

**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: **Scott Robbe**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Scott Robbe
December 5, 2013

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so we usually start with – have you looked at the Web site, and looked at some of the others?

SCOTT ROBBE: Yeah, I've looked at some of them.

SS: Okay. So we start by you saying your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

SR: Scott Robbe, 58 years old, Milford, Pennsylvania, on the fifth of December, 2013.

SS: Okay. And we're out here, in your beautiful house, in the middle of this gorgeous land. Did you grow up in the country?

SR: I grew up in a little town of 3,000 people, in Wisconsin.

SS: What was it called?

SR: Hartford.

SS: Okay. And were your parents born in that town, also?

SR: Actually, my parents – my father was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and my mother was born in Decorah, Iowa. And I was also born in Decorah, Iowa. So I come from Midwest stock.

SS: And where are they from originally? Are you like Norwegian, or something like that?

SR: Both sides of the family are Norwegian.

SS: Okay. And was it your grandparents who came over, or –

SR: My great-grandparents, from both sides.

SS: So what kind of work did your parents do?

SR: My father was a construction worker, who did carpentry work; worked construction on bridges and power plants. My grandfather had a construction company in five states, and he sort of enlisted my father, who was actually, at one point, going to become a minister. But he brought him into the construction business when he married my mother.

SS: So were you brought up religious?

SR: I was brought up Lutheran. But my family had a very sort of open feeling about you choosing your own religion. And so I was lucky to have parents who said, you know, we're going to raise you Lutheran, but you should explore, and find out what's right for you.

SS: So how did you do that?

SR: I started reading a lot, very young, and looked into different faiths. I'm not sure if I would say that I adhere to any one faith. I think they're all paths to the same direction. I do consider myself spiritual, and I think there is something bigger than all of us, somewhere in the universe. But I'm not sure, like most people, what that is.

SS: Well, their connection to their church, was that like a model for belonging to a community, or being accountable to a community?

SR: I think that there was a strong sense of community that was given to me by my father, who was always very active in the community; ecological issues, community issues that affected the broader community. So I was raised in an activist household, yes.

SS: Do you remember your early participation – what you were being asked to do, or –

SR: Well, I helped my father organize by leafleting when Libby's Foods created a giant lagoon in our small town, where they would dump all of their wastewater, which caused terrible odors to flow across the town. And so we initiated a campaign that eventually shut down that lagoon. And that was the first time I was involved in anything, and I was probably 11 or 12 years old at that point.

SS: Wow. But certainly, in the '60s, you're seeing things on television about what was going on in the rest of the world – the Vietnam War, and –

SR: Yeah. The Vietnam War was what really radicalized me. I was 12 or 13 years old at the time, and little green cars would come into our neighborhood, and we feared these little green Army cars with the serial number on the side, because we always knew that they brought bad news. And so the neighbors across the street had a son who was maimed in Vietnam. Another son was blown up in a foxhole, near me. The neighbors on the right – he was very, very maimed.

And all of the older brothers — the ones who were 17, 18, 19 — all feared the war, and we would sit around – and I can remember tales of people crying, being afraid that their number was going to come up in the draft. And I had a babysitter who was very radical, who I stayed in touch with. So when I was

about 13, I was going to anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. And she introduced me to Emma Goldman's book, *Living My Life*, which I read when I was about 13 or 14, and that sealed everything, from then on.

SS: And so when did you realize that there was a connection between homosexuality and politics?

SR: Well, I don't think I made that connection until I was in college. Because I really was not really aware that I was gay when I was in high school. I had a guy who was probably my first boyfriend, but I didn't even realize it at the time. And they actually – his parents – the father was more conservative, and he was concerned about our relationship. So he actually moved the family out of Hartford, my hometown, to another town, where he could get a transfer, as manager of a Super Valu grocery store, so that he could split us up. And then we continued to try and see one another. Andy's mother would call, and I would travel to Marshfield, where he was, and he would travel to where I was. But they literally split us up.

SS: Were you guys having sex, or was it an emotional –

SR: No, not per se. I mean, sleeping together, yes. It was an emotional bond, a spiritual bond.

**SS: So when you were in college, were you involved in politics?
Or were you guys going through –**

SR: When I first go to the University of Wisconsin – the University of Wisconsin's always been looked at as sort of the Berkeley of the

Midwest — so a lot of my first memories – when Nixon was pardoned by Gerald Ford, and thousands of us gathered, and attacked a Rockefeller bank, up around the capital square, and set most of the flags on fire that surrounded the capital building. It was a huge demonstration. So that was the first large-scale demonstration.

The babysitter that I had was actually a girlfriend of New Year's Eve Gang member Leo Burt.

SS: Oh, wow.

SR: And so they blew up the Army Math Research Center, for the Army Math's research work on strategy for the illegal bombing of Cambodia.

SS: So did the FBI come after her?

SR: They went after her, but she didn't have a direct connection with the Armstrongs or Leo Burt or David Fine. So she was never charged with anything. Leo Burt, I think, is the only one that was never caught, and he, I think, is in Algeria. If he's still alive.

SS: Right. Wow. That's training. Your parents just innocently hired this babysitter, and –

SR: They knew.

SS: Oh, they knew.

SR: Yeah, they knew.

SS: Okay. So did you come out in college, or –

SR: I was still identifying as being bisexual in college. So I was doing what Tom Daley's doing now. I love the fact that Dustin Lance Black is his boyfriend.

