

# **A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Jeff Griglak**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Jeffrey Griglak  
July 19, 2012

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

JEFFREY GRIGLAK: Jeff Griglak, sixty-one. Today is July 19<sup>th</sup>, yes, 2012, and we are in my apartment in the East Village.

**SS: In fact, one of the historic ACT UP blocks, Seventh Street.**

JG: Yes.

**SS: Can you tell us who else from ACT UP used to live on this block?**

JG: Oh, absolutely. And I didn't know this when I moved here. It wasn't until afterwards that I started running into these people. Peter Staley lived on this block. David Robinson lived on this block. I don't remember the name; there's a woman in the next building who was in ACT UP, and she was actually really prominent in ACT UP. I haven't seen her in a few years, but she was on this block. Then, of course, me.

**SS: And Ellen Spiro.**

JG: And Ellen Spiro. Right. Ellen Spiro lived in this building.

**SS: That's right. This is like the epicenter.**

JG: Yes, evidently for— [laughter]

**SS: So where were you born? Where did you grow up?**

JG: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania in a little rural town called Perryopolis.

**SS: Do you come from a mining family?**

JG: I don't, but it definitely was a big mining area, mining coal mines, and steel mills. My parents were both schoolteachers.

**SS: Were they from there originally?**

JG: They were.

**SS: So that was home.**

JG: Absolutely.

**SS: Both sides.**

JG: Yes.

**SS: All your relatives.**

JG: Yes. Very small community, and it was the type of town where you were born there, you grew up there, and you died there. People really didn't leave.

**SS: So when did you decide that you had to leave?**

JG: Well, I was in the arts, and there wasn't a lot of opportunity. It really was mining and farms. My dad was a music teacher, so that was the art influence there, and I knew in high school that I was going to have to leave, that I was not meant for that area.

**SS: So how did you first express yourself as an artist? What were you a performer?**

JG: Oh, lord.

**SS: Was it earlier than high school?**

JG: Yes. In fact, my parents used to call me P.T. Barnum when I was a little kid, because I was always putting shows together. I would get all the girls in the neighborhood together and do a baton fest. It was my first big performance. So, yes.

**SS: Were you a twirler as well?**

JG: I was a good twirler, absolutely, yes. I was fascinated with that.

**SS: Did you get mocked for that by other kids?**

JG: You know, I've either blocked it out or I don't remember. I was so serious about it. I don't remember being mocked for it. I felt that it maybe was not appropriate in that arena. Fortunately, though, I also was good at sports, so I could kind of balance the two. People just looked at me like I was weird.

**SS: So sports made up for the twirling.**

JG: It did. At least I thought it did.

**SS: So you're born just right after World War II, is that right?**

JG: 1951, so a little bit later.

**SS: A bit later and sort of the McCarthy era is evolving. So when did you start to think about the world as a political entity? I don't know if you guys had a television at home.**

JG: We did, and I was not political at all when I was young. Really, it was all about the arts for me. I didn't become political until ACT UP.

**SS: So how did you get information about what was going on in the arts, or what did you do? Did you go to the movies a lot?**

00:05:00 JG: No, we didn't really have the money for movies, but my sisters were also musicians. I was basically a musician. That was really what my focus was when I was young, with my dad being a music teacher. So we did get private lessons, and at that time the school system still offered music and band, so I had a little bit of it in school. That's sort of where I was nurtured in the arts.

Then when I was in high school, I became a member of the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony, so that was like a great—that was really a cool thing because I was with all these kids from the city, playing in an orchestra. That was like the big time.

**SS: And when did you start to realize that you were gay? Was that in high school or earlier?**

JG: You know, I knew I was different, but I didn't know it was gay. But I knew I was different from when I came out of the womb. I used to say—and my family, they laugh about it now—“When I grow up, I want to be a girl.” That's what I—you know. And I didn't understand why everybody didn't—I always liked boys. I thought everybody likes boys.

**SS: Was that a problem at all? Did it become a problem?**

JG: You know, it was never a problem. The only place it became a problem was my own questioning of it.

**SS: Well, good. So when did you leave Pittsburgh?**

JG: Actually, I didn't leave Pittsburgh until I went—it was after college. I went to Pitt, I did my undergraduate work and a year of graduate work in Pittsburgh. So I was already, like, twenty-two.

**SS: Were you already having gay sex and out in some way or –**

JG: I wasn't. I wasn't.

