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Interviewee: **David Gerstner**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of David Gerstner
December 19, 2013

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so we start, you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

DAVID GERSTNER: I'm David Gerstner. I'm 50 years old. We are in my home, in Chelsea, West 23rd Street. And today is December 19th, 2013.

SS: Okay. And I do know that you're from Buffalo.

DG: I am originally from Buffalo, New York.

SS: And were your parents from there, too?

DG: My parents were from Buffalo. My mother's mother came from Italy, however. She was kind of the connection for us to Italy. And my favorite story about my grandmother is that she arrived in New York in 1924. And my great-grandfather was something of a beast. And when he picked her up uptown — off the boat, he ushered her into the car, pushed her head down, and said, "You cannot look at this evil city," and drove her right upstate to Buffalo. They moved to Buffalo.

So she did not get to New York until I came here — when I moved here, in '81, and went to Fordham. It was her first airplane ride, and her first trip to New York City was some 60 years later.

SS: Now, since you went to Fordham, and your grandmother was from Italy, are you Catholic?

DG: Oh my god, yes.

SS: Oh, I didn't know that.

DG: Oh, yeah, I'm Catholic. Yeah, I'm Italian Catholic. But the story is, on my father's side, is that the family was Jewish. And in around 1880-1890, because of persecution, as they fled, they changed their denomination to Catholic to protect themselves. So from what we've found out through my mother's friend who's a genealogist — found out that we are actually Jewish on that side of the family.

SS: But your name is David Gerstner.

DG: David Gerstner, which is my dad's name. Which apparently, it was Gerstein, and changed to Gerstner – and then also changed to Catholic.

SS: So you were a Catholic named David Gerstner all your life. That's very interesting.

DG: All my life. In fact –

SS: You're treated like you're Jewish –

DG: Yes, yes, oh, oh, that's the great thing. People always think I'm Jewish, and I went to a Catholic high school, and they probably thought that I was Jewish there, too, who knows? They did know I was probably gay, so — I was gay.

SS: So what came first; homosexuality or the movies?

DG: Happened at the same time. And I think it was probably *My Fair Lady* and *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, where I would put on my mother's afghan, and pretend that I was either Barbra Streisand or My Fair Lady — I was Audrey Hepburn. And I would just dress the part, after watching the movies. So I think it blurred together.

I think my family probably had a strong sense of this, because the option on a Saturday night. My dad had hockey tickets, and my sister wanted to go to a hockey game, all the time. I was like, "Ooh, I don't want to go to a hockey game." And my mother and I would stay home and watch musicals.

SS: On TV.

DG: On TV.

SS: And what about movie-movies. Were there any good movies in Buffalo?

DG: Yes. Well, there were the big Hollywood films. And I remember I had a fascination with *The Poseidon Adventure*, because I loved Stella Stevens. I thought she was fabulous. Of course, Shelley Winters. So I loved that movie — it was '72, something like that? And *The Way We Were*. So we would all go see all of those movies all the time. *The Sting*. I was really into the Hollywood films of the time. It was great.

SS: Okay. So you had classic fag movie taste.

DG: And with my mother. I mean, every cliché possible, I lived.

SS: Okay. So what was your feeling about Buffalo? When did you decide that you were going to be leaving Buffalo?

DG: On my 15th birthday, that was, if I remember correctly, was the blizzard of '77 — one of those giant things. And because of that blizzard, my birthday was cancelled. Nobody could get to the house. My mother had ordered a special guitar-shaped birthday cake for me and, somehow, the guy whose wife made the cake — he was a construction worker, this big beefy guy — somehow got to my house with the birthday cake. So I had the birthday cake, but that was that.

And I thought, this is really depressing.

00:05:00 And around the same time, within a year or two, myself and a bunch of my high school friends from St. Francis High School took our little trip to New York City, and we went to see A Chorus Line. Which I saw eight times, nine times, on Broadway then. And the line that always stuck out to me — because Michael Bennett was the director — there's a line about suicide in Buffalo, and how it's redundant. And I thought, yes, it is.

And I think Chorus Line, and the movies — that whole fantasy world was so important for me, and feeling so — because of the snow, I think. I hate snow. I feel claustrophobic — I can't breathe, so I have to get out. And so

New York was the place for me to leave, to come to. My family came here quite a bit for business. And I just loved it, so I stayed here.

And, ironically, where I stayed with my friends was the Leo House — right up the street. We would stay there, and all the nuns would make sure we were in by midnight, ha ha! It was great. And at the time — it must have been, what, late '70s, early '80s — you would never go past Leo House. They warned you, “Don't go past Leo House, it's very dangerous.”

SS: To go west?

DG: To go west.

SS: Oh, okay. Now, were your parents politically active at all?

You said your grandfather was a jazz musician.

DG: Yes, my grandfather was a drummer, a keyboardist. He owned a restaurant in Buffalo, where he'd play with the band, and he was a bartender. And he then worked for the city, when the restaurant went bankrupt. I remember he would drive the big trucks, and fill the potholes, right?

Political? Not per se. I think my grandfather was a strong union guy. He believed in that. So that was, I think, in my familial background, it was there.

My father was Republican. And he was — what do you want to call it? — that Nixon-Agnew Republican, about money. Reagan — he liked Reagan, that kind of thing.

When I came out, his politics changed to Democrat. He decided that that was part of his move to change — which is interesting. And my mom, at that time not political at all, she joined PFLAG. So she got involved with that kind of thing.

SS: And how old were you when this happened?

DG: Eighteen.

SS: Wow.

DG: Yes. It's when I had just moved to New York. And I had my first boyfriend here, in New York. That was Jim Fall, who is now a director in Hollywood, which is kind of funny. And they met him, and loved him, and then it was a process. It was a very productive, very good process for my family.

SS: That's amazing. That's very unusual for your generation.

