

INTERVIEWS



Who Are You, Markus Hartel, 2008

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

“I’d never convincingly say ‘freeze, motherfucker,’ and I’ve no desire to do so.”

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: Hmmm...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*

“Why should we have to campaign?”

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

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.

T.J. JAGODOWSKI and DAVE PASQUESI

Chicago is the world's capitol of improvised comedy, and perhaps the best improv show in Chicago—as measured by awards, ticket sales, laughs, and general consensus—is “TJ and Dave.” Every Wednesday night for the last seven years, TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi have taken the stage at Chicago’s iO Theater for an hour of improvised theater that eschews ‘jokey’ gags for the honest and hilarious absurdity of daily existence. We sat down with the two at Mr. Pasquesi’s studio apartment, in a handsome high-rise in Chicago’s Old Town neighborhood.

Will Litton, Wag’s Revue: Let’s start with some biographical questions. How did you get into the Chicago improv scene?

Dave Pasquesi: I was going to college. My brother went to an improv class, and I tagged along with him. He was in law school, he wanted to take an improv class to help him in front of moot court. The teacher’s name was Judy Morgan, she was—I found out, after I started—in the company with Harold Ramis, Joe Flaherty, John Belushi, and Brian Doyle-Murray at Second City. One of the great casts. And she was a great teacher. That was the first time I did anything like that. I was studying philosophy at the time, and then I kind of, kind of got the...

TJ Jagodowski: Bug?

DP: The bug. I got bit. Couldn’t remember what I was supposed to say there. I got the bite. That’s what I was trying to say.

TJ: Hooked.

DP: Hooked, right. I got hooked, I got the bug.

TJ: The bug.

DP: I was bit.

TJ: I was taken to a Second City show by my friend. She was the one who encouraged me to start taking classes, and I took those initial classes at Second City. And I also got smitten.

DP: Then after those classes, then I stopped, finished school, came back to Chicago. I was roommates with Joel Murray and he got some advice from his brother [Bill Murray]: “Go find this Del Close guy, he’s starting to teach again.” So I went up and I’ve been at what’s become ImprovOlympic since then.

Will Guzzardi, Wag’s Revue: And the two of you met at the iO?

DP: No.

TJ: The very first time we met was during a set at Second City. But we really didn’t get to know one another, it was more like, nice to meet you, Mr. Pasquesi.

DP: Nice to meet *you*, Mr. Jagodowski.

TJ: Right, yes. And we both donned our bowlers—

DP: We doffed our chaps, we grabbed our canes—

TJ: We waxed our moustaches, and went upon our way. [Laughter] But the first time we kind of met and played together was for, I think, the second Chicago Improv Festival [1999].

WG: *And how did the “TJ and Dave” show start?*

TJ: I think Noah [Gregoropoulos] said, “You know what would be interesting? To watch you and David play together.” I mean, we had met, but I didn’t really know Dave. I don’t remember how I would have gotten your phone number. I just remember us eventually meeting.

DP: At Savory’s.

TJ: Yeah. And Dave at the time was doing *Glengarry* at Steppenwolf and he said, let’s talk a few times and see if we want to do something similar, to see if we’re of like minds.

DP: Like minds, yes, interested in doing the same kinds of things. I think one of the ideas was, the way I was taught, I didn’t see much of that in performance around town any longer.

WG: *Explain that. You didn’t see much of what you had been taught?*

DP: Right.

WG: *What specifically do you mean?*

DP: I mean, it was real funny and clever, a lot of what I saw, and that’s not necessarily the way I was taught. By Del [Close]. And maybe he changed his mind, or else things were forgotten for whatever reason.

WL: *Yeah, so let’s go into this, about what it is that you and TJ do, and the sort of philosophy behind it. How would you describe the weekly show you do to someone who’s never seen it? Or even to people like us, who’ve seen it a bunch, and are still sort of baffled by the genius behind it.*

DP: Don't diffuse that statement. [Laughter]

TJ: You just said it beautifully. Baffling genius. [Laughter]

WL: *But it does stand in such stark contrast to so much improv, even many of the other shows you see at the iO. So if you were to tell someone what your show is, what would you say?*

TJ: Roughly an hour-long, two-actor semi-play?