No, I didn't really come out until I got to New York.

SS: So when was that? Right after college?

SR: Yeah, I got to New York in '78. At that time, I had both boyfriends and girlfriends. And then I met a Russian lad who was a student of another friend of my uncle's — who's also gay — who was going to Bennington College. So I would travel to Bennington College and he would travel to New York. And then we lived together for about six years.

SS: From '78 to '84?

SR: About then, yeah.

SS: So where were you living in the city?

SR: We lived in the East Village. At that point, I was living on Seventh Street, down from McSorley's Pub. And I was the only non-Ukrainian in a Ukrainian building. And from there, we moved to Fourth Street. And at that time, we were doing things like renovating the Orpheum Theater. I was really getting involved with a lot of budding playwrights at the time, and that's how I met Harvey Fierstein, was in that sort of milieu on the Lower East Side.

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SS: Let's just old for a minute, because I want to go back to moving to the East Village. There were – it's hard for people to understand

now, but there were very few places that a male gay couple could live comfortably in New York City, right?

SR: Yeah. I mean, we really never thought about it much, in terms of the discrimination aspect of it. The people who owned the building that I lived in were always sort of like quizzical about us living there, but they never were really bigoted in their outward attitudes toward us. So I think they were fine. Although when we went to renew the lease, they did say to us that they were going to move their daughter into that space, and so they wanted to give us notice to find another place. Which they absolutely –

SS: Which in those days, you could do in a week, right?

SR: No, it wasn't –

SS: You could find a place quite easily.

SR: We had a month, yeah.

SS: Oh, okay. So when you say you were renovating the Orpheum, what was your role in that?

SR: It was really sort of a hippie collective of theater people, who pooled their money and pooled their skills to reopen a theater that had been very popular in the 1920s and 1930s, with musicals like *Little Mary Sunshine*. And then it was closed up for decades, and became a lumber yard and a cabinet workshop. And so we had to sort of restore the internal workings of the theater and found 300 seats in a warehouse in Brooklyn and reinstalled them, and I reopened the theater for the first time since *Little Mary Sunshine*, with an original

production of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's *False Promises/Nos Engañaron*. Which was about a copper-mining strike, where they brought in the National Guard to basically shoot the strikers. Which became very popular. Did well; the Times liked it.

SS: So you were the house producer, or –

SR: Yeah. I was the producer for the Mime Troupe.

SS: And who were some of the other people that you were working with at the Orpheum?

SR: Alan Schuster was the person who really got the place started. He was the one who enlisted me. He was a young hippie kid, a Jewish entrepreneur; went on to do quite a few plays, on and off Broadway; and was partnered with a guy by the name of Mitchell Maxwell, who sort of became infamous as a producer later on. Lost a lot of money, and did a musical about the Holocaust, which was a terrible failure.

SS: What was it called?

SR: I can't remember. I think it was – *Let My People Go*, or something like that.

SS: Oh, my god.

SR: It was a horrible failure.

SS: So then when did you start getting involved with playwrights?

SR: Really, at La Mama, with Ellen Stewart. I workshopped Harvey Fierstein's early plays. We were doing *Fugue in a Nursery* at that time, at La Mama. And then we moved *Fugue in a Nursery*, which is the middle of the trilogy, of *Torch Song Trilogy*, to the Orpheum Theater. And it ran there, and did quite well.

SS: Is that the one with – there's some young guy who was in that play, who became very famous, but I can't remember who it is.

SR: Well, later on –

SS: Matthew Broderick, was it?

SR: – well, Matthew actually did that play, that middle play — playlet — in *Torch Song Trilogy*. But that's a whole 'nother story, with Matthew. Matthew used to hang out at the readings of *Spookhouse*, another play that Harvey was working on, because his girlfriend was doing one of the roles in *Spookhouse*. So Harvey actually gave Matthew his first acting job, and that was in *Torch Song Trilogy*.

SS: Right. So you were one of the original producers of *Torch Song*.

SR: I didn't do *Torch Song*; I just did *Fugue in a Nursery*.

SS: Right, okay; that part of the trilogy.

SR: Right, right. But I was at the opening night of *Torch Song Trilogy*, which was thrilling. I wasn't very old at the time.

SS: Right. So did you continue as a theatrical producer, or did you start branching out at that point?

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SR: I did a number of plays off Broadway, and then I did Harvey Fierstein's play *Safe Sex* on Broadway, at the Lyceum. The play didn't do well; it ran for about two months. It was very in-your-face, and the title, "Safe Sex," of course, at that time, was viewed as being a little bombastic. It was a really nice piece – again, three playlets. John Wesley Shipp was in that, who went on to become the father in *Dawson's Creek*, and also had a television show where he played The Flash.

SS: Okay, so let's back up a little bit. So you're living in the East Village; you're producing plays, you're working at the Orpheum. And when did you first become aware of the AIDS crisis?

SR: The AIDS crisis hit me around '85. A good friend at that time got sick.

SS: Who was that?

SR: Neil Murphy. And I spent that whole period that he was sick with him, until he died. That was the first time that I had ever gone through the full experience.

SS: But it must have been all around you, right, because you were in the East Village.

SR: Yes. I mean, people were sick everywhere. John Falabella, who was the production designer for *Fugue in a Nursery*, also was sick. And

then, of sort of the Harvey Fierstein group, of course, it was John Falabella, Court Miller was sick.. My uncle, who's also gay, his group was getting sick. And I knew all of them through, sort of my extended family was through him, in New York, as well as my theatrical family. So it was pretty widespread, it was starting to really decimate everybody.