DG: Yes, I think so. I think that my mom was always sensitive to being someone who was othered. She was the Italian kid growing up in an Irish neighborhood, South Buffalo. She knew that feeling of being marginalized. She always liked to tell me how, "When I worked at a department store in Buffalo,

there was a black girl there named Trudy. And we were really good friends.” So there was that idea that, okay, I’m gonna identify with the other.

Simple as it is, that was my mother, her way of saying, “I care about your difference, and I understand this.”

SS: And did you study cinema studies as an undergraduate?

Did it exist at that time?

DG: Yes. Well, when I went to Fordham — for one year, in the Bronx — there was no cinema, really. I went to Fordham because it was New York. And then I discovered NYU — and discovered downtown, and all its pleasures. And I took cinema studies there for four years — didn’t finish my degree, because I spent all my money on trying to make a film. But it was amazing. It was a terrific experience for me. Just being around actors and film people, and all that.

This was ’82 to ’84, I guess, somewhere around then. And I worked at the Buffalo Roadhouse for awhile, as a busboy, down on Seventh Avenue South, where I met a bunch of great people.

And then, My sister studied in London. I went to London. And when I was there visiting her, her friend got me a job back here at the World of Video, on West 10th Street, off Seventh Avenue. Which, to me, was the greatest experience of my life — working at the World of Video for a year and a half. I

still have very close friends who worked there. But that was a really important site in New York — for gay men in particular. Because it was a major VHS rental place that rented — I think it had the biggest gay porn selection at the time. Right next to that were the foreign films and Disney films. And we would have so many guys come in. I remember Tuesday — “two for one,” — there would be *Mary Poppins* and *Like a Horse*, or *A Matter of Size* and *Persona*.

SS: Right.

DG: And I met so many wonderful guys. We would joke about, “we’ve got the video date tonight!” So we had a ball. It was really great. And I got to deliver videotapes to Grace Jones — because I was the delivery boy. Probably more than college, more than NYU, the World of Video was where I learned about being a gay man. It was so important to me.

SS: And were you following contemporary gay film at that time? Or not yet.

DG: Yes, because what was happening then — if I can keep my dates straight — I remember the gay films coming out, especially some of the European cinema that had gay themes to it. And a lot of the people I worked with, they were cinema-studies kids. But many of the customers were people who were into film quite a bit. So they knew Pasolini; they knew Fassbinder. So we had all those discussions going on. So I think, in a way, the World of Video is

where I probably learned more about film than I did at NYU. And the weekends I would be off, I would take home stacks of video. And my friends would come over, and we would just watch film after film. We had a marathon. And it was terrific — I learned a lot at that place. It was a very, very important place.

SS: And were you at all interested in gay politics at that point?

DG: Well, again, I think there was a turning point there, at the World of Video. Because at a certain point, probably — I started there April, '84 — and toward the end of that year, maybe beginning of '85, is when we discovered many of our customers were getting sick. And that's when things around AIDS began to change the dynamic of the West Village quite a bit, and the politics became very important.

SS: So you're saying that for you personally there was a three-year gap between the beginning of AIDS and when it started to really get on your –

DG: In terms of being on my radar – it was there. I think it was talked about. We were – I remember, I think the Newsweek article came out — was that around maybe '82? — with the guys who were on the front cover. And so we were – people talk about it. But it was when, I think, being in the store, I started seeing people I know — I knew — become sick, and people dying. My doctor at the time, Dr. [Dennis] Passer, I remember, started telling me about this,

informing me, “There’s something going around, be careful about sex, we’re not sure what the outcome is, and how it is transmitted yet, but be careful out here.”

He died, eventually.

So, then the march of death began. And again, it all happened in that site. That West 10th Street location was so important –

SS: But what did you do? I mean, your doctor says, we don’t know what it is, but be careful. I mean, what did you do?

DG: Well, it’s funny, because at the time I was having my first experiences of unprotected sex. And having it – I think with my partners at the time, we maybe talked about it, but it wasn’t a major concern. It was interesting, it was an interesting time. Because we still wanted to have sex, right? We were having sex. But we weren’t really clear about how to navigate it.

I think, when certain customers were also getting involved with ACT UP or different political organizations, then we started getting information. Interestingly, there wasn’t a lot of information I was getting at school about this. I was getting it more, again, at the store than I was at school. It was very prescient, if I can use that word.

SS: You know what? I’m gonna go ask these people next door to turn off whatever they’re doing.

DG: Sure.

JAMES WENTZY: It's not registering.

SS: It's not registering? Okay, great. It's so interesting, because you could be right in the middle of AIDS, and have it not really reach you.

DG: Yes. Yes.

SS: It just really depended on what clique you were in, in those early days.

00:15:00

DG: And I think the — but I think that the other side of this — and I'm thinking about the various people that streamed through that store, and that I worked with, and then my colleagues that got sick — there was a lot of misinformation. But there was also information that could have been true, in fact, maybe was true, but not always true in all circumstances. Do you know what I'm saying? Whether it was the oral sex thing, or it was the different drug treatments that were beginning. Nobody knew. And in fact, my partner at the time — I met this guy Craig, I'm trying to remember what it was — '85? He was HIV-positive. And he began — I remember AZT at one point. And he got into macrobiotics. All these different things, constantly shifting back and forth on different possibilities. He's still alive.

Another good friend of mine went through a huge range of different treatments, and he's still alive.

Yet, other people I knew were trying all these different — whether it's holistic or the drug regimens — and they're not alive.

So you just didn't know. And I think maybe that's part of the — that weird kind of — in the thick of things; and — one's awareness is just based on kind of an amorphous set of information that's playing out around you. It's hard to ground.

SS: Right.

DG: It really —

SS: It was really individual.

DG: It was really individual. Because all these different individual experiences were right there, it was impossible to know it, exactly. And it changed. And it's interesting, when I pointed out this thing about Buffalo to you, because I did go back to Buffalo for my master's. A lot of it based on fear; the anxiety of AIDS; just kind of burned out — people dying. And my partner was HIV-positive, he was feeling the pressure to leave New York. He was feeling very depressed.