DP: Yeah. There will be two people, maybe two people playing between two and fourteen characters.

TJ: So far.

DP: It's difficult to explain. But I think what we do is: fifty minutes of tiny little moments added up, and then the lights go out. And then sometimes the lights don't go out—that fucking guy. [Laughter]

WG: *Yeah. So, okay. That brings up a couple of things, directions we want to go in.*

WL: *Lots of things about what you do in relation to where literature has been going for the past 100 years.*

TJ: We like to think we're still at the forefront of it. [Laughter] It's been a tough thing to maintain for 100 years, but we like to think we're still right at the front, at the leading edge of literature.

WL: *We laugh about it, but I think in the improvisers' community, you two are widely regarded as two of the best. The people at the top of the game. And Noah [Gregoropolous] makes it*

in there of course, and several other names. But everyone's always like, "Go see TJ and Dave."

DP: And Noah? This is not quite the compliment I thought it was. [Laughter]

TJ: Go fuckin' talk to him. He's sittin' around at home. [Laughter]

“You can do a tiny sketch about polar bears fucking cake, but that's not gonna last very long.”

WG: *Here's a question. People often confuse improv with stand-up comedy—*

DP: And “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?”.

WG: *Right, right.*

TJ: There was a stand-up place called “The Improv.” So I think maybe, for some people that just sticks in your head, standing in front of a brick wall.

DP: Right. “What's your act?” I get that asked a lot. “What's your act?” You know, go fuck yourself. [Laughter]

WG: *Okay, so if it's not “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?” then what is improv?*

DP: This is what I'm familiar with as being improvisation, as taught and developed a long time ago by Del Close. It's not just people getting up on stage and talking. And it's not just the clever make-'em-ups. It can be more than that, and it can be a bit more honest. You can do a little tiny sketch about polar bears fucking cake, but that's not gonna last very long. That's just not going to sustain itself very long. So it has to be something closer to genuine.

WL: *The aesthetic of your show is hard to describe. For one thing, you play a lot of the characters close to the chest. There is a kind of honesty and rawness there, right? The aesthetic is conversational.*

WG: *It's mundane, too.*

WL: *Right, whereas in a lot of other improv shows, you're hoping for a three-minute something-that's-funny.*

DP: I think you said something important there. If doing something funny is your goal and you fall short, you've got absolutely nothing. But if the goal is something else, and you fall short, it may well be funny, it may well be interesting.

WL: *You focus on the everyday. The banal. Like in a recent show of yours, you played two elderly people sitting watching an infomercial. When I've tried to explain this to my friends, it sounds like the most boring possible thing to ever watch, and yet it is so engaging when you're sitting there in the audience.*

DP: Yeah, I think there are a lot of rules of improvisation that we don't follow. One rule is: find out who, what and where, immediately. Like, "I've just got the results of your blood test back."

Okay, great. Who gives a fuck? I'm not a doctor, and you're not dying. So why would we do that? I've just told you, probably I'm going to give you some bad news, and pretend that I'm a doctor. That's the information that I've just given you. And that doesn't matter because we still don't know our relationship.

TJ: In improv classes, you're often taught to ask, 'why is this day different?' 'Why is this the one in a million?' For whatever reason—and it might have just been personal taste—I've always liked, 'why is this day the same?' Maybe later in a show something will occur that seems different for these two people's experience. But until how they are the same is shown, then how do you know something's different?

I think maybe it's not just us, it's people in general: whether they're watching a film or reading a book, even if it's some crazy science fiction thing, they still want something that's simple and understandable and has a relationship to it—whether it's in space or underground or on a submarine or just in a living room. You still want something that you can believe, or empathize with, or understand, to make it impactful for you. If it's all just bullshit, what part of it sticks to your person?

DP: And I think a lot of it is dependent on what the audience is looking for. The audience likes "Transformers." They fuckin' love it. Not everybody likes "My Dinner with Andre." Not to say there's anything wrong with any other kinds of improvisation. They're very popular.

WG: "Transformers" is also very popular.

DP: Right, yeah.