**SS: At twenty-two. It was private, some—**

JG: Yes. You know, I'm sure it would have been very different if it were now, but the time was such that people just didn't really talk about it. It was really a secretive thing. It was bizarre.

**SS: Were you aware of any kind of gay world in Pittsburgh?**

JG: I was aware of it, but I wasn't involved in it at all. Again, at that time I think all my focus was about what I was doing in school. Whether by choice or because I felt that I had to, it really was—

**SS: And your graduate work was in music?**

JG: Yes.

**SS: So when you left at twenty-two, where did you go?**

JG: I went up to Yale, actually, for a semester. There was a gentleman, Robert Bloom, who was this phenomenal oboist—that was my instrument, oboe—who I wanted to study with. My teacher at Carnegie had studied with him, and he only took a very few people because he was older at this point. So I auditioned for him, and he agreed to take me on as a student.

So I moved to New Haven and spent—I was going to spend a year or two years there, but it turned out after a semester, he was taking a year's sabbatical and he was leaving town. But it got me out of Pittsburgh, got me on the East Coast, and brought me to New York. So I spent about one semester, about four or five months, in New Haven.

Then my older sister was living in New York at the time, and I decided I was going to come down and visit her and her husband, so I came down to New York. And I was always interested in theater and had participated in theater to varying degrees. When I did my graduate at Carnegie Mellon, they had a really strong theater department, and so I did some theater there, and I did some community theater. So when I came to New York to visit my sister, I thought, "I'm going to the theater. I'm going to audition

for the theater. I'm here. It's here. It's the heyday of musical theater." And I auditioned for a touring company of *Shenandoah* and was cast in it.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

JG: So I went on the road.

**SS: What year was this?**

JG: This would have been—let's see. I think, '75, around '75.

**SS: And you were twenty-four. How did you miss the draft, by the way?**

JG: I had a heart murmur and a really high number, so it was not meant to be.

**SS: Good. So you had a tour with *Shenandoah*, and I assume that somewhere along that line you came out in the context of –**

JG: Yes, totally, in like a big way. Yes, that was my coming-out party.

**SS: So what's it like being a gay man and touring in a musical? I guess gay men of every city are coming to see the show, right?**

00:10:00

JG: Yes. What could I say? It was fabulous.

**SS: Yes?**

JG: Yes. It was great. It was a wonderful time, good friends, lots of experiences, just a lot of fun, and really for the first time in my life starting to understand who I was, that there were other people like me, who were very talented and very smart and that there was something here and there's something — it was the first time I really looked at myself. It was a great opportunity to do that.

**SS: So then you came back and decided to stay in New York?**

JG: Yes, yes. Actually, I stayed in theater. I kept working in theater for probably the next about fifteen years.

**SS: So in the chorus or as a dancer or—**

JG: I started off in the chorus, but I always wanted to do lead roles. And I studied. I would take, like, three dance classes and an acrobatic class a day when I first got here, because it was the heyday of the musical, and you had to be what they called the triple threat – actor, singer, dancer. I could already sing, having had a background in music, so I was a hit in that respect. I was theatrical just by nature, so I had something going there. The dance I didn't have but, like I said, I really hit that hard, and I started out doing chorus work, but eventually I did a lot of leads. The last thing that I did was a touring company of *The Rocky Horror Show*, and I did Frank-N-Furter in it.

**SS: Oh, wow. What other parts did you have?**

JG: Oh, my god, it's so funny you would ask, because before this interview, this job interview I was telling you about that I had this morning, I was trying to think of all the musicals that I did, and I did, like, every musical ever written. I did Perchik in *Shenandoah*. Not *Shenandoah*, excuse me. Perchik in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I did *Chicago*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *My Fair Lady*, *Kismet*, *Little Mary Sunshine*, *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. You name the musical, I did it.

**JW: Bye, Bye, Birdie?**

JG: *Bye, Bye, Birdie*. I did Alfred in *Bye, Bye, Birdie*, so that was a lead.

**SS: This was all through the seventies and eighties?**

JG: Yes.

**SS: So can you just tell us how did gay world inside the theater transform in that time? I mean, were people starting to come out, or was it really diverse, divorced from gay politics?**

JG: Oh, totally, totally divorced from gay politics. Were people coming out? You know, “coming out” has such a different connotation now than it did then. No, people were very secretive in the industry. In private and in small cliques, it was a really different story. I remember when I did a tour of *West Side Story*, and my future partner at that time, Lee Raines, was in the company, and he’s gay, of course, and then our other roommate was gay, and we would stay up all night long, hootin’ and hollerin’ and listening to music and just laughing and having a great time. Would we do that in public? Well, probably not. Certainly not to the degree that we did.