A good friend of mine killed himself, rather than deal with the disease. After Peter and I split up, I first came in contact with ACT UP, in Washington, D.C., for the demonstration outside of the White House. And that, to me, was where I needed to be. I was very, very angry, and I needed to channel that somewhere. It was something that I had told Jim, who was my new partner at the time, that I wanted to do, and Jim was concerned because Jim wasn't out that much. He was also concerned because I, at the time, was producing television commercials and corporate/industrial films. Which, even though you think of the theater world as being very gay-friendly, the world of television and commercial marketing just as in the banking and finance industry was not as embracing of openly gay people, at the time. In a historical context, you could still be fired if they found out you were gay. There would usually be some excuse, but especially in finance and banking, it was very hard to be out.

SS: Now, not a lot of theater people became activists. In a way, it's a different impulse. So you're coming out of this community, and you have Jim, and he's involved in another world that's also not going that way.

And yet, you become involved with ACT UP. Did that separate you from your other friends, or move you away from the worlds you were living in?

SR: It caused a lot of huge, heated arguments. People actually would say to me, you know, you're going to get us all thrown in camps; you're going to cause it so that we can't go out on the streets; people are going to beat us up, they're going to shoot us. There was a very anti-ACT UP attitude, in the early days. And literally, screaming arguments with relatives and good friends.

SS: And what was it that you understood that they didn't understand?

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SR: Well, I came to ACT UP because I'd always been a fervent believer that if you want to create change, you have to participate. Democracy doesn't work unless you participate. You can't foster change unless you participate. And while part of me very much adhered to the philosophies of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., there's another part of my personality that I always had to keep in check, that adhered more toward the Malcolm X philosophy.

And there were a lot of people in the theater world who did become political. I mean, Harvey Fierstein signed the first big ACT UP fundraising letter. His work was definitely political, in that homophobia and the AIDS epidemic and the way it was treated – they were intrinsically linked. You had to do away with homophobia in order to find a cure for AIDS, or to deal equitably with the AIDS epidemic. They just went hand in hand.

So to work in theater, you knew that you were helping to change people's minds. I always went into theater because I wanted to do social-issue theater. I wanted to do material that would entertain, but also would enlighten and uplift, and make people understand the gist of what people go through. And that's why I was so attracted to Harvey's work.

Larry's work, of course; he's a wonderful, wild, angry prophet. And he also comes from the theater-and-film world.

So there were quite a few of us; some more involved than others. The old guard — people like David Geffen were less inclined, in the beginning, to be involved — but came around, once they understood. There was a lot of tugging, to bring people along with us. And it wasn't easy, at first.

SS: So what was your first involvement in ACT UP? What did you work on, or how did you plug in?

SR: After the White House, I started going to meetings. And I realized that my strength, because I came from a theater and a film-and-television background, would be to work with the Media Committee. So I worked with the Media Committee. We met at Vito's [Russo] home. And that's where I started to put my skills to work.

SS: And who was on the committee at the time?

SR: At the time, it was Michelangelo Signorile and Alan Klein and Ken Woodard, who came from advertising. Ken and I hit it off, at that time, and Ken had these brilliant ideas. It's always been my job, as a producer, to try and

put the creative idea together with the folks who can realize it; to bring a creative team together to make that creative idea happen, and do it within the cost structure of whatever we had, which at that time was not much.

And the first thing that Ken and I did was something we called Operation Batman, which was getting ready for the demonstration at City Hall, where we put – he wanted to do something that was similar to what they had done in Italy, to rally people, which was to do giant projections on buildings, around issues. So I found a projection system with a very high-quality lens, and Ken created the graphics for slides that would advertise the demonstration. And we put a generator in the back of my Jeep, and put the projector on a little platform in the Jeep. And we would go to an abandoned billboard, one that had nothing on it, and we would project from the Jeep to that billboard – the date of the demonstration.

SS: Where were some of the billboards?

SR: One was in the West Village, above the cigar shop, just off of Sheridan Square.

SS: Oh yeah, I remember that billboard.

SR: And that one we would like to go back to a lot, because it was vacant at the time – no one had taken it.

SS: That's the one that Hibiscus used to use.

SR: Yes.

SS: That's right.

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SR: Yes. And we also would go to the club Mars, which Chip Duckett was running at the time. And he would let us set up on the second floor of Mars. And across the street was a big, white freightliner building — one that was derelict and out of use — but it had a big, white front. And so we could do 40- to 60-foot-long by 30- to 40-foot-high visuals on that building. And so as people would come to Mars, or pass by on the freeway, they would see these gigantic advertisements for the demonstration at City Hall.

It was fun, too; it was fun.

SS: So you were interested in the grassroots side of marketing; getting to the community to come out. Or were you also involved with the media establishment?

SR: I didn't have any great — I wasn't a journalist. I was somebody who could put up a show. So the theatricality of ACT UP was where I could make the best contribution. The things that I was good at were — when there was a problem, I could try and work out an idea of how to solve it.

We had a problem with getting people organized in terms of commuting between affinity groups. And so I had access to get walkie talkies and cell phones, through the production companies that I worked with.