And up there, the ACT UP group and that experience was very different, because it was looking *at* New York. And it could almost, from that perspective, focus New York, in terms of the way they described it, to themselves — and to others. It was smaller, so it appeared clearer from that distance.

SS: Okay. Well, that's jumping ahead.

DG: Yes.

SS: We're still in '84.

DG: Yes.

SS: Because what year did you get back to Buffalo?

DG: Eighty-six. I did two things: I went back in '86 – I finished my bachelor's, because I ran out of money; moved back here; I moved to Atlanta for a couple months — with an ex of mine who is HIV-positive, actually. All these crazy dates. And then I worked here for a few years in advertising. And then, moved back to Buffalo for my master's. And then I went to L.A. So I was kind of zipping around.

SS: Okay. Well then, let's just step out of your own chronology, and –

DG: Yes.

SS: – let me ask you some questions as a film scholar.

DG: Sure.

JIM HUBBARD: Wait just a second. It sounds like t's getting more —

SS: Okay, I'm going to talk to him about it.

DG: It's just Tony.

SS: We're recording something.

DG: Thanks, Toe. Sorry about that.

DG: *Parting Glances*— Yes, when was that; '85, '86? I remember that being in the video store. So it was ver-...

00:20:00

SS: Let's just wait.

DG: It's so funny, I never even hear these noises. I never even hear these voices. But we had to put – we put soundproof windows on this, because –

SS: Oh, great.

DG: – that street is – yeah.

DG: So these are pretty good, in terms of just knocking out the –
What are your thoughts on Billy Jean King going to Russia?

SS: Listen, when I was posting from Russia, I said, the only people who can do anything are ex-Olympians who are gay. Right? And now it's happening. Not because I said it, but –

DG: Well, it could be.

SS: – it was obvious that that was the only possible strategy, because there was no corporate boycott.

DG: What I found out is that the White House pays very close attention to people like your writing and my – it turns out – we've discovered.

SS: Hope you can prove that.

DG: Huh?

SS: Can you prove that?

DG: I don't know if I can prove it, but I do know that Michael's correspondence with people – they know.

SS: Okay. Well good, I'm glad they listened.

DG: They do.

SS: All right. So I just want to – I want to ask you this as a film scholar.

DG: Okay.

SS: So AIDS is identified in 1981 –

DG: Yep.

SS: – of course, we know that it existed before. And how does that either confronting it or denying it, how is that reflected in gay cinema, in the early '80s, the mid-'80s?

DG: In the early cinema. I'm just thinking – as soon as you said that, I was thinking of Fassbinder's *Querelle*. I was thinking of Warhol and that meeting that takes place, in that, that filmmaking.

SS: What meeting?

DG: Well, when Warhol was on the set of *Querelle*. And it's this odd moment, these two very different figures meeting. Sorry.

I guess I'm not clear on the question in a way. Do you see it as a denial, in filmmaking in the '80s, early '80s? Or –

SS: Well, because we were talking about existent gay cinema when you were working at World of Video.

DG: Yes.

SS: And you were pointing to, like, Fassbinder.

DG: Or Pasolini. Because the question there — and again, I think the European cinema — the question at hand for them, it seemed, was often about class. Sexuality and class. You look at *Salò*, or you look at any of those Fassbinder films. Even *Fox and His Friends*, right, where it's – how do we think about the question of the proletariat and sexuality, and what do we do with this bourgeois construction of homosexuality that's happening, right? They saw it happening there, in the '80s. So that was the question at hand.

It seems to me that American cinema dealing with gay issues — because remember, *La Cage au Folles*, all these films were about the fabulousness of being gay, the fun. There were the campy films that people were renting at the time, even if it was to –

SS: Like *Outrageous*, by Craig Russell.

DG: Yes. The Russell films are very important. You had Derek Jarman's stuff happening. AIDS changes the discussion, obviously — especially for American filmmaking. And I think that, to my mind, what happens with MIX, but also with independent film is AIDS really drives, I think, a push for a change in gay cinema in America. The new queer cinema, et cetera et cetera. *The Living End*, and — right, Araki, and all these films, and then Todd Haynes.

So you get a generation of filmmakers who are thinking about
00:25:00 these things, but they're also aware of the Pasolinis and the Fassbinders, right? They're coming to film that way. So I guess for me, when I'm at the World of Video, it's a transitional thing that's happening. Because when I left there, when I left the World of Video, in eighty — god, mid-'85 or 6 — I began to study film more closely, and then I saw a group of experimental filmmakers begin to think about their sexuality and film. I was thinking '86. Because I studied with Tony Conrad who made a film with Jack Smith, right? So there was that whole — it was learning about that stuff then, too.

So you had that kind of filmmaking going on, right, the Jack Smiths and the Warhols, and — Barbara Rubin stuff; all those films that were part of this. Even *Portrait of Jason*, where you had the gay figure.

SS: But there's this, like, when AIDS becomes apparent – we're also seeing this blossoming of openly gay film, independent film, experimental film, and also quasi-commercial film.

DG: Right, right.

SS: Some of the film is directly confronting AIDS. *Parting Glances* –

DG: *Parting Glances*.

SS: – is the most famous example of that period. Some of the film is only talking about AIDS metaphorically. Like

DG: *Safe*.

SS: – *Poison*. Yeah, and *Safe*. And some film is deliberately avoiding AIDS, like – what's Tom Kalin's film called?

JH: *Swoon*.

DG: *Swoon*.

SS: *Swoon*.

DG: Right.

SS: Which is still into this pathological homosexual, but goes into the past. Because the present is AIDS.

DG: Well, I think a couple things are happening, it seems. And I think in many ways it's AIDS that's driving this multiple set of events. We have

films like *Parting Glances*, and Haynes's films. I think it begins to trigger not only that response to this immediate situation — AIDS — but it begins to trigger the question about, first, gay history; but also it begins to question what's good and bad representation. That becomes really crucial, I think, in terms of the filmmaking. People thinking about "How do we present these gay bodies?"