Another interesting thing—and I’m going to tie this in to somebody who was very prominent at the beginning of the AIDS crisis, and that was Mark Fotopoulos. Mark was in theater, and when I first met Mark, he would shake your hand and keep you at a distance. So when I saw Mark a few years later when he was going around with the sign, “Person with AIDS, three years, two months. No thanks to you, Mr. Reagan,” and he came up to me and gave me this big hug, suddenly it was a whole different thing. But the Mark that I described initially was really kind of what the feeling was in the industry when I first started.

00:15:00

**SS: Could a person be out and about in the gay world and still be in the closet, or once they went out in the gay world, was that out?**

JG: No, you could be out and about in the gay world and still be in the closet.

**SS: They were totally separate.**

JG: Yes, yes.

**SS: Did you like to go out? Like where did you like to go?**

JG: In New York?

**SS: Yes.**

JG: The Underground. Do you remember the Underground? The Underground was a—this was tea dance, right, on Sunday. It was at the corner of Union Square, and I would go there with friends, like, three o'clock, four o'clock on a Sunday, and, of course, we would come out twelve hours later. We just spent twelve hours partying, dancing, being crazy.

**SS: So when did you first become aware of AIDS?**

JG: I was working. I'm trying to think. No, I know when it was. I had a friend, who eventually passed away from AIDS, who was cleaning the apartment of this Hollywood film director. He had an apartment here in New York on Fifth Avenue. It was this penthouse, and it was like a house in the country on top of a building. You would go into this apartment, this place, and you wouldn't know you were in New York City. It was extraordinary. And one day—the owner was rarely in town, so my friend Danny was there cleaning, and he invited some of us over, some friends, three or four of his friends over. We were going to smoke a little pot. We were going to, you know, just have a good time.

And one of the friends, his name was Marvin Feldman, and, actually, Marvin was a really good friend of Cleve Jones, and I think the first panel for the quilt was for Marvin Feldman. Marvin came over, and he had this article about this gay

cancer, and I remember him talking about it and passing it around, and we all looked at it. I also remember at the end he asked if anybody wanted the article, or if anybody wanted to take it, and nobody took it. And that was sort of the first inkling of it.

Then I was working at American Ballet Theatre part-time at that time, and suddenly people started getting sick, or a dancer would come in with KS lesions or something, and it's kind of even hard to think about.

**SS: What were your thoughts at the time?**

JG: Oh, I don't know, just didn't know. Lost. Scared. I just didn't know what end was up, because also it pretty much was at that point in the gay community and we were still fighting our own fight in terms of being recognized, being accepted. So to have this added to that mix was no small issue.

**SS: When did it come very close to you? Marvin died in '86, right?**

JG: Yes, Marvin was early, really right away. Just so many, so many people.

**SS: So how did you first step into the fray? Were you in a support group? Were you a buddy? Or did you go right to ACT UP? I mean, what was your first—**

JG: I went right to ACT UP, and it was completely by chance that it happened. Lee and I were together at that time, and he had gone over to the Community Center for—I think it was a comic class or something, and the class was just a nightmare, and he left and somehow wandered into the ACT UP meeting and came home and he told me about it.

00:20:00

Then the next week we went together, and then he went out of town to do something, and I went back the following week and ended up going to a demonstration around Columbia University. I don't even remember what the demonstration was, and I've looked at the timeline and I don't see it. But we blocked traffic, we sat in the streets, and it was my first arrest. I was arrested, like, two weeks after going to ACT UP. I had no training at that point or anything, but there was—

**SS: You hadn't been to a demonstration before?**

JG: No, no.

**SS: So why do you think that happened?**

JG: Well, the energy and the intelligence, the incredible intelligence in that organization was overwhelming and inspiring, and I just had to be a part of it. I knew it was right. Yes.

**SS: You were just sitting there getting arrested and then being put in a paddy wagon and all of that. You felt okay with it?**

JG: I felt proud, yes. Yes, absolutely.