I can remember, at City Hall, I brought in a couple of cases — maybe 24 to 30 walkie talkies — to give to the marshals and to give to the leaders of the affinity groups. We were the first ones who had arrived on site at City Hall. There was a huge police presence there. And I remember, as we started to

unload all of the silver cases and pull out all of the walkie talkies, and get people hooked up; the Tactical Squad from the Police Department was just beside themselves. They were getting people to come over, shoot photos of us; commanders and lieutenants were like, just befuddled that these grassroots activists were now all communicating via walkie talkie and cell phone.

That was fun.

SS: And cell phones were these huge things, right?

SR: They were big, at the time.

SS: Yeah.

SR: Yeah, yeah. That was also my first arrest, was at City Hall.

SS: Now how did you decide to get arrested?

SR: Well, I had been thinking about it for awhile. And I had been going to the civil disobedience trainings. And I just, I think the hardest arrest is your first arrest. After you're arrested the first time, the rest of it just seems like a cakewalk; you don't even think about it twice. But it's making the decision on the first arrest that's the hardest, I think. And Brian Zapcik was doing the trainings. And Brian, I felt very comfortable with. And so I was, really of the mind if Brian can do it, I can do it.

SS: What did they teach you in the training?

SR: It's really about maintaining your calm and your cool. That's something I really didn't have a problem with. I'm not one who believes in physical force to achieve any end goal. And the camaraderie of being arrested

with lots of other like-minded people was really fabulous. To flood the jails of Manhattan, to the point where they had no more room for us, was a hugely empowering moment.

SS: Did you get arrested with an affinity group?

SR: At that point – I got arrested with the Media Committee, after our job was done. We were some of the last to be arrested. We just sat down, and didn't move. We were hauled off. They were so comfortable with us in the police van that I actually sat beside the guy who was driving, because there was no more room in the back. And so we just chatted, the cop who was driving, and myself, about the fact that they had a job to do, and we had a job to do. We had that mutual respect. They understood what we were doing. And that's sort of the beauty, for the most part, of New York City cops; they really are just working guys, who understand that you have something that you need to get elevated in the public's consciousness; and that it's their job to arrest us for doing that.

SS: Yeah, but weirdly, New York had this problem that some other cities, like San Francisco and Toronto, didn't have, where the city government was our enemy. I mean, we had this very – that was our problem; they were not helping us.

SR: No. But –

SS: But why was it so hostile in New York?

SR: No other city government was helping, either. I mean –

SS: Well, San Francisco was a lot more cooperative.

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SR: To some degree. To some degree. But that's because of people like Milk. But I would say, in New York, Ed Koch, of course, could have done far, far more than he did. And being a closeted mayor did not help things. And he was part of the old guard. And he probably had the same fears that the David Geffens of the time had, in that what would happen to their career should they come out, should they be known to be gay. And that was the other major hurdle, besides getting treatment for our people, was to get our own people to come out; certainly the ones who were rich and powerful.

SS: So where did you go next, with the Media Committee?

SR: Next, we wanted to try and do something that really would galvanize attention on the cost of drugs. And so that's when I became more tight with Peter Staley at that point. And he and I did a scout of the New York Stock Exchange together, before the action. We figured that by shutting down the New York Stock Exchange, which had only been done once before, by Jerry Rubin, would be a good way to gain some attention about the insane cost of the only efficacious drug at the time, AZT – which did very little, but was the only thing we had.

So we went in, dressed as Bear Stearns stockbrokers. And we had counterfeit badges.

SS: Did you own those clothes, or did you have to get them?

SR: I pieced together a pretty good stockbroker outfit.

SS: Okay, okay, good.

SR: I got a sport coat, and I got some pants to match. But our Bear Stearns badges; the number on them was too long. And so when we went in and scouted the place, one of the guards remarked: Now that's an interesting number; I've never seen a number like that before. But we just bluffed our way in, and decided on the old VIP gallery as the space for the action, and then went back and assembled the affinity group that did the final action. There were seven of us; five on the VIP balcony, and two shooting down below – stills.

SS: And who were they, do you know?

SR: I can't name them all right now. Gregg Bordowitz, Peter Staley, myself, and the rest is gone from my memory, 25 years later.

SS: And how did you get fake ID?

SR: Peter knew what the IDs looked like, so we literally just manufactured them. We stole them – so that they looked like Bear Stearns trading badges. And when we were arrested, of course that became a major charge; that we had counterfeited credentials. And so we were held – we were first fingerprinted and photographed by the New York City Police. And then we were fingerprinted and photographed by the FBI. And then they put us all into one big holding cell. And they wouldn't communicate what was going on with us with our support team outside. So Lambda Legal Defense and the folks who were outside were not really sure what was going on on the inside. And finally, it got to be about six or seven that night – and the action had been at the opening of the trading bell. We drowned out the trading bell with air horns, and chained

ourselves to the balcony, and unfurled a big banner that said, Stop your profiteering, sell Wellcome, which was Burroughs Wellcome stock, and then threw imitation hundred-dollar bills over the heads of the stockbrokers, who were like an angry mob below us. And they said, Fuck your profiteering, sell Wellcome. They actually had to bring in a line of police to separate us from the traders, who were literally going tear us apart.

00:35:00 When they put us through the intake of the arrest, they weren't quite sure what they were going do with us either by the end of the day. And so by the end of the day, I talked to Peter. And a number of people were on basic medications at the time, of that group. And only five of us had been arrested, because the other two had gotten out with the pictures, for the press. So by the end of the day, I talked with Peter, and I was one of those who was not on medication. And I had them bring me the guy who was in charge of our holding area, and told him that there were people who had medications that they had to get to, otherwise, they would be responsible for their lives, or any upcoming sickness, and that anything that would happen to them could come back to them in the form of a legal suit, both against the city and against each one of them individually.