So for me, *Swoon* — I remember the discussion. In fact, [Tom] Kalin stayed at my house when he was in Buffalo to present the film. One of the things that I think — if I remember correctly — at the time was important for him was this question about, do I need to show good gay guys? Or can I, in light of this situation, particularly AIDS happening at the time — this question of coming up with the political movements: Do I have to show good guys? How else can I show this, in an interesting, provocative way?

SS: It's funny that you bring that up, because nobody showed good gay guys. Whether it was experimental film, whether it was underground film, whether it was the most solicitous work; we didn't have this heroic person with AIDS —

DG: Until we get, in a weird way, *Parting Glances* — to an extent. Right? And then of course, we get *Philadelphia*. It was later. But it comes out of where the hero emerges — the sentiment emerges. I think gay filmmakers, unlike

Demme, were asking more difficult questions about what does it mean to be gay? What does it mean to have this identity? What does it mean to have this identity that is now highlighted by this disease that is seen as sin, that is seen as a political disaster, that is seen as all of these things. How do I show this body? How do we put this body into cinema? And I think the important question that comes up — and this stems from a longer tradition in film, or any work of art, is, what form does that take? Do we tell a story about it, or do we do experimental film? How do we show this?

SS: Well, I also think – because I’m trying to focus on the early '80s, because I think things change once there’s an activist movement.

DG: Yes.

SS: But – yeah, yeah.

DG: But I think — think about — I’m thinking of Marlon Riggs, for example. Right? It’s not until – what year is *Tongues Untied* –

SS: No, it’s eighty-

JH: '91.

SS: '91?

DG: Yes, so before that, right, he’s making films about being African American. Like *Ethnic Notions*.

SS: *Color Adjustment*.

DG: It's not until *Color Adjustment*; it's not until later. But —
again — it's about getting the funding, too. When I studied the Riggs stuff, going
00:30:00 to the archives, what I found there was he was struggling enough as it was, trying
to get the funding just for *Ethnic Notions*. That was rejected so many times. And
then finally, when he seroconverts, and when he is in this position — then he
makes this film.

But I think it took time for gay filmmakers — gay artists — to
digest a lot of this. Let's think about — Von Praunheim's film is '90, right,
Silence Equals Death. Wojnarowicz is in that film, too —

**SS: Yeah, but I'm gonna argue that the ones that come after
the activist movements are different than the ones that come before. Because
there's this gay content in the early-'80s films —**

DG: Yes.

SS: — which is based on people dying.

DG: Yes.

SS: I mean, Bill Sherwood dies —

DG: Yes. What was that, *Lost Companion* —

**SS: No — *Longtime Companion*, right. Norman René died of
AIDS, and then half the people in *Paris is Burning* died of AIDS.**

DG: Yes, right.

SS: And the –

DG: But –

SS: – what's his name? Arthur –

JH: Bressan.

SS: – Bressan – he died of AIDS –

DG: Yes.

SS: – and Craig Russell died of AIDS.

DG: And then, take it to the porn industry.

SS: Right.

DG: Right? Which is probably important to think about. What happens to the porn filmmakers, like Bressan, but also the porn stars? That's a really important history, that's rarely talked about in terms of even the new queer cinema –

SS: So who are the most important porn stars who died of AIDS — in that early era?

DG: God. You're catching me off-guard, because I have to think about it. But I think it's an important question to ask.

SS: Okay, we'll come back to that.

DG: Yeah. But also something changes though, with the making of those films, too, about getting the condoms into the porn films. That activism changes what happens in those films. Right?

SS: Although that's still contested.

DG: But the point is that debate took place around that time, about what to do with a porn star; about testing, all that kind of stuff. Right?

SS: For MIX, the first AIDS film that we showed was Larry Brose.

JH: Right.

DG: Yes.

SS: *An Individual Desires Solution*. So that was the first AIDS film that we saw. It was a heavily, heavily experimental film.

DG: Let me ask you something. You raised a question about death; I want to come to that for a moment. Were you saying that the early films, prior to the activist impulse, were dealing with the sentiment of death? Or were —

SS: No, that it's the back story of the films.

DG: Is the death.

SS: Is the death of the makers, the death of the subjects.

DG: *Early Frost*.

SS: No, but that's about AIDS. But I'm talking about these other films, where the makers die, the people in them died. But it was in the

early part, where people were dying, but it wasn't yet the – their dying was not yet the subject.

DG: Right. Because, from my perspective, I think, I really think that there was a lot of emotional, psychological digestion going on; and thinking about how to make this. And that's why, for me, what's always fascinating is precisely this question of form. Is it the biopic about, I don't know, Rock Hudson, whatever; or is it the *Early Frost* film? I think it was a really difficult set of questions that filmmakers were being asked — asking themselves, I should say — about how to make these things.

SS: Because *Longtime Companion*, everybody comes back at the end, remember? They all come back to life.

DG: Well, because it's –

SS: Except that the director died.

DG: Well – before that. Think of *The Boys in the Band*. How all the actors in that film died –

SS: Died.

DG: – from AIDS.

SS: Leonard Frey.

DG: Right. That whole group there, right? That's a crucial film, I think, when we talk about AIDS, because that's this kind of hinge film. It brings

us from the Stonewall moment, and that question about – are we in a closeted life, do we come out, how do we come out; campiness and fun. And then, the guys who are in that film die from AIDS. It's an amazing –

SS: Yeah, so the dying comes first; and then the representation of the dying comes –

DG: I think that trying to figure out how to represent the dying comes about.

SS: So in terms of black gay film, which is your specialty –

DG: Yes.

SS: – where do you see the first representations of AIDS in black gay cinema?

