, it fills me with fear to think about or give too much attention to this persona, but I guess I should just lie back and think of England on this one. The persona is most definitely me. He is perhaps amplified somewhat (although I do object to the word misanthropic. I don't hate people, I don't even think my writing persona hates people) but he's definitely me. The funny/sad is no more intentional than the color of my (rapidly disappearing) hair. It's simply the way I see things. Chalk it up to Canadian civility, Jewish guilt, a deep well of reflexive self-loathing, who knows, but if things get too jolly, they invariably morph into melancholia. But it's more than that. I try to be exceedingly judicious about my targets. I've said some pretty caustic shit about Barbara Bush, Karl Lagerfeld, and Roberto Benigni, for example, but they're public figures, for one, and my criticism was scrupulously moored in the very reasons that caused me to write the things I did. I'm not going to make fun of someone for their lack of education, for example. That's not funny to me. That's just oppression, basically. I'm not an angel, by any means, and humor does require a certain savagery. Are you a hate-mongering homophobe who runs a vile think tank called The Culture And Family Institute? I shall give you no quarter.

As for the discomfort, the bred-in-the-bone loneliness... it's a reified public version of a genuine personal state, but it's not an intentional stylistic device.

SA: Your work is often riddled with esoteric and surprising vocabulary, you seem to relish in such choices, revealing what you've described as your "school marmish, dense kind of effete manner." Does this style of language come naturally to you? Or is it something you forged naturally at some point in your life?

DR: Oh dear, I'm know I'm beginning to sound like such an asshole, but I always bridle a little when the subject of my vocabulary comes up, and it certainly does come up, which always surprises me because I don't think mine is all that fantastic. I go through phases where I over-use words like a moron (*counterintuitive, manifest, chastening, to wit* come to mind as terms that I relied on at one time or another and trotted out way too many times, to the great misfortune of those who had to listen to, or read me), and there are other words that I simply don't seem able to learn. Like vitiate. I look up vitiate at least nine times a year. I am forty-five years old and I cannot tell you what it means. It means either to weaken or strengthen a argument or something, but I couldn't tell you which. I'm going to look it up right now....okay, it means to impair the quality or efficiency of, to corrupt, debase, make invalid or ineffectual. Perhaps because I've actually typed this out, I might just remember it for the next time.

But I suppose my disquiet around conversations about my vocabulary has to do with an unease about its veering dangerously close to the false populism of the Right and old derogatory notions of Jewish "cleverness." That suspicion of book learning or language that is deemed highfalutin and the

people who employ same (namely Hebrews, homosexuals, urban dwellers, liberals). It's that ersatz plain-spoken jes' folks bullshit of George W. Bush, Sarah Palin, and the like that hoodwinks people into electing politicians who the turn around and fuck them royally. It really is a triumph of the conservative movement that education, once the absolute bulwark of the progressive agenda, the way to get one out of the sweat-shop, the poultry processing plant, etc., is painted as being the very opposite; exclusionary, a way to high-hat people and make them feel small.

I like using words. We're incredibly privileged in English to have so many. It's just like being allowed to cook with more rather than fewer ingredients. I have always spoken in a kind of school marmish manner but it's emphatically only to be very specific, to leave no doubt as to what I am saying, and to keep it sprightly and pretty. It's definitely not to exclude people from my writing. If I were employing certain words and then burning all the dictionaries in the world, that would be another story, but I'm not. And again, I'm really not that smart. It's not like I'm British...

SA: You've before said that being the funny guy in the office is entirely different than writing humor. It seems your burden is double, because not only is it frustrating to be a writer, it's frustrating to be a comedian. Could you describe your process of creating humorous writing? Do you tell jokes to your empty apartment?

DR: Being the funny guy in the office was enormous fun, and I did it for many, many years. I enjoyed it tremendously and had a lovely time, but it's spoken and situational; the very definition of *guess you had to be there*. Writing humor is different because it's writing, first of all, and it's for a larger

constituency, it can only be hoped. But to the larger issue of "crafting a written joke," it's essentially an automatic process if that's how you see the world. Everyone sees humor in certain situations to differing degrees—and pity those poor, thankfully rare, individuals who don't. It's simply like that genetic predisposition to being able to roll one's tongue. There are times where I can understand and perceive the various components of a joke but they're lying about in a disorganized pile, a punchline here, an element for a funny set-up there, but just a mess of building materials. That takes some time to assemble them into a clean structure. Then again, that's all of writing in a nutshell.