SS: Now that's chutzpah. I mean, there you are, counterfeiting, impersonating, disrupting; and you're threatening them, that they're going to be in trouble.

SR: We were charged. I mean, the next step was for them to put us on trial. So there was nothing to lose by it.

SS: Right.

SR: And they released us.

SS: Oh, so you never did go to trial.

SR: Yeah, we did go to trial. We went to trial. And at that point, there was a lot of discussion that we possibly would do time, and would maybe have to go to prison for a number of years. So Lambda Legal Defense was handling everything fine. I decided that I would drive to Portland, Oregon, and slip into Vancouver, if I had to. And so I left. And it went to trial. The judge said that we were heroes acting in the public interest. He condemned the profiteering of Burroughs Wellcome. Nationally, editorials ran then, the following week, following up on the judge's decision. And initially, the drug price came down 15 percent. And then, within a month, it came down 30 percent. So I came back to New York.

SS: So you didn't show for your own trial, though. That's a problem.

SR: No, I didn't show up for my own trial.

SS: Okay, well, isn't that a problem?

SR: No. The lawyers worked it out. I think the lawyers knew what was going to happen. I think they knew that things were going in our favor. If I had been convicted, in absentia, that would have been a problem. But I was going to go into Vancouver, at that point.

SS: Wow. That's heavy. And is this David Barr, when he was at Lambda? Who was the attorney?

SR: Yeah, David Barr was at Lambda. There was a whole team. There were probably six attorneys, at that point.

SS: So you were lucky.

SR: Yeah, very lucky. But I mean – Vito had always reinforced in my mind that the truth shall set you free. And he was right time and time again. When I came back to New York, he was starting to get very sick. And I went to visit him in the hospital. And at that point, I was getting to the point where I felt like I had done everything I could do in New York. I'd been doing something for years. And my career also was faltering. I wasn't getting the calls to work on things I wasn't able to find financing like I was before – because I was that gay radical producer guy. So luckily, I had a Japanese friend, Yuki Matsumoto. And Yuki offered me a job, producing Japanese commercials, in Los Angeles. And that way, they couldn't touch me. I'll have a financial source, I'll be able to pay my bills; I can go to Los Angeles, and produce Japanese commercials, and do what I do.

And so I went to visit Vito. And at that time, Larry was doing his “We gotta up the ante” speech. We've got to become more forceful. We've got to take up arms. I wasn't at the point where taking up arms was something that I was gonna do. But I was up for upping the ante.

So I went to Vito, and I said, Vito, what do you think we should do? Because for me, Vito was my mentor. I was very close. I loved Vito.

He said, I think Larry's right, and I think you should go out there, and you should up the ante. I don't think it should be violent in nature, but I think you need to go to the next step.

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So we got to Los Angeles I did commercials for the Japanese. And then, we decided we were going to disrupt the Oscars, because there were no positive portrayals of gay and lesbian people; and there certainly wasn't any kind of tackling of the AIDS crisis, in terms of film or television, at that time.

So I got — and I don't think he'd mind me telling you now; but at the time, he didn't want anyone to know — Larry gave me, because he was a member of the Academy, his Oscar seats. And so two PWAs took those seats.

SS: Who were they?

SR: Again, my — it's so many years later, I can't remember. They took those seats, and disrupted the ceremonies during Chevy Chase's speech. And I was watching it outside. And we had also assembled a big demonstration outside, as well.

I can remember watching Chevy Chase look very befuddled at what was happening. And you can tell that there was a clamor going on in the hall, but then the director immediately cut to a commercial. So all you got was Chevy Chase sort of befuddled and going, what — uh — well, um — and then they cut up.

But it really did have a big effect on the industry, in that the industry was now on notice that if they did not deal with the AIDS epidemic, there would be hell to pay.

At that time, I had also formed a group called Out in Film, which were all of the people who were gay and lesbian and who were out at the time. And we were more like the ACT UP support group, on the industry side.

SS: Who were some of those people?

SR: Oh, Spence Halperin, who's now in New York, was probably one of the biggest folks who helped. Spence was integral in making sure that when *Paris Is Burning* was not nominated for Best Documentary, he really brought it to the forefront, to the press. *The Lost Language of Cranes*; Texaco pulled their funding for that piece. We tackled those issues, but we also decided to directly mount a frontal attack at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, so that Queer Nation, Out in Film, lots of members of ACT UP, basically decided to stage a massive demonstration in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, that addressed not only the AIDS crisis, but why there were no positive portrayals of gays or lesbians – once again, knowing that doing away with homophobia would be key to finding a way to stop the AIDS epidemic, was our thought process.

The demonstration was huge. Ken Woodard designed huge placards that said, Make Queer Film; Make Queer Film Now; Where Are the Gay Stars? And then there was a series of films that were named, for either their positive portrayals or their negative portrayals.

I was doing an interview during that demonstration, where they had just asked me whether or not they thought that people were really that angry about gays and lesbians doing this in Hollywood. And somebody, at the very moment they asked that question, took a full can of Coke and threw it down from the upper level of the bleachers, and it just missed my head, as they were asking that question. So that sort of reinforced the answer to the question.