00:35:00 DG: Well, I think that this is the question that Riggs takes up with *Tongues Untied*. Because that film is about the refusal to discuss that question, or that concern. First of all, identify his – what Riggs said about that film: this is a film that is about me being a black gay man, and a black gay man with HIV. Right? So that film, to him, was, as he said, the revolutionary act. Right? Brother to brother, loving each other. Which he took a lot of shit for, because his lover was white, and this kind of thing. And he went through — it's interesting to read the interviews with him subsequent to *Tongues Untied* coming out, because he was asked on several occasions what this film is about. First time: about being

a gay black man. Second time: it's dealing with AIDS, as a gay man. Then, in the third interview that — literally chronologically — he says, it's about being a black gay man with AIDS. It took him this set of — a time frame — to deal with how to explain what he was trying to present in this film — even though he shows it — but to articulate it. Right?

SS: But he contextualizes himself. He has Essex saying that now, we think as we fuck.

DG: Yes.

SS: So he's not the only one.

DG: That whole group of black men that he's with is about that experience. It's a brilliant film. And I think it's one of the most underrated, underestimated films from that period. Whether it's its aesthetic, its editing — everything is just fantastic. And it's probably one of the only films, other than maybe his *Black Is... Black Ain't*, that takes this question right to its heart.

SS: Except for *No Regrets*.

DG: Great film. But I think *Tongues Untied*, for me, is — it's personal, but it's general; about the black community, the gay black community. It's really amazing.

SS: But also, *Tongues Untied* is saying, maybe we're not gonna die. And *No Regrets* is saying, we know we're gonna die.

DG: *Black Is... Black Ain't* is about him dying. It is – in fact, he didn't finish the film, right? His producers had to finish the editing. He gave them instructions, knowing he was gonna die. So we're watching him die in the film. As he's reflecting, as he's projecting about what it means to be black, what it means to be gay — all these sorts — and to be dying with AIDS. Again, another masterwork, I think, in terms of that reflection on death. And I think why the film is so important is precisely because it took that amount of time — was it '94, this comes out? — for him, dying from AIDS, to reflect; to finally see what we see there.

I really think that that's the reason, as I see it — this gap of time.

SS: It was interesting, when ACT UP is formed, in '87, ACT UP does show up, but in these very diluted ways. Like, in *Longtime Companion*, there's a benefit for ACT UP. But ACT UP is like a person in a T-shirt. It's in the most benign, wimpy thing.

DG: Well, think about it. It's funny. Because, as you were saying, I immediately think about *Menace II Society*.

SS: What's *Menace* – oh.

DG: The black film, in South Central; and you've got these black kids that are caught in South Central, and they end up getting — the protagonist gets killed in the end. But throughout the film — the film's about religion, right; the different forms of religion that one could turn to, but none of them are successful, and they're all a failure.

But what religion becomes is fashion. Right? It becomes the crucifixes they wear; it becomes the paintings on their wall; it becomes a fad for the one kid to join. His father encourages him to become a Muslim, and all this stuff. It's fashion. And I think, for many people, ACT UP was a safe way to be political — for some — because it could be fashion. Remember, there was a dress code that happened: the bomber jackets and the —

SS: Right. But film could never actually address that, though.

DG: Well, but then Jarman did, right? *Edward II*. They come in, it becomes part of the event. Speaking of death — *Blue* is the perfect — there's almost perfect cinema. The image is gone, and it's only the voice, the thinking
00:40:00 through, the fading away — of the body, of that cinematic experience. A certain end of cinema. Because of AIDS. Right?

So, I guess what's brilliant about that film, and for me — the Riggses and films of that kind; again, it's the form issue. Where, if we think of

Longtime Companion, for me — because we can kind of insert ACT UP as an image, and see the T-shirt, or a benefit — great, fine. But ACT UP, for me, what ACT UP did, in terms of its generative movement, was to get filmmakers — like the Jarmans and the Riggsses — to think about, how do I express this, how do I show it, without just sentimentalizing, and turning it into a story? Because it's not as simple as a story. There's no story here, right, that could be told so simply.

That, to me, is what ACT UP was all about. It's just — shaking it, moving it, making us rethink who we were as people, as we are as a group of people, and the politics of that people.

SS: So ACT UP has no traditional narrative structure. When you try to oppose that, right —

DG: Impossible.

SS: — then the story gets — so I just want to ask you one more think about black gay film, and then we'll get back to ACT UP. So before *Tongues Untied*, and except for the fact that so many people who appear in *Paris is Burning* died of AIDS, although it's not acknowledged in the film —

DG: And that's later too.

SS: — is there any other representation of black gay AIDS before *Tongues Untied*?

DG: In film. Nothing I can think of offhand. Can you think of something, does anything enter your mind? I'm looking to Jim over there.

JH: Right, okay. I'm wondering – it wouldn't be a full-length; it would be –

SS: because I'm thinking –

JH: It would be "This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement" or —

DG: Oh, the –

JH: You know, Isaac [Julien]

DG: I, uh – right, but that's –

JH: But when does that come? I don't remember the date of that.

DG: That's all in the same time, isn't it? Isn't, I mean, Julien's film is part of the same time as *Tongues*. Again, this is like this early-'90s stuff.

SS: Because *Looking for Langston* does not have AIDS content, right?

DG: No, again, interestingly, *Looking for Langston* is not dissimilar, in my mind, to *Swoon*. Where the question is about representation. However, it's kind of, *Looking for Langston* is dealing with the question of death, and the angels and all this kind of thing.

SS: Right, right, right.

DG: So you've go this, and if you will –

SS: It's metaphoric.

DG: – metaphoric, for situation. I'm just thinking, in my class here – when I show these films. I can't think of anything offhand.

SS: Okay.

DG: Yes. I think that's Riggs's point, though, in fact, is that no one has said this, no one has shown this issue.

SS: Didn't Isaac Jackson make something really early? Is that his name?

JH: Yes.

DG: When is the brother – the brother, brother – what's his name? Oh my gosh, I forget his name. The Richard Bruce Nugent – film. Again, it's metaphoric, in some ways, right?