SA: You mentioned in an early essay how when you were acting you got cast as two stereotypes: Fudgy McPacker and Jewy McHebrew. In a later interview you added Classy McSophisticate, Classius Sophisticaton, to this fold. These

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titles intrigue me because you're both casting off such stereotyping, and owning it. Do you fear that by engaging with these stereotypes, you're only further cementing them in your readers' minds? Or exploiting them? How do you navigate translating these personal identities in the public sphere?

DR: Hmmmm...well that's a question about the world of writing versus the world of acting, and within the latter there is acting on screen (TV, movies) and acting on stage.

Theater, in my very limited experience, is a good deal less hidebound when it comes to stereotypes. You can play a host of more varied characters on stage, partly because theater audiences are smaller and often more sophisticated, and because there's not nearly as much money riding on it. I certainly don't begrudge the risk-averse habits of those who cast TV and movies. Film production costs a lot and it's for a huge audience. I'm not for all markets, obviously, nor do I particularly yearn for that kind of mass appeal. Because of that, I bless every day I don't have to slate for some casting person, in whose eyes there is no difference between me, literally not one jot of difference, and a depilated queen in hot pants, on roller skates with a tambourine and a rainbow flag tied around the huge black dildo in his hand. No difference. They just see GAY in huge letters, the way the grown-ups in Peanuts are all incomprehensible squawking authoritarians. This kind of reductionism is partly why I never made a proper foray into the world of acting. It's of limited interest to me to be told that I can go from here to here, but not there, *never* there. I'd never convincingly point a gun and say "freeze, motherfucker," and I've no desire to do so. Happily, it has been my boundless privilege as a writer to not be fettered by these strictures. I *am* gay, I *am* Jewish, and I am a writer. I've appeared at readings or universities, occasionally under the auspices of one of those identities, but never for a moment have I been told, either explicitly or implicitly, that either of them limits my readership or the subjects I can write about. Again, it comes back to the skillful use of language and craft. Writing as well as one is able ultimately supercedes any considerations of what (or who) you put in your mouth.

SA: You wrote a pretty scathing piece in on Salon about the Sacha Baron Cohen film, Bruno, wherein you asserted that his movie was anything but good for the gays. If I may

indulge in quoting the last line: "There will be those who will tell me to lighten up, and it's not like I don't want to. I really, really do. Brüno gets his anus bleached in the movie, whereas I don't know if there is Clorox enough in the world to make me clean again." What motivated the writing of this piece, stepping out so forcefully on the issue of gay rights? Have you seen yourself step out more directly like this as your career has progressed?

DR: Like most of my writing, that was an assignment. *Salon* asked me to write about the film and whether it was "good for the gays." I don't do a lot of on-line writing and I'm not very used to or comfortable with that kind of turnaround and lack of gestation. There are things I would certainly tweak in the piece now. I'm not embarrassed in the least about stepping out in favor of gay rights. It's simply human rights, after all (I was enraged, for example, when the head of the NAACP indicated to Deborah Solomon in the New York Times magazine that the gay community hadn't tried very hard or successfully to campaign for the right to marry within the African American community, and I thought *why the fuck should we have to campaign*?). But what troubled me about the film, far more than the gay stuff, was the essential abuse of his interview subjects. This particular Bruno character is a first-world Austrian, monied, with the further authority of a camera crew following him. I hated, absolutely hated the way he cowed people into participating and then abused them. *That*, more than any vocabulary I might ever use, was the classist high-hatting I so loathe. Those poor hunters, their gaunt

"Why should we have to campaign?"

faces portraits of Appalachian want, who take him hunting, and he proceeds to sexualize the proceedings and they are just humiliated into silence. Again, it's the lack of thought or judgment in picking his targets. Making fun of people less powerful than you is just abuse, no?

SA: You had a 'post-it' article on the Rumpus.net recently that, to put it delicately, reamed Jonathan Larsen's famed musical, RENT. If I may quote: "I heard 9/11 jokes long before it felt okay to say that maybe RENT was an insidious, middlebrow lie. That, even though it was a terrible thing that he died, and that, yes, New York was getting far too expensive and inhospitable to young people who tried to come here with dreams of making art, and indeed AIDS is a devastating, horrible scourge, RENT was an insidious, middlebrow lie." RENT was released thirteen years ago; what inspired this rant?

DR: The piece about RENT is part of a longer essay in the current book I'm laboring to finish. The piece is about the myth of romanticism and how being an artist takes more than hanging out, hating your parents, refusing to pay your rent, or even being HIV+. It requires the very solitary process of making art, which can be rough and difficult and soul-destroying, but it's not mining coal for God's sake. Every artist I know manages to pay their rent. Would it be easier in Canada or Britain? Absolutely.