That really made me persona non grata in Hollywood at the time.

I got into a huge fight with David Geffen and Oliver Stone.

00:45:00

David Geffen actually called me at my office. And I had a Japanese American woman who was the receptionist. And she came into my office, and she said: Scott, David Geffen is on the phone. And I said, no, Eri, it's not David Geffen, it's a prank. Somebody's pulling a prank.

She said, no, no, Scott, it really is, it's David Geffen.

And so I picked up the phone, thinking it was a joke. And I said, yeah, yeah, David, what do you want?

And he said, no, no, it really is; it's David Geffen.

And I was so – and this led into a 45-minute discussion of why are these people so angry. By the end of the conversation, he really understood why these people were so angry – especially when we discussed the fact that if you're on a film set or a television set, while a lot of writers and creatives, actors, certainly people in the art department, were gay; grips and electricians were not gay, and would oftentimes sit –

SS: Except for the women.

SR: – Yes. You would oft-times sit, and hear gay jokes being tracked by grips and electricians. And I said, you know, David, in your position, you never have to listen to this stuff; you never have to be part of it, day to day. But for the folks who are in the trenches, they have to listen to it. Certainly now, with the way things are going in terms of the AIDS crisis, we don't want to hear it, even more.

And he did come around. To his credit, he was one of the people that slapped five thousand dollars in Peter Staley's hand to go and put a condom over Jesse Helms's house.

So people may not have all come around right away, but they eventually did come around.

SS: But didn't he have experiences of people in his life who died?

SR: Oh, sure.

SS: Or are they immune to emotional experiences, some of these –

SR: Yeah, yeah – well, he was, he was another one who finally, when – and you know, I think denial is a very strong thing, for some people. I did the same thing he did. I had Rolodexes, before we had computer databases. And I would take cards out of them when people died, and put them into another box. And he had said that he had done the same thing. He went through how many

people who had died. And I think he was up to 300 people. So it touched his life. It definitely touched his life.

Trying to decide how you dealt with it was also a hard decision. For those of us who were raised by parents who said, go do, change things by direct action, it was easier for us. For those who knew that if they do them, they might lose a lot of money, it was a harder decision.

SS: Now where were you in your own health, and all of that, during this time?

SR: I was working on a show, a pirate movie, where we were onboard tall ships. And I developed a case of thrush. And we were off the coast of Puerto Rico, and we were shooting in the jungles of Puerto Rico. And I went to basic healthcare in Puerto Rico. And they basically said, you should go back in and get checked out when you go back to L.A.

And so I went back to L.A., and I did come up positive.

At that time, because I knew a lot of the doctors who were the best in the field, I was going to Pacific Oaks, and there was a great doctor there, by the name of Michael Thomas. And he did what a lot of other people did for us. He said, go into this Crixivan protocol. I'll make sure that you get the real stuff.

And so literally, I was getting Crixivan immediately.

SS: So you went into a double-blind, knowing that you –

SR: Yes.

SS: – were getting the real stuff?

SR: Yeah.

SS: That's intense.

SR: Yeah.

SS: That's intense. Okay.

SR: I was one of the lucky ones. I was very, very lucky.

00:50:00

The melding of the AIDS crisis and the work on homophobia just – to me, they were one and the same. They stayed one and the same. When the AB 101 fight came to California, literally, all of the activists who were from Los Angeles were in Washington, D.C., working on national healthcare. And I remember, when the word came down that AB 101 had been defeated, all of those activists from California were immediately on their phones, in phone booths, finding the next flight back to Los Angeles. Because we had done what we had to get done, in terms of national healthcare, in D.C., and we had plenty of other comrades there to continue on the flight; and we would all get on the same next flight back to Los Angeles. And the moment we would get off the planes, we would be in the streets, and there would be thousands of people shutting down intersections, marching in the streets. And all of those same people would be there, marshaling.

And I can remember L.A. cops trying to drive their scooters into the back end of the demonstrators. And just intuitively, everyone who had civil disobedience training through ACT UP was immediately linking arms and forcing the scooters back from the demonstrators at the back of the pack.

So all of the training that occurred in New York City went on, it filtered out, to the rest of the country, the rest of the world.

When I would shoot overseas, you would see the impact that Outrage and ACT UP London would have, that ACT UP Paris would have, that ACT UP Berlin would have. When I traveled to Sydney, for the Gay Games, years later, you could see the impact of what ACT UP had had.

So you can't underestimate how widely the influence of ACT UP was on the world. And now we see it even today.

Years ago, I got in a catfight with Oliver Stone because he was going to be the director of the Harvey Milk story. At one point, the studios were saying, you know, oh, Oliver Stone's the guy who should direct the Harvey Milk story. And this was just after he'd made the film *JFK*.

SS: Right.

SR: And I had become tight with Gus Van Sant, and I said — they asked me, because I had been saying, you know, where are all the gay people going to be in the making of this film? And there was no answer to that. And I said, well, you've got Oliver Stone, a man who just made a film that said that Commie queers killed Kennedy — because he's got that bombastic scene of all of these guys dressed up at some gay party like no party I've ever seen before —

SS: Right.

SR: – as being some of the folks who had contributed to the funding of the killing of Kennedy. And now he's going to go out and make the Harvey Milk story? Well, I don't think so.