WG: *What you were just talking about, TJ, is something that Will and I were just talking about on the way over here. I think your shows have something in common with recent fiction, short fiction especially, that Raymond Carver aesthetic of describing the life of a boring, depressing, middle-aged man. Not that that's your show, but that in plumbing the depths of the banal, you can find richness at the bottom.*

DP: I'm just reading Seymour again. *Raise High the Roofbeam, Motherfucker?* Is that it?

WL: *Even in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," with its exceptional ending, a huge part of the story is just a very blasé conversation between a woman and her mother.*

DP: But it's extremely well done. And I think that's the thing. If it's well done, I'll watch somebody tie their shoe.

TJ: Well the banal thing, I think we also have the benefit of not being able to be clever for that long. So you'd better do something you can do for fifty minutes, and being normal, or average, you can sustain that, you know. It's tough to sustain or even attempt something extraordinary and maintain it.

DP: Right. Going back to what we said at the beginning, the way I was taught, was you're supposed to have a series of genuine moments. And therefore, watching some people watch an infomercial, as you were just describing, can be interesting. It isn't interesting if there's nothing genuine in it.

“If it’s well done, I’ll watch somebody tie their shoe.”

Conflict is supposedly where dramatic tension comes from. Not necessarily for us. Or, rather, try to avoid creating conflict, because it'll always show up. Something like: "Mom always liked you better!" gets said in every improv class. Rather than come out with that conflict explicitly, maybe later on down the road say, "You bought the wrong bread." The characters may go to blows over that, rather than some artificial imposition of supposed drama or conflict. [sotto voce, to TJ] I just bored myself.

TJ: Not just you. [Laughter].

WL: Almost always the words 'improv' and 'comedy' are attached to one another. For example, what the iO does is always billed as 'improv comedy'.

DP: Right. Second City, 'Fifty years of Funny!' I just saw that today. 'Fifty years of funny!'

TJ: [mumbled] With some breaks.

DP: Yeah, just the last 35 years. Took the last 35 years off. [Laughter]

WL: Is it irksome to you to always have that word 'comedy' uttered in the same breath as 'improv'?

TJ: It almost always is, though. 'Funny' can happen in a lot of different ways. You can play it as intentionally not-for-laughs as possible and you still won't be able to help it.

WG: Why isn't that true of movies or conventional theater? I saw a show that you two did with a guest, Michael Shannon. And he, Michael Shannon, played a person who was coming back from the Iraq war.

DP: You mean Academy Award nominee Michael Shannon?
[Laughter]

WG: *Academy Award nominee Michael Shannon, playing a returning Iraq war veteran, and you guys did not play it for laughs at all. It was at times very sobering, but also at times hilarious. How is it that, in good improv, no matter how hard you try, it will always be funny, whereas in other media you have to try very hard to be funny?*

TJ: I read that to really find something funny it has to go through the ‘surprise’ part of your brain. One of the reasons I think you don’t need to put conflict into improvisation is that there’s already conflict in the form. The dramatic tension comes from the fact that the next word is not written. It’s not planned, the next shot is not known. And then when things go okay, there’s a relief to that, like “Oh, they didn’t fuck it up!” And sometimes I think that relief manifests itself in laughter.

DP: Also I think that people are surprised by people telling the truth: laughter is just a reaction to recognizing the absurdity of just being us. It’s surprising to tell the truth.

TJ: There is something to ‘the moment,’ to it being in that room in that second. Because on tape, on paper, in re-description—

DP: Telling your friends.

TJ: —it won’t be funny. You can describe a scene perfectly, but it’s not in that room with those people in that moment with that crowd with all the other moments that may have seemed unrelated but that all sort of now culminate in this second, and now they all culminate in the next second. And I think that second or moment or whatever has something to do with what makes it funny.

WL: *I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the formal qualities of improv and how they make it a unique art. Great works of literature, great works of film, movies, books, music, they can all be reproduced, and disseminated widely, whereas there's something about improv that resists that. And it's almost like flying in the face of our whole age of technology. You can get a book or a movie on your phone. You can't get improv on your phone.*

DP: Yet. Yet. [Laughter]

WL: *Is there something to that that is part of why you guys love it so much?*

DP: Absolutely. It's really temporary. Like the Dead used to talk about people taping or bootlegging their shows: "Whatever you want. When we're done with it, you can have it." I think we have a similar sensibility. Also, we realize that it's not just the two of us, but that everybody there factors in heavily. Their participation and encouragement.