SS: But that's so much later.

JH: Yes.

DG: Yes, it's later, right?

JH: Rodney's –

DG: Rodney Evans's films.

JH: Yes, that's –

SS: A whole other generation.

DG: It's all like the – the guy that made – oh, god, my brain – the *Boys in the Band* documentary, that links *Boys in the Band* to ACT UP. That's made, what, four years ago, five years ago. But, and he's a young black, Cray–, uh, uh – Crayton Robey. He makes the film, as a young gay black man, and he, it's one of the few films that concentrate on the black figure in *The Boys in the Band*. But he makes it directly for him, as a young black filmmaker, in relationship to what ACT UP does for him.

Again, I guess I just keep coming back, and I think about these films; it took a long time to reflect.

JH: These are all later, like Stephen Winter's *Chocolate Babies* which is '96.

DG: Oh, god, that's right, that film, oh, Jesus.

JH: And his short *Here be Dragons*, which is two years earlier and Lourdes Portillo's film of Stephen Corbin.

DG: Oh, god.

JH: Steven Corbin.

SS: Steven Corbin, the novelist?

JH: The poet. He reads –

DG: I don't remember this film.

00:45:00

JH: – It's about "My feet go numb." It's a poem.

SS: Oh, okay.

DG: What year is that, do you know?

JH: No, but it's probably '90 or '92. [1996]

DG: Yes. I have a –

JH: I don't think there is anything.

DG: Yes, I really think that – it was just, it was almost impossible to make them, I'm guessing.

SS: Right. Okay. Well then, let's go back to – so before you got involved with ACT UP, were you involved in any other kind of, had you ever been in a political movement before?

DG: No. ACT UP, for me, was probably one of the first groups, organizations, in which I actively went to things. Which is to say, to go into those rooms, to go to a protest, to be there. And I'll admit – look, I live with someone who was totally central and immersed in this.

SS: For the record, Michelangelo Signorile.

DG: Michelangelo Signorile, right?

SS: Mr. ACT UP.

DG: Mr. ACT UP. So always feel like I was kind of – I looked in more than I was – when I think about what he did, I'm more about that who went

there and held the signs; it would be part of that, but it was not the same thing. ACT UP, for me, I think, stimulated me in a very different way than it, say, stimulated him. It made me realize — I guess as I'm talking to you, it's interesting how this all becomes of a piece, in a way. When I think about my attachment, or my love for, say, a Fassbinder film, and the question of class; not sure what that all meant. But then — I think ACT UP made me, directed me, to rethink about what it meant to be a white gay guy, coming from a middle-class family, and what my privilege was. I really hadn't thought about that before. ACT UP really made me think about that. It made me think about my friendship with my liberal white gay friends as well, who were really pissed off when ACT UP would shut down Grand Central — like, oh my god, why are they doing this?

ACT UP put me in the situation of having to articulate why things were important about being gay, about what AIDS was doing to the gay community. It was important for me in that way. It also was important because it directed me toward graduate school. There's no question in my mind. Because I found myself often in situations unable to articulate the complexities of what was happening. And I think now, as we sit here and talk about it, we can talk about the, almost the impossibility to put this into a narrative. At the same time, ACT UP was about articulating a moment — because we had to. The one thing I learned

in graduate school is when someone said, "How do you answer this?" And they said, "It depends who I'm talking to. And that was really important for me.

When I was working in advertising, with all these people who thought they were really cool and groovy, and they would say, "Roland Barthes," I didn't know what they were talking about. I needed to respond to that. I needed to be in a position where I could work my brain critically, and address what I was seeing as potentially something that could be quite dangerous; that people just let things go by. People's lives were at stake. And – "I'm sorry Grand Central was so dumb. You know, I'm sorry that your dad missed the train home."

SS: Well, tell us about when you first came to ACT UP. How did you get plugged in? What did you do, or who did you hang with?

DG: Who did I hang with. I hung with –

SS: What actions did you work on –

DG: People I was dating at the time.

Well, the actions I went to; I would be down at the City Hall protests. I was definitely at the Church protest that day, in that crowd.

SS: Now were you and Mike together?

DG: No. Michael and I get together much later.

SS: Because I remember Mike in the church. He was wearing a full-length fur coat, and he was carrying a shopping bag. And I think he had a bouffant.

DG: He must have just got off the plane from the Jean Paul Gautier award contest in Paris. You know he won a look-alike contest, right?

SS: So what did you do at the Church action?

00:50:00 DG: I was there. I remember the crowd. In all of these protests, where you would be pushed in, right? And it reminded me, — oh, correct myself — I did go to anti-nuke marches. And the similarity — I remember marching down Broadway for the anti-nuke things — that energy, right? When you're around — whether it's the Church protest, or down at City Hall; nothing like it. That feeling of, wow, we're on the same page, and we have the same emotion, the same anger, right now; I am with a friend of mine who is really sick, and I am sad.

That was the amazing thing about ACT UP. That it was sadness, anger, disorientation, in many ways; yet everyone could come together, and just put that together, and let people know we were angry, and we're gonna make a change on something. Right? So, that was what drew me to it.

SS: Did you work on any committees?

DG: No. I didn't do any of that until I went to Buffalo, and I was with the Western New York group. Before I went to graduate school, I was not in the best position to articulate or state my place in all of this. I really think that my New York ACT UP experience was being in it; feeling it; taking that when I went to graduate school to articulate. So in Buffalo, and in L.A. even — my involvement with queer stuff and film is when I was able to participate in that way.

SS: So what did they do in Western New York ACT UP?

DG: Well, Western New York, I thought, was terrific, at that time; the English Department in particular. In '91 to '93, I did my masters, and it was a joint degree between English literature and media studies. So you had this really great group of scholars in English. They were politically active in different ways. Like Andrew Hewitt in comp lit, and then Bruce Jackson in English; Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits. I took Paul Sharits's first driver's test. That's another story; that's crazy.