So they asked: Who do you think should make the Harvey Milk story? And this was back in — I don't know — ninety, '94, '95. And I said, Gus Van Sant. And they wrote that. And suddenly, Oliver Stone was off the picture. And of course, the Harvey Milk story was not made until years later, when Lance Black wrote fabulous screenplay, and Gus directed it. And now, you have Gus Van Sant, in Russia, screening *Milk*, at a time when the Russians are now the enemy. They believe that gay people are an aberration. And you have Gus Van Sant and Lance Black, in Russia, screening *Milk*.

So we should be extremely proud that we're not only responsible for having changed American culture; but now we're on our way to changing world culture.

SS: Well, if it makes you feel better, three weeks before they were there, Jim and I were in Russia, showing *United in Anger*.

SR: All the better!

SS: So there you go.

SR: All the better! That I didn't know, and congratulations –

SS: Thank you.

SR: – to both of you.

SS: So – hm. It’s interesting, because you’re pointing to some really substantial changes in the highest places in the industry. And yet, the representation is still so inadequate. What is the problem?

SR: I think – with Hollywood, it all boils down to money. If a film of a certain content is thought to make money, then it will be made. I think the biggest test right now is going to be *Dallas Buyer’s Club*. Again, once more, you have a heterosexual protagonist. But the story is populated with gay people. If that –

00:55:00

SS: But didn’t James Schamus lose his job after – isn’t that the last film that he produced at Focus?

SR: Yes. But the reason – and I can’t say why James Schamus lost his job. I can tell you that when I was doing gay and lesbian shows — I did *Out There*, at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, for Comedy Central. Luckily, *Out There* was the highest-rated show that Comedy Central had ever had, of any special, of all time. And it was all gay and lesbian comics. *Milk*, even though it did very well critically, did not make a lot of money. And unless the piece makes a lot of money, there is hesitance to do anything of the same nature, in terms of storyline.

If *Dallas Buyer’s Club* makes a lot of money, then I think we’re going to see possibly that scripted film, of –

SS: But isn’t Lance Black doing something for ABC, on –

SR: In theory, he’s doing a miniseries.

And hopefully, that's going to get done. We'll have to wait and see. With most of them these days, until I see them go into production, I don't believe they're going to happen.

SS: Right.

SR: And I hope that that gets made, and that will be another step along the way. But all change is incremental. It never happens as fast as we want it to happen. And I think that each thing that we do that's positive, in that way, brings a part, more of a shift, in the culture, more of a shift in what will be funded and produced for the mainstream.

SS: So would you extrapolate from that that the reason ACT UP was so successful is because there was such a huge market for AIDS drugs? That there was a money incentive?

SR: Well, it wasn't the reason that ACT UP was successful. ACT UP was successful because they – lobbied for a group of people that were viewed, at one point, as being the lowest of the low in society, and then they also changed the perception of what people thought a person who was gay or lesbian or transgendered was. They changed the perception of what gay and lesbian people were. And therefore, once that perception of who they were changed, then there was a more forceful attack on the disease known as AIDS.

SS: And how did ACT UP change the perception?

SR: By forcing people to be out, quite frankly, and forcing people to be in the fight – directly in the fight. No one could not be in the fight. It's like

telling someone, you know, what did you do in the war, Daddy? And Daddy says, I didn't do anything; or Mommy says, I didn't do anything. You had to be in the fight. ACT UP made people join the fight. Maybe not through ACT UP, but through any way they could, or any way that they felt comfortable.

SS: Because, our largest demonstration was only 7,000 people. It was never a mass movement, right? It was always a critical mass.

SR: It wasn't a mass movement in terms of the people who got into the streets. But the tangential impact on society was huge. You could not – you may not, as you're sitting in your office in Hollywood, be able to join an ACT UP demonstration in the streets. But you could get on the phone and say, listen, we want to do a fundraiser for this AIDS-service organization, or this research project. And that, they could do. But they would never have done that, had it not been for ACT UP's motivating them to get into the fight, in any way they could. They may not be able to get into the streets; but they may be able to help in another way.

SS: Okay, I understand the distinction. So let me ask you something even more complicated. So you're telling me that David Geffen has to remove 300 cards from his Rolodex. That's how surrounded he is by death, right? And yet, he has to be persuaded by people like you. What is the characterological difference between a person who's not going to do it, if they're going to risk money or stature; and people who are going to do it, no matter what?

01:00:00

SR: Well, I think that cuts to the core of human nature. Protecting wealth, fame, and power is innate to those who have wealth, fame, and power. They didn't reach that position without making that the top priority in their lives.

I think that we've gone through an economic crisis that proves that that's true, where the majority of the wealth of the country is concentrated in three percent of the population. They are not going to give that up without a fight. Just the way that they were not going to help, in terms of the AIDS crisis, without a fight. And we gave them a fight. And the key to turning the economy around right now, quite frankly, would be to give them a fight. You don't wrest power from people who have it unless you fight them directly in some way.

SS: Right. I concur. So then, after all of this Hollywood period, did you get back involved with ACT UP New York, or were you in L.A. at that point, from then on?

SR: I was in L.A. up until I reached about my 40th, 41st birthday. And then I came back to New York.

When I was back in New York, we had done most of what we had seriously set out to do. ACT UP wasn't as vital as it was. I still stayed in contact with my old friends from those days, but I wasn't involved as actively as I had been previously.

I think we all reach a point where we personally sort of burn out. And I had started working with ACT UP when I was about 30. And by the time I was 40, I think I was a little tired.