TJ: I wish I loved it for something as lofty as, "Ah! Improv flies in the face of modern society!" But you just can't explain why you love anything. It just, it bites you. And I'm not good at anything else. I don't write. This is the thing that I got better at because I just liked doing it as often as possible. I love baseball too. But I love baseball because it flies in the face of football. [Laughter].

DP: But there is a sensibility to improvisation that is non-commercial.

TJ: Cause we've tried.

DP: Yeah, right.

TJ: We've been told it's highly non-commercial. [Laughter]

DP: Yeah, it's a pretty—we're talking about a pretty tiny world. We're talking about the world of improvisation, more specifically the world of long-form improvisation. That's like eight people.

But it's like jazz music. That shit on a record? Go f—no! I have to be high and in the room! And I think that's something similar. Like oh wow, that guy's gone. That's fun to watch.

TJ: And the non-guaranteed nature of improvisation hasn't allowed it to be in the place that improvisers—former improvisers, current improvisers—have to find it. Like, it has to be a written TV show, or a film.

DP: Nobody's going to back it. It's an unknown.

TJ: It's inherent that it might not work. Well, why am I giving you eight million dollars to do it? Like, yeah, it might not work for that random guy over there. I can throw a balloon and hit a dude who it might not work for. Although things like “Curb [Your Enthusiasm]” and stuff—

DP: “Factory.” There's a great television program called “Factory” that was improvised.

TJ: Maybe that day and age is changing. Or there are some filmmakers—I saw an interview with Amy Poehler, and when she and Tina [Fey] did *Baby Mama* or whatever they allowed room for improvisation within there.

DP: There was [John] Casavettes. They made—there was some script, but they shot a lot of film.

WL: *A lot of comedians probably improvise towards a script, like Best in Show, and that whole aesthetic. But there's something about what you two do on the stage that's even more raw and liberating by the very fact that it's mimed. That anything could be in that space, that you could grab hold of anything, and moreover that you could be or look like anyone, and that's a discovery that you make.*

DP: Yeah, like you find out that he's 400 pounds.

**“Jazz music on a record?
I have to be high and
in the room.”**

WL: *There's a kind of expected verisimilitude in film. If you are an old African-American woman, you must be and look like her—and there's something about that, when you're improvisers, you can do anything. And that really doesn't translate to anywhere but the stage.*

TJ: Yeah, I hear you. I think in some ways the elements that are maybe as closely—at least in my head—something like that happens on radio. Even our best implied wrench, you're still drawing that line that makes the wrench itself. That the experience, in some ways—we can lay some of the stuff, but you, each person, uniquely, fills in the rest of the look of that room, or what that 400-pound person looks like, to them. What their shirt is. Because it's not the shirt that either of

us is going to be wearing onstage. It'll be your picture. And in that sense it's a unique experience for each person who's attending, like it might be listening to a radio show. Where you're given the dialogue and stuff, and you might get a door creak, but the one you have in your head is specific to your imagination. So it's cooperative in that way as to how it plays on the screen in your head. You're filling in a lot of the gaps and the missing parts and the looks and the pieces.

WG: The analogy to jazz improvisation was interesting. I think that the ideas of structure and rules versus freedom, this is something that jazz musicians have been grappling even since the origins of jazz. But you have this chord progression, and then you improvise based on the structure. And that seems like something akin to the Harold, which is the popular formal structure of improvisation at the Improv Olympic. The Harold has this kind of structure, you're gonna get piece A, B, C, here—

DP: The old Commedia dell'Arte was all improvised, but they had well-known stories and well-known stock characters. Whereas our pieces don't have any of that.

WG: This is more in the vein of free jazz.

DP: Even less possibly commercial. Possibly the least commercial endeavor ever. [Laughter]

WL: The Harold has a kind of teleology to it: you start somewhere, and you know you're going to try to wrap it up. Whereas what you guys do, is you kind of start somewhere, and it's never a big proposition, it's never, "Here's the first sentence," it's, "Let me look at how TJ or Dave is standing and then make an inference."