**SS: So how did you get into the organization? Did you join a committee?**

JG: Oh, yeah. I threw myself in, hook, line, and sinker, man. I did everything I could. I was actually the head of the Speakers Bureau for a while, which I don't think lasted a long time. Basically, I remember it was me and Brent Nicholson Earle. Do you remember Brent?

**SS: Sure.**

JG: We would go and I remember we would get on the Long Island Railroad and go out to some corporation and talk to these people and community, anybody that would listen to us, we would go. So I did that. I was also on the Outreach Committee, which was phenomenal.

**SS: So how did that operate? What would you do? What was outreach for ACT UP?**

JG: Really it was we organized all the wheat pasting. I did more wheat pasting and more stenciling, more stickering, and loved every minute of it.

**SS: You would just walk out with a bucket of wheat paste and a brush?**

JG: Yes, and it got to the point where we would go out like three, four nights a week, but we would meet. I was working at American Ballet Theatre, and American Ballet Theatre was very gay-friendly. In fact, we used to hold our meetings in American Ballet Theatre.

Also, I just thought of something. Michael Signorile was head of media at that point, and he needed materials for press kits. I was the office manager at American Ballet Theatre, so I was supplying ACT UP with folders and all this stuff for their press kits. So it almost became like a satellite of ACT UP at American Ballet Theatre, because Outreach would meet there, I think on Wednesday nights, and we would be Xeroxing there. ACT UP would be coming over getting supplies for the press kits. I actually—this would never happen nowadays, but I actually talked the general manager into letting us have a fundraiser there. We did—I think it might have been the first fundraiser or Art—

**SS: The Art Auction?**

JG: —the Art Auction, yeah, at 890 Broadway.

**SS: Now, were any dancers joining ACT UP, by the way, from American Ballet Theatre?**

JG: Yeah, there were a couple that came through. They were all definitely very supportive of it. They had a really busy schedule. They were basically a touring company. But I remember seeing dancers come to ACT UP. Like I said, they were heavily scheduled, whereas me and Lee, we were in theater, so our schedules were pretty much our own. If we were working, that was one thing, but if we weren't, we were in the city taking classes, so we would do everything we could.

**SS: Because there was a real split in the dance world, right? There were people like Arnie Zane, who was just like, "I have AIDS," and then there was this heavy closeted, I assume, much more ballet?**

JG: Yeah.

**SS: And were there any ballet dancers who came out as having AIDS, like, well-known dancers at the time, or was it all hidden?**

JG: I'm trying to—well, Nureyev.

**SS: Was he open about having AIDS?**

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JG: I'm not sure when that came out. I don't know if it came out before—I think it did, though, before he passed away. But, no, it wouldn't be like today if someone had AIDS. Again, people were still very cautious regarding their career, because they thought that it would impact on that.

**SS: Also ballet had such a strange idea about masculinity, right?**

**Very, very, very effeminate men partnering women with almost no real sexuality between them. It was kind of a pretense, right, of heterosexual partnering?**

JG: Yeah.

**SS: So the closet was quite important in that delusion in some ways.**

JG: Oh, yeah. I mean, I remember—I certainly won't mention any names, but I remember soloists with the company who were in relationships with ballerinas, and I saw one of them. I ran into him in a back room. So it was—

**SS: Right. So let's get back to outreach. Did you guys ever get caught?**

JG: We did.

**SS: Wheat pasting?**

JG: Actually, I have a really funny story about this. One night, I remember, it was me and three or four other guys from ACT UP, who, we were wheat pasting in the West Village along Seventh Avenue, and this group of guys came by and they started giving us a hard time and they were serious about it. And we were all like—we were all—these were actors, dancers. We weren't fighters at all, right? We were out there doing our job for ACT UP, but we were not about to get into any kind of fistfight.

Well, don't you know, just as this was happening, Maria Maggenti and Heidi Dorow came by with some of their friends, and they realized what was going on, and *they* ended up getting in a fight with these guys. They protected us. It was like—it was the best thing. I'll never forget that.

**SS: I can just picture it.**

JG: They were not—you know.

**SS: Right. That's great.**

JG: Yeah, it was fabulous.

**SS: So what was it like coming in as a couple to ACT UP?**

JG: Were there a lot of couples?

**SS: Yes.**

JG: I don't remember a lot of couples. I remember one other couple, and I forget their names. It was interesting because ACT UP was just such a stimulating environment. First of all, there were so many beautiful, beautiful people there, and then so many intelligent people there. What's not to like? So you're always looking and being enticed by something.