And then, the students, the graduate students. Even though I was doing my master's then, I befriended a number of the doctoral students in English, who were very much involved with Operation Rescue. And the greatest thing, for me, was *that* involvement. That's when I felt, okay, I could coordinate — which I did. A semester, two semesters' worth, I think, of queer theory seminar things

right on the campus, which brought together those people. At the same time, those were linked to the meetings we had at Hallwalls [Contemporary Arts Center] and different places about how to coordinate Operation Rescue protests. And so, just being there; there's nothing like ushering a woman into a clinic, to protect her from those creeps out there from Operation Rescue. It's one of the greatest moments. I just can't tell you.

SS: That's interesting, because ACT UP New York also was very involved with abortion rights.

DG: Um hm.

SS: And it seems like that was the one non-AIDS issue that all of these groups just took on, without any debate, interestingly. I mean, Stop the Church was a coalition, right, with abortion-rights groups.

DG: Yes.

SS: Now what about people with AIDS in your personal life? Were you involved with any kind of care groups, or anything like that?

DG: I did, in different ways, with my partner at the time. Because he — I basically would go where he wanted to go. And he was in constant flux. So I did. I remember, it started with doctor visits; also, he was in denial. He said, "This is so funny — I'm a top." I was like, "Craig, why are you saying this? You

are HIV-positive, we need to deal with this. Let's not try to figure out if you're a top or a bottom — it doesn't matter.”

So there was the psychological element there, of dealing with therapists – finding money at the time, to go to a therapist; helping him cope with that. So we would go to therapy together — because it put a strain on the relationship, obviously, too. Then, what drug protocol. So we investigated that. And then he really got invested in macrobiotics for awhile, so we went to a lot of the AIDS macrobiotics groups that were happening. And – I'm trying to
00:55:00 remember if some of those met at the Center or not? There were different places we met with that, where you realized that he needed drugs, because macrobiotics was not really gonna help him out, and all that brown rice wasn't doing much. He went through the AZT treatments — we went through all these different processes. So my involvement was very personal, in terms of working with him. Learning experience – I was with this guy for four years. And he had done porn; he was a hustler; he was all of these things. And it got to the point, as I mentioned, when he stressed out so much that we had to leave the city. He just couldn't bear living here anymore. And so that's when I went to Buffalo to do my master's, and where we confronted our first homophobia, trying to get an apartment together — which was kinda crazy.

And he went through some painful stuff there, where he fell back into hustling; all these things were going on, that were really precarious for him. But that's when I, while he was going through that, found myself — because of the university, SUNY Buffalo — directly involved with Western New York ACT UP and Operation Rescue stuff.

It's a lot of different threads, isn't it, that brings us into these different things?

SS: What was the difference between a very small regional ACT UP and ACT UP New York? What were some key differences?

DG: Ego. I felt I could get involved. But I think a lot of that had to do with, obviously, me becoming more confident in myself, too — being in graduate school. And I think — heh — you know — I taught in New Zealand for a couple years, and New Zealand and Buffalo remind me kind of of similar dynamics; because they're two places that are always looking over their shoulder to New York or the U.S., in some way, to say, "Are we doing it right? Are we doing it right?" So I was with people that were already not sure of their confidence in the world.

So, we had these kind of "scared little queer people" that got together — that got their strength from being together. Straight people, gay people — the whole realm. And there were small, cool, punk bars where we

could to together and hang out, and – we were together a lot. New York – I was never afraid of New York — the anonymity and all that kind of stuff. It's just that ACT UP — there were the stars that were really taking shape, right away. You know? And we have the hagiographies now, that are falling into place. Whatever. But then, they were already assuming their place on the dais. So, I didn't see a place, in some way, where I could kind of jump in. I didn't have that personality at the time, either, to do that. So ACT UP Western New York – much different, and more inviting, I guess. Which allowed me to what I did.

SS: And when you went to L.A., were you outside of the AIDS world at that time?

DG: Well, at that point – when I went to L.A., which is '93 — that's the year, or '95. That's when [Douglas] Crimp was there. He was teaching some courses in art history. And I was hanging out with him for a bit, and that's where I met Ron Athey, through my friend Marc Siegel; Marc's a terrific scholar and performance artist, and dealt quite a bit with AIDS, and his partner. That was more, I think at that time ACT UP was kind of – again, because L.A.'s so spread out – I think ACT UP was more spread out. But there were difference scenes — in Silverlake, or in Hollywood — that the groups would come together. It was more of a performance, I think, in some way, right? It wasn't the same; it

definitely wasn't the same. It's not that things weren't going on — I think the art galleries there were doing quite a bit — but it wasn't as proactive, I guess? Maybe because I was just immersed in studies at the time, too, but it didn't seem the same.

SS: So then what year did you come back to New York?

DG: So, I finished my course work in '95, and I met Michael when I came here to give a talk at the Whitney. There was a conference going on – my first paper on Vincente Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*; Homophobia and Hollywood, right? And the closet. And I was feeling pretty hot and cool at the time. And I was at Food Bar – you remember Food Bar?

SS: Sure.

DG: I met Michael at the bar. We chatted, and I think we hung out
01:00:00 for that weekend. I went back to L.A. He came to L.A. because he had a book out, I think – was it *Outing Yourself*? Yes, *Outing Yourself*, at the time. And so he came to L.A. for a book-signing thing, we hung out for the weekend, and that's when we decided that I think I'll come back to New York, and I'll write my dissertation.

So I came back to New York, and I lived on 23rd and 7th with a friend of mine, and then a few months later, we moved in together on 16th and

Third. And I wrote my dissertation. He wrote *Life Outside*. And then we just— things have kept going.

And he was –

SS: He was far out of ACT UP by that point.

DG: Yes. Well, at that point, then, when I got back, he – this was just starting when I was leaving L.A. — was the Sex Panic, with [Michael] Warner and [Douglas] Crimp. But then that divide was taking place.