TJ: To come out of the box like, “Hello, Doctor” that would set us on a false foot immediately. To come up with this faux’d, super-important thing, it’s tough to believe that. But we just look at each other, and see like, okay, he’s standing like that.

DP: He seems worried.

TJ: The look on his face. Then it seems like we can start from something that at least appears to be the truth at that moment. So it kind of puts you on a foot that then you don’t want to start making up a lot of bullshit because it’s not how it began, it’s not how this little piece started.

My friend had read about someone’s quote on improvisational jazz. He couldn’t remember exactly, but it was one of the big ones, it was Miles or Coltrane, and it was that, “You play until you make a mistake, and then you make that mistake over and over and over again.” And improv can be like that, that there’s nothing better than an honest mistake to it. Or the way that you describe what you like about the way Jerry plays guitar, Jerry Garcia, he gets himself in a hole—

DP: He puts himself in a position, he starts playing and it’s like oh man, there’s no fucking way, he’s doing this all wrong, there’s no way he’s gonna get out of that. It seems like he’s falling, and then he catches himself, and he’s fine. He’s fine. And people clap.

WL: *Maybe this is myth, Dave, but I’ve heard that you once won a best improviser award, and in your acceptance speech you just said, “I was always taught that my job was to make my ensemble players look better. I’ll try harder next time.” I’m wondering if you can talk about how this informs how you improvise. Improvisers often say, “The things we*

learn about being a good improviser are communicable to a philosophy of how to live well.”

DP: I think Del [Close] would say that too. He just makes the world a better place through better improvisation.

I remember I was teaching a class one time, and everybody was just fuckin’ moving around, for no reason, I told them all to just stand still and not move until they have a reason to move. And somebody shifted their weight, and I’m like, “Why are you moving? Why are you moving?” and they couldn’t answer, so I said, “Then stand fucking still. Stand still.” And nobody moved, and then they started getting crazier and crazier about why they’re not moving and what have they got to do—one person went over and tied somebody else’s shoe. That is: there’s nothing within me; my use is to other people. That’s really the reason that should motivate me to do anything in improvisation.

WL: *It seems to me that every time you guys start out a piece you’re undertaking a philosophical experiment. Sartre has that famous line in “No Exit” that, “Hell is other people.” That has everything to do with the fact that we’re a person, and we’re self-aware, and we live in a world where we have free will to do anything. That’s great. The catch is that everyone else who populates this world we live in has free will as well, and when those wills overlap, intersect, aggravate, that’s when things get crummy. So you start a scene, a thought experiment, where there’s nothing, an existential void, and everything is built piece by piece by two different players with unique wills, moment by moment, like you said, you’re building everything together, and you’re trying to make it not hell, right? You’re trying to make it a world in which these people are actually great for each other.*

DP: I think we would argue with some of your starting points. That there's a void at all.

TJ: There can't be nothing.

DP: We're exactly on the other side of that school, which is that it's all already there. And our job is to not make it whatever we want but to discover what it already is. In great detail.

TJ: To try and not mess up a good thing that's already happening.

DP: It's already perfect. Like those ideas of the rules: know who you are, say who you are, what's the problem, where are we, what size are my fucking shoes, all that stuff. Or just do a perfect scene, and all that stuff will either not matter or be taken care of.

TJ: As an improviser, even if you attempt to give someone nothing at the beginning, you're still going to be giving them something. You can't give them nothing. There's always already something there.

DP: They talk about "Let it happen," that's a bit of hubris, I think. It's already happening, with or without my permission. My job, our job, is to find out what it is that's happening, what's going on here, what's already going on.

TJ: Almost like every improv show ever is going on right now, and you kind of jumped into this one, and you'll be in this one for an hour, and then you'll jump back out of it.