We had a lot of good friends in ACT UP. We made a lot of really close friends, and, fortunately, we were in ACT UP when we were tested, because ACT UP became a huge support group for us. Lee and I had been together at that point, I don't know, I want to say like maybe eight years, nine years, and we went through should we get tested, should we not get tested, and we finally decided we were going to do it. Lee came back positive. I came back negative. This is after eight, nine years together. We, you know, did all the same things. There was absolutely no explanation for it, no explanation for it. And the people in ACT UP were just so great. Lee really at that point—well, no, we both really needed it. We really needed that support, that understanding that the people in ACT UP gave us.

I remember we got our—or I should say Lee—no, we got our test results back together. We got them the night before the City Hall demonstration. And I

remember Lee going, “I don’t know if I should go to the demonstration. What if I get hit? What if I bleed or something?”

00:30:00

And I remember he called Patrick Moore, who’s a dear friend, and Patrick Moore said to him, he said, “You know, it’s not going to change anything, whether you go or whether you don’t go. If you want to go, you should go.” And he and Lee went.

But I started realizing also at that point that Lee needed to interface with other people who were HIV-positive or were people with AIDS, and obviously there was a connection there that wasn’t between us anymore, so it actually started, unfortunately, fracturing our relationship, but the support that we got there was just invaluable.

**SS: So, now, looking at that story, I would just say, well, he had a genetic predisposition and you didn’t, something like that. Why some people never get infected is just this mysterious thing that we still don’t even understand.**

JG: Yeah. Isn’t it bizarre?

**SS: Yeah.**

JG: To this day I still go, I just don’t get it. I don’t get it. There’s absolutely no reason.

**SS: There’s just so many mysteries about HIV, and that’s a big one.**

JG: Yeah.

**SS: I just want to know the relationship between people who produce the posters and the people who put them out. So what would happen? Gran Fury would say, “We have a new poster,” and then you guys would go and put it out? Or how was it?**

JG: Yeah, I don't remember. Vincent Gagliostro was part of Outreach, and I think Vincent was with Gran Fury. Do you know?

**JH: No. He generally did them on his own.**

JG: Oh, he did. Oh, all right. I didn't—I always thought Gran Fury was a group of artists. It wasn't?

**SS: It was, but Vincent, I think, had his own thing.**

JG: Oh, all right.

**SS: A little studio –**

JG: Oh, interesting, interesting, because we always seemed to get posters from Vincent. Maybe it wasn't all Gran Fury posters that we did. But I remember we were churning them out.

**SS: Did you ever look at a poster and think, "I don't agree with this," or, "I don't like this poster"?**

JG: I don't think so. I can't think of any that I did. Yeah, I loved the stuff that we would put out, and Vincent was incredible. He would come in every week with something else.

**SS: So then what did you do after Outreach? Did you ever belong to an affinity group?**

JG: Yeah. Seeing Red.

**SS: Seeing Red. What was that?**

JG: Seeing Red. We were the ones at the FDA in the white jackets with the red handprints on them.

**SS: Patrick Moore was in Seeing Red.**

JG: Patrick Moore. In fact, Patrick Moore, Patrick is brilliant. He was the marketing director, I think, at the Kitchen at that time, and I believe he came up with the slogan which we used at the FDA, which I think is absolutely brilliant. "The FDA has blood on their hands, and we're seeing red." Brilliant, right? In so few words, it says so much.

**SS: And did that group stay together?**

JG: Oh, yeah.

**SS: For how long?**

JG: I actually don't know time-wise, but I remember after the Monday night meetings, we would go off and we usually would go to a restaurant and we would meet together. We would also meet at American Ballet Theatre. I remember meeting at the Kitchen.

**SS: Who else was in Seeing Red?**

JG: Wayne Kawadler was in it. Mark Carson, who passed away; great guy. Steve Nesselroth. Patrick, of course. Lee was in it. I was in it. Michael someone. I can't remember Michael's last name. It was an amazing group of people, though, just amazing. Everybody was an individual who brought something special to it.

That was one of the great things about ACT UP, the most incredible collection of individuals I've ever been a part of in my entire life, bar none. It doesn't matter. I've done a lot of stuff and been involved in a lot of institutions, a lot of jobs. Nothing compares to the brains, the wit, the humanity that I experienced with the people in ACT UP. It was life-changing, absolutely life-changing.