SA: A word strikes me in that summation is the derogatory use of "middlebrow." One of the marvels of your work, I think, is how oddly you walk the line between the various brows. Your diction, of course, feels very highbrow. But you are a humorist, and funny people are generally the fools of the court, rather than the kings. You gained your fame on public

radio (upper middle brow), and* Don't Get to Comfortable*, for example, was on the* New York Times *bestseller list. Are you truly as hateful towards the middle brow as this quote would suggest? Who is your audience?

DR: My tastes run pretty high, but they also run pretty low. Fry something, *anything*, and I will eat it. As for jesters who become kings, look no further than Lorne Michaels and the gentlemen who started Spy magazine. I'm not that powerful or rich, so I have no fear of that particular 4 a.m. "What have I become" crisis of faith. I'm also fortunate that I wasn't really pitching at those windmills when I was in my 20s, at least not publicly. My first book didn't come out until I was 36, so I had long since gotten out of my system the unearned salvo and childish attack, for the most part.

I suppose I used middlebrow to indicate the flaccid thinking. There was something pernicious about the musical to me, preaching artistic purity and the myth of not being bound by the usual rules that govern the non-Bohemian segment of the population, but still nobody did a fucking thing! You can't rail against gentrification and yuppie scum and your only alternative is this bullshit undergraduate lounge where no one makes work. Then you're just a gentrifying trustafarian, a white douchebag with dreads. The entire enterprise was a symptom posing as an antidote, a public health film narrated by a virus. Even though I admit to getting weepy over some of the songs that make me remember my life in the 80s and the many, many friends I lost. I'm not a completely heartless monster.

SA: During your interview with Terri Gross, you described yourself as being of "public radio fame." This seems an ironic statement because you, and several of your compatriots from* This American Life*, seem to have risen to a fame that

far exceeds regular public radio fame, perhaps coinciding with the incredible success of the show. Do you ever marvel that a public radio program was the vehicle to your national success?

DR: Well, first of all, while I'm incredibly lucky with the nifty little career I have, I don't confuse myself with my TAL colleagues who are genuinely famous. The show rode the crest of a growing interest in first-person writing. It was at the forefront of it. Now there are more story-telling series going on than one could possibly ever want. I marvel at the radio show's success constantly, but more in a kind of astonishment that I ever got to be part of it, and a kind of amazed relief that I am the age I am, and not just starting out which, despite the greater numbers of avenues there are for writing, just seems a good deal more difficult and crowded. So yes, I do pinch myself regularly.

SA: Is great fame something you aspire to? How do you aspire to wield your power?

DR: It's really not about that. Would I like to have no money problems? Yes and no. I'm always better with a little something to push against. I don't mean obliteratingly terrifying life and death problems. I've had those and worrying about whether one will be dead within the year lays waste to creativity, let me tell you. You might even say one's creativity is *vitiated* by it (*ding ding ding!*). But it's not about fame. There's obviously certain need for recognition, not just for egotistical reasons but in order to justify publishers continuing to publish one. I'm really looking for longevity, both as a writer and a person. I'd like to see a shelf with more than three titles on it. I'd like to become a better writer. I'd like to write a play (I never will), but wielding my power? I suppose in my twenties

I was visited by fantasies of a ghoulish and grandiose nature, but I'm happy to report that such considerations fade super quickly. It's a lot more relaxing with them gone.

SA: It's been a while since you released a book. Is one soon to come?

DR: Yes, I hope in Autumn of 2010. I'm really late, I got sidetracked. All will be made clear this Fall.

SA: 'Wag,' I'm sure you know, is an antiqued (Shakespearean) term for a habitually droll joker, a wit. Who is your favorite 'wag,' (from fiction, nonfiction, history, your own life), and why?

DR: My favorite wag, the person it would be a dream to be known as the modern-day equivalent of is Oscar Levant. You can see him in *An American In Paris*. Levant was Gershwin's best friend, a brilliant pianist in his own right, and author of one of the great standards of all time, "Blame It On My Youth," as well as books of his observations and witty aperçus (he's the one who said of Elizabeth Taylor, "Poor Liz, always the bride, never the bridesmaid,") He was also known as a great wit and raconteur. He was also famously sad. Clinically so, thinking himself a failed musician and composer and general fraud. He went on Jack Paar and talked about his depression and electroconvulsive therapy, a first in American culture. He was a panelist on the radio quiz show, *Information, Please* (where, coincidentally, he was joined by Clifton Fadiman, father of Ann, re-animatrix of the term 'familiar essay'). So, perhaps minus the pill-popping (he bumped into Judy Garland in Grand Central Station and said, "This is one of the great moments in the history of pharmacology,") and debilitating affective disorder and in-patient episodes, it is Oscar Levant.