WL: *I guess before we ask our traditional closer, we're interested in what works of literature you guys have been influenced by. What do you love?*

DP: For parenting skills, Dostoevsky. *Brothers Karamazov* specifically. No. Salinger, I think. I like that. I think it's real helpful for improvisation. I read a bunch of stuff, but I don't think I've read anything more often than I've read Salinger. Boy, if you could improvise like that. There's an awful lot of information in every sentence. And what we were talking about before, we've got "Bananafish," I don't know how many years later, we read "Seymour." That's not a whole story. It's just a little bit in some guy's life. Segmented pieces. It looks like an end. It wasn't an end.

TJ: I read a lot of garbage. Real, real pablum. I was an English major, and I resented it for a while, because it took the joy of just falling into a story away. I was reading for hegemonies within *Wuthering Heights*, imperial societies being exhibited through *Emma*. And this was probably a decent story.

So now I read a lot of things that are easily digestible. Murders and suspenses. I was trying to alternate for a while, go back and read stuff that I should've, so I worked my way through *Dunces*, and *Brave New World*—stuff like that. But right now, if I'm down to picking up *Pilgrim's Progress* or Harlan Coben, I'm probably going to pick up "Tell No One." Mr. Bunyan can wait. [Laughter] I have come to terms with the fact that I'm never going to read *Ulysses*. I've accepted that as a fact.

WG: *I'm starting to grapple with that fact also.*

DP: I'm starting to grapple with the idea that I'm not going to be a huge film-maker by the time I'm 25. [Laughter]

WG: *What did you think of Dunces?*

TJ: I thought it was way too long.

WG: *I couldn't get past, maybe, 50 pages.*

DP: I've made it to fifty pages several times.

WG: *That seems like a nice place to stop.*

WL: *I've done the same thing. I have my bookmark in it.*

TJ: The only thing that got me through *Dunces* was, I pictured Jimmy Carrane. Because it's such an unlikable protagonist, that I had to picture someone I liked and thought was funny as Ignatius. That helped me.

DP: Also, so many people I know, people I admire, think that's the greatest book—fuck, what did I like about you? [Laughter]

TJ: It does make hard lines.

DP: Funniest book ever written? Funniest book ever written?

WG: *If that's the funniest book ever written, it's sad.*

TJ: What, do you also laugh at people getting hit in the leg with shovels? Do you also find that funny?

DP: Woody Allen, I guess. And *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. That's fucking hilarious.

WL: *For sure. That's one of the best.*

TJ: Hugh Laurie's book [*The Gun Seller*].

DP: Adams?

TJ: Douglas?

WG: *My dad knew him before he died.*

TJ: Was he like 6'8" or something?

WG: *He was huge. But he was in really good shape, and one day he was in the gym, working out, doing his usual thing, just dropped dead.*

DP: That will never happen to me. I will never drop dead working out.

TJ: Oh, darn it.

DP: You're disappointed that I won't drop dead working out?

TJ: Yeah. Well, I'm out of the pool. [Laughter]

DP: Also, apparently, fucking is out of the pool. [Laughter] I will not die fucking, I will not die working out.

WL: *Improv doesn't get you rockstar sex?*

DP: No, this one [pointing to TJ] makes me sit around after the show and go over the thing, instead of getting out there and casting the nets. [Laughter]

WL: *A 'wag' is a sort of wit, a merry, droll jokester. Who are your favorite wags? They could be fictional characters, historical figures, a buddy of yours. Don't say each other.*

DP: No danger there.

TJ: Wouldn't make the top hundred.

DP: Well I like that Woody Allen fella. I think he's pretty funny. But an idiot. [Laughter] He's pretty bright and pretty funny and apolitical. I find those things to be three good qualities.

TJ: I think Noah [Gregoropolous] qualifies in the classic style of that. I read an entire book of G. K. Chesterton quotes when I was a sophomore in high school. I was into witty little things. I imagine Noah would have been that guy in the corner. Dorothy Parker.

DP: H.L. Mencken.

TJ: Jack McBrayer.

DP: And Noel Coward: "I didn't get that laugh, when I asked for that cup of tea." These two vaudevillians are backstage after the show, husband and wife. The husband says, "I didn't get that laugh when I asked for a cup of tea." And the wife responds, "That's because you were asking for a laugh, and not for a cup of tea." [Laughter.] That, I think, really speaks to what we were talking about earlier.

WG: *Yeah, that's a perfect note to end on. Well, thank you guys.*