**SS: So what were some of the other actions that Seeing Red did?**

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JG: Oh, City Hall. We made a big mistake at City Hall because we, I can't remember. I think City Hall was one of those actions where we were doing things in waves, the affinity groups, and we were on a side of City Hall where we found ourselves cut off from the rest of the demonstration. Somehow we were there on our own, and there were no cameras there, so that when we proceeded to go onto the grounds, the police were ruthless with us, ruthless, throwing us into the back of those paddy wagons, saying things like, "Break their fuckin' backs," and just the usual, "You're all going to die," that sort of thing. I remember that action.

**SS: So what's it like when you're all sitting there together in the paddy wagon, and this cop is saying, "You're all going to fuckin' die"?**

JG: This is another wonderful thing about the ACT UP people. They truly—I've said this over and over. I can't say it enough. Brilliant and witty. Witty, right? People would just be taunting those police, and so that it actually became—once we got in the paddy wagon, it became humorous. It actually was fun. Dare I say it was fun? Again, and there was such a sense of camaraderie, and underneath that it was people — we knew what we were there for, but —

**SS: When Mark got sick, was the affinity group involved in his care at all?**

JG: I don't remember it being.

**SS: Or Dino, when Patrick's boyfriend died?**

JG: Wow, you remember Dino. It's funny. When Dino got really sick, I think at that point it was really just so much for Patrick, that if I remember correctly, I don't think he was around as much. So we weren't involved with Dino's passing.

**SS: Were you involved in any care groups, or did you have any close friends who died?**

JG: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

**SS: Could you explain what that was like?**

JG: My very, very, very close friend, Danny Rounds, I don't even remember what ultimately was the reason for Danny's death. He was a dancer. He was an actor. We had done numerous shows together, and he was out on the road with *A Chorus Line*, and suddenly his knee just started buckling on him, and that was the first sign. But then it developed into something with his brain where they actually drilled into his head, and, oh, it was just horrible, horrible stuff, and he lost his faculties slowly, except mental. He knew what was going on the whole time, but physically he lost his sense of speech, everything.

So I took care of Danny, along with some other friends. His lover at the time also was sick. They were both sick. So we would go up and make dinner for them and just do whatever we could. When they have to go to the doctor, of course, we'd accompany them and things like that. I remember several times Danny being in the hospital and spending days in the hospital, sleeping on the floor at night. I remember other friends—and I'm sure you've heard this a million times—going to hospital rooms and the food trays on the outside of the room.

**SS: Like who? Do you remember someone specifically?**

JG: I do. Ricky Verretta.

**SS: Which hospital?**

JG: It was Beth Israel.

**SS: So how did you feel?**

00:40:00 JG: Oh, furious, furious. I knew, I knew in my soul that god or whatever higher entity exists would not have allowed that or wanted that to happen, and it just made me crazy, that people in the healthcare profession would stoop to that kind of treatment of somebody who was sick.

**SS: So when you were in ACT UP and you had friends who were not in ACT UP and they were sick, did they come to you and ask for information or advice about medication and treatment? Were you someone that people—**

JG: Like a conduit for that? Not really, because, I didn't have the expertise in that. I tried to stay current with it, but my brain, it really doesn't work that way. But I'm sure I recommended people to them.

**SS: How did you negotiate, when you were really, really in ACT UP—and I know that you were really in ACT UP—how did you negotiate with all your friends who were not in it? Was it alienating or—**

JG: It was alienating to some, but they were accepting of it. They were accepting. In fact, it's really funny because I have a really close friend who was in that—he was the third roommate in the *West Side Story* apartment, and he and his partner were not involved in ACT UP at all, and they were living at—what was the Manhattan—

**SS: Manhattan Plaza?**

JG: Plaza, right. Set aside for actors. And I remember Lee and I going up there for dinner and putting "Silence = Death" stickers all over the lobby, and they were furious, because they knew who did it. We, of course, we would buy those rolls. We

always had, like, ten rolls on us everywhere we went. Right? And they were furious, but they understood, you know, and we laugh about it now.

I have to say American Ballet Theatre was incredibly supportive. I had an office probably like the size of this room here, wallpapered with ACT UP posters. It looked like ACT UP central in my office, and never once did someone come in there and say, “This is not the place for that.” Never.

**SS: What was their policy in terms of healthcare for people with AIDS early on, I mean, if the dancer got sick?**

JG: They were very caring about their dancers, yeah. As I said, they were very supportive and did anything they could and everything they could to help them. I have to say they were a tremendous organization at a time when people with AIDS were not getting a lot of support from the general populace.