SS: Right.

DG: I remember, at one point – I remember it got so bad that he came home one time, and someone had smeared dog shit all over his backpack. And he didn't even know it. He came in, and I said, "What the hell is that?" It was an incredible hostility — and the antagonisms that were happening tore — at the time — apart even my friendships with people I knew in L.A. — because they were either close to Crimp, and all that kind of thing. I think that's healed by this point, but it was very tense. Because that was the GMHC parties that were going on, and all the drugs that were being used. So that's what *Life Outside* was all about. Of course, [Gabriel] Rotello's book had come out. And Michael and I were constantly arguing over all that stuff. It was pretty tense. We knew who was right, but just for the record...

SS: Now history –

DG: Just for the record –

SS: – has proved you right; history proved you right.

DG: – As it always does.

SS: I only have one last question. Is there anything else that you think we should be talking about?

DG: Well, as you talk about – going back to film. I think it's a really important part of the AIDS movement, just as all of the art movements were. And what's great now is that many students are doing dissertations on ACT UP; art and ACT UP. I'm on a dissertation committee now. And even though students don't know who ACT UP is, at least I'm running courses, people are running courses where they are having to learn about ACT UP.

I'm fascinated by — and you know I'm a great champion of *United in Anger* — I'm fascinated by the fallout around the films that's happened since these have come out. The other film, that David France made, and –

SS: We don't mention that.

DG: – Yes, because I can't remember the name of it. But there was another film, too. Not only with the films, but maybe because of Facebook and because of these social-media things, where this thing about a certain hagiography

does keep going. Where what gets lost in the figures, the “stars,” is this energy, that I still believe is there — political energy — that ACT UP was about. I think it allows a younger generation — I’m thinking about Crayton Robey, and what it’s done for him, and thinking about who he is as a young gay black man. It’s still there.

So it’s unfortunate, I think, that some people decide that they need to have their persona as a star, they need to package themselves and sell themselves, and all this kind of thing; when, in fact, I think their energies would be better placed if they could use it in a way to engage this new generation of students — of kids.

SS: Well, there’s gonna be more. I mean, I just blurbed Martin Duberman’s new book; which is a dual biography of Essex Hemphill and Michael Callen.

DG: He did do that. Great.

SS: And it’s an early history of AIDS, in which ACT UP is completely trashed. I mean, he just trashes ACT UP – because it’s all through Michael Callen’s point of view. And it’s really interesting. And I’m like, great that he’s doing this, because more and more and more and more work is gonna be done; and a broader, broader picture is gonna be painted.

DG: Uh huh.

SS: I mean, also the people he trashes are the people that I feel similarly about –

DG: But you see, with Duberman — see, what's important for Duberman — and remember his generation, too — and that aligns; right through that Fassbinder-Pasolini stuff, there is class. Right? And I think as we've maybe even talked about briefly, is that this is perhaps a shift that's happening now — now that we've got gay marriage and we've got gays in the military, and whatever — that there can be a concentration, a question, a discussion again, about class.

01:05:00 And that's why I was kind of sad to see Queers for Economic Justice closing down. Just because at least that discussion was there — people were engaged with this issue. And I think that that is important.

SS: Well, Duberman uses Hemphill's biography to really skewer the racism of the early AIDS movement, which is so necessary.

DG: Absolutely. And you know who also should be brought into this discussion, and just mentioned here, is Gloria Anzaldúa. Not only was she dealing with the question of race and queer identity, but she was thinking that — and if one reads *Borderlands* carefully — about using the cinema as a way to

express those issues of identity. She's such an important figure. And I think that we — at our peril — neglect her.

I just want to ask you one other thing. You had mentioned awhile ago, on Facebook somewhere, you were at a talk, on Sonnabend —

SS: Oh yeah.

DG: — Yes. I was just curious, the upshot of that. Because there, he's basically saying, "You think you were important, but you weren't."

SS: Well, his —

DG: Not you personally, but the movement.

SS: No. His argument was that — this was at South Bank, in London, and I was on a panel with Simon Watney.

DG: Yes.

SS: And Sonnabend came. And his argument was, how do you know for a fact —

DG: Right, the fact.

SS: — that the reason that industry and government changed is because of the activists? And to me, there's all this evidence. Because Jim Eigo designs a fast track, and next think you know, you have it. Right? There's a demonstration, and then it exists. So I can see that activists

designed things that Pharma and the government then implemented. But he said that I can't prove that.

DG: Well, let me bring cinema into this, again. Because, remember — and less so with Robert Mapplethorpe, but with Marlon Riggs, because of *Tongues Untied* — that went right to Congress, that forced Congress to address the arts funding in this country; it forced, into a public discussion, how we think about the question of gay representation, gay culture, gay art, through the government; and it changed things — whether for good or for bad — there were changes made, there's a direct link. I mean, he was trotting out pictures of Riggs and Mapplethorpe. So –

SS: And David Wojnarowicz and Nan Goldin.

DG: Absolutely.

SS: So, the final question. So, since our focus is ACT UP: looking back, what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you feel was its biggest disappointment?

DG: I would say its greatest achievement was making the world aware of AIDS. Absolutely — and through all its different protests, media, all of that. Right? That is its key achievement.

Its greatest disappointment, for me: eh, you know how it is with any of these things. Culture-industry absorption, as we just mentioned. I just find

it disheartening, some of the star-gazing that goes with it. The money thing; it becomes something to be sold, rather than a point of critical engagement and action in the world.

SS: But it's not over yet. The representation – ACT UP is over, but the representation isn't over.

DG: Never. And again, I think your film goes to great lengths for that — for keeping that in play. And my proof of that is seeing my undergraduate students respond to it, being blown away by the fact that this ever happened in the world.

SS: Right.

DG: So that's important.

SS: Thank you, David.

DG: Thank you all.

SS: Are we off?

JW: I'm off.