They were an arts organization, but they were really caring, absolutely caring. Everyone from Mikhail Baryshnikov himself, who was the artistic director at that time, to the general manager to, actually, Bob Pontarelli, who was head of press and eventually became head of media with ACT UP.

**SS: So it was that close.**

JG: Yeah. So there was a lot.

**SS: Do you remember ACT UP ever doing anything that you disagreed with or were uncomfortable about?**

JG: You know, the only thing—and I know you’ve heard this a hundred times, if not a thousand times also—was the way that Stop the Church went down.

**SS: Did you feel that at the time, or do you still feel that way now, or has that hindsight changed that?**

JG: I don't feel that way now. I did feel that way at the time, but, you know—who—is it Ann Northrop? Somebody in *United in Anger* —

**SS: That was me.**

JG: Was that you? It was you. Absolutely. It was you. You said it perfectly. I'm sorry. It was you.

**SS: No. I don't feel that way anymore.**

JG: Really?

**SS: Because it all turned out for the best, didn't it? As Larry says in the movie, they took us seriously after that. They were afraid of us.**

JG: Right. "Now they're afraid of you. You can—." Yeah. It's true.

**SS: You know, just thinking back, why did I think that then, why do I think this now, I think it was such a huge thing to do, for us to do, because we were so marginal, and the church was so powerful, that I think some of my conflicts came from that, honestly, and now I've evolved.**

JG: Yeah.

**SS: But I don't know. What do you think? Why do you think you felt differently then than you do now?**

00:45:00 JG: Well, I was raised Catholic, and I thought—well, actually, it didn't go off as planned and that was something that I don't remember happening in ACT UP. We planned very meticulously everything, down to the smallest detail. So that was kind of jarring, and it *was* very effective. The die-in was very effective, and we weren't—I guess

it was Ann who said this—we were not disagreeing with their ideology; we were disagreeing with their policies. And again, this is so fresh, having just seen the film, but seeing Michael Petrelis stand up there, you know—Larry’s right. Ultimately, it served the purpose. It served the purpose and continues to.

But at the time, that — I also have a funny story I just thought of that, about Stop the Church. It was the one day where, you know, those of us who were going inside, of course, could be identified as ACT UP-ers, so we took out all our earrings, our leather jackets. I was wearing a shirt and tie, a long overcoat. I looked rather dashing. But I remember I was standing at the side of the church at one point, just standing there, and I think an earlier service had just let out, and we were kind of infiltrating, and this undercover cop comes up to me and goes, “They’re coming in. Watch that one over there.” He thought I was an undercover cop. And I was like, “Yes! All right!” I loved that. I’ll never forget that.

**SS: So were you involved in planning any actions after Stop the Church?**

JG: Let’s see. You know, again, the chronology gets screwy with me. The ones that—no, that was really the big one. That was definitely the big one. We pushed that. Outreach really was spearheading that.

**SS: Well, that’s when Vince made that poster that ACT UP vetoed. Do you remember? It was of women in chador.**

JG: Oh, that’s right. That’s right. That’s right. Was that the only one that was ever vetoed?

**SS: I don’t know.**

JG: I completely forgot about that.

**SS: And he replaced it with the Scumbag one, I think it was.**

JG: Yeah, which was a good poster. I remember going on subways and slipping them in the overhead sections, and people, like, looking at them. We'd spend all night, one subway after another, just putting those.

**SS: Well, it worked, because you got 7,000 people there.**

JG: I know. Yeah, pretty amazing. It was an amazing demonstration and opportunity for ACT UP.

**SS: So did you ever get arrested besides that one time?**

JG: I did. I got arrested a total of, I think, five times. I used to get a piercing for every arrest. I don't have my earrings in now, but sort of my badge of honor.

**SS: So the first one was your first day at ACT UP. The second one was the mistake at City Hall.**

JG: City Hall.

**SS: What were the other three?**

JG: Let's see. What else did I go to? Were there arrests at Kennebunkport?

**SS: I don't know. I wasn't there.**

JG: FDA, City Hall, NIH. I'm just trying to think of the—

**SS: Were you arrested in Washington?**

JG: —of the big ones that I went to.

**SS: What did we win at the NIH?**

JG: What did we win?

**SS: What did we get out of that demonstration?**

00:50:00

JG: I don't know. I don't know specifically. Did that open the door to the scientists actually hearing us? I know that there were other things on the agenda. Also that was expanding the definition of AIDS, right, to include women?

**SS: That was part of it, yeah.**

JG: Right. So we certainly got that out of it, which was huge, huge.

**SS: It's funny, because every woman with AIDS in ACT UP is dead except for one. Do you remember interacting with them? Do you remember Katrina Haslip or Marina Alvarez?**

JG: I do.

**SS: Marina's still alive, but—because they were the people who were the most different from the Peter Staleys, right?**

JG: Right. Well, this is where the whole question about what ACT UP was and what it was doing, that's when it started to open up that dialogue and really blossom into what was ACT UP. What was our purpose? Was it just to get the drugs into bodies at that time, or was there a greater picture? And, of course, now we realize there was a greater picture, and it couldn't have happened faster.

**SS: Did you understand that yourself at that time? Was that a difficult conversation for you?**

JG: I didn't understand it, because I didn't know any women who had died of AIDS at that time. I knew that it was important. I certainly knew that. But I still had a lot of friends who were dying, and I wanted to make sure that they were helped. There was Lee.

**SS: So you saw it. At the time you saw it as opposed somehow, as either/or?**

JG: It was a gray area. I knew better. Intellectually, I knew that this was absolutely right, but what was happening within the organization, I didn't understand. It seemed like they were fractioning off the group as a whole, which didn't feel right, felt like, of course, that it was watering down the power we had as a cohesive unit. But, and I think Maxine is the one who said it in the film—if you're the one who said it, I'm going to feel terrible—the lifespan of most political groups is not that long, and ACT UP certainly had a run, a healthy and productive run in comparison.

**SS: So how would you explain why ACT UP split?**

JG: I'm really not sure. Maybe it had run its course in really being the springboard for visibility, for the perception of the AIDS epidemic, and people infected with HIV. That'll always be the big question, won't it?

**SS: When did you leave the organization?**

JG: Sarah, I don't know exactly. I believe that it happened gradually, and I still think about going back. I probably will at some point. I just would like to see what's going on. I get on the website periodically. But, yeah, I think it just happened gradually. Whether that was because of work commitments, I'm not sure.

**SS: I want to ask you a completely from-left-field question.**

JG: Okay.

**SS: A lot of the—not a lot, but a number of people that we've interviewed have had pretty bad crystal meth problems since ACT UP, and there's a lot of ACT UP people who seroconverted much later, like in their forties and fifties.**

**I was wondering, just as a gay man of that generation, if you have any thoughts about what that's all about.**

00:55:00

JG: No, I don't. I don't understand that. I think there's a lot involved there.

**SS: Obviously, there's some need and there's some consequence of that experience, but I don't know exactly what that is.**

JG: Yeah.

**SS: So I only have one question left. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important?**

JG: I don't think so. I think this has been a really nice walk down memory lane. I love talking about ACT UP with people who were there in the trenches. I was saying before we started, it was so great to go to the film the other night and see old friends, and what just struck me and I was so moved by was the young generation, a younger generation that was in the audience that night, that was just so thankful.

I said earlier to the guys, I said this one young lady stood up and said, "I was born in 1985, and I don't know anyone who ever died from AIDS, and I just want to thank you. I want to thank you for giving me history." Wow, you know.

I'm very proud of ACT UP and of my involvement in something that I truly—that I know changed the world.

**SS: Well, then let me ask you this final question. So, just looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?**

JG: Well, I think its greatest achievement was moving a response to the AIDS crisis a lot more quickly than it would have happened. God knows where we'd be even now if there hadn't been an ACT UP, because we were completely ignored. That crisis, people wouldn't even say the word, right? So is that not a huge achievement? A lot of people died, yes, but a lot of people were also saved, and I believe that that is absolutely because of what ACT UP did.

Its greatest downfall?

**SS: Well, disappointment.**

JG: Disappointment? ACT UP's greatest disappointment?

**SS: Or your greatest disappointment.**

JG: My greatest disappointment is that—and I don't even know if this was possible—that that intensity, that fury, that intelligence, that commitment to change couldn't be maintained over years, because it would be a much better world. We changed the world in a few short years hugely.

**SS: That's a fact.**

JG: And that's a pipe dream, maybe. As Maxine said, most political organizations, the lifespan is short but—

**SS: Okay. Thank you.**

JG: Thank you.