SS: What is or was your understanding of why ACT UP split?

I mean, I'm more interested in what you think now than what you thought then.

SR: I never really thought of ACT UP as having split. I thought of ACT UP as having created wonderful offshoots of ACT UP. And just like Housing Works was a wonderful, effective offshoot of ACT UP, so was TAG. I think that to maintain the life of a grassroots organization over a span of more than five years is very, very difficult, because it's based on really strong commitment and leadership, on a day-to-day basis, totally from a volunteer, non-paid level. And to maintain the life of a grassroots organization over time, I think is extremely difficult – unless you decide that you're going to give it some sort of a greater, more traditional corporate structure, where there's a board of directors and a funding arm. I just don't think in the scheme of grassroots organizations they have a huge, long life. They're like a meteor; they have a very intense period, where they burn very bright, and do great work. But then they trail off, just because that energy level can't be maintained by the same people for a prolonged period of time.

SS: Now there was a period when you and Ellen Spiro were going to make a film about ACT UP.

So if you were going to make a film about ACT UP right now, what is a story about ACT UP that you feel hasn't been told, that needs to be told?

SR: Well – funny you should ask that question. My mind always goes to, how do you get a lot of people to see this message?

01:05:00 One of the reasons I went from theater to film and television was because we would do our social-issue theater productions, and we would reach, you know, 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 people, maybe. With film and television, you can reach millions of people; you can reach the world. But you have to be sort of both tenacious and tactical about how you make something to reach a wide audience. And I think, and I hope — and I probably won't be the one to do it, because I don't have those Hollywood ties, Hollywood credentials, or Hollywood deep pockets — but somebody's going to do it. And it's going to be a film, in my mind, that will be something like *Reds* – whereby Warren Beatty decided he wanted to make a film about Communism and about the anarchist movement, and get a wide audience to see it. So you gave it a love story. He said, I'm going to use John Reed and his love interests, and I'm going build a story around that.

Well, in my mind, the story would be, really, between – Keith Cylar and the head of Housing Works, Charles King. And use their love story to basically tell the story of ACT UP. Because you have a great love story between two men – which I think the American public is ready for. And certainly, the American public was sort of gently made to look at this subject matter with films like *Philadelphia* – which, you know, [Jonathan] Demme made at a time — and I think the reasons that he made it were – that's a whole other –

SS: Okay.

SR: – subject area to get into, but I think that if that film is made, where you do the Charles King and Keith Cylar love story, and make the public understand why ACT UP did what it did; that’s the way to reach a broad audience.

SS: Yeah, but then you have a guy who can never get off drugs, and it ends up taking his life.

SR: Well, these things are true, in life.

SS: And that’s the Hollywood ending for the ACT UP story?

SR: No, no –

SS: Oh, oh –

SR: No, the Hollywood ending is – to that film would be all of the things that have been accomplished, as we’ve talked about today – by ACT UP, in changing the world’s view of gay and lesbian people, and making sure that people in Africa have efficacious drugs. It probably would open the door for more-risky subject matter, as to how the pharmaceutical industry played a role in prolonging the AIDS epidemic, and feeding all sorts of different drugs into people’s bodies, at very high prices. Why there’s no cure for AIDS today – unless, of course, it’s locked up in some pharmaceutical’s safe at the moment. Because why would a cure for AIDS be a good thing for corporate America? It would be like killing the golden goose. The profits that the pharmaceutical industry has reaped from AIDS-maintenance drugs has been bigger than any other drug –

SS: So you maintain that it’s a conscious decision.

SR: In my mind, it's a conscious decision. Ever since I read [Edward] Hooper's book, *The River*, which looks at the fact that to get around human testing guidelines in the United States, a U.S. pharmaceutical company joined with a Belgian pharmaceutical company to take an experimental polio vaccine, which was tainted with simian – SIV – virus; and test it on African subjects. And if you look at, in terms of Hooper's work, in looking at where the first major onset of AIDS was in Africa; all of the main onset areas are the same areas where that vaccine was being tested.

SS: And what years is it?

SR: This is in the late '50s, early '60s. So in the late '50s, early '60s, hypothetically – the American pharmaceutical industry may have introduced SIV to the human population via this polio vaccine; and then decided, well, now we can market drugs to keep these people alive.

SS: Ooh, you're a conspiracy theorist!

SR: No, I'm not a conspiracy theorist.

SS: Okay.

SR: I believe that Darwinian capitalism works that way.

SS: Just an aside: do you know that book by [Mirko] Grmek: *History of AIDS?*

SR: I haven't read it.

SS: You can find AIDS in the '40s. So it predates that. There were sailors with anal trauma who had died of PCP.

SR: Yeah.

SS: So it predates those. But anyway.

01:10:00

SR: Well, I think in the instances where it predated the late '50s, early '60s, I think Larry is right, in that that was probably introduced by eating SIV-tainted monkey meat.

SS: Okay.

SR: Which was a common practice in that period. So yes, that could be another way that it jumped from chimpanzees to humans.

SS: But can the true story of ACT UP be told by Hollywood? Or is it always going to be like – the heroic individual? Because ACT UP, of course, it's the group that's the hero, right? And Hollywood loves the individual hero.

SR: Yeah, and that's why I keep saying you have to – if you're going to get it, you have to deal with the Hollywood formula, which is frame it in a love story somehow, so that people will watch the movie and buy tickets.

SS: I think there's only one couple that's still – oh, there's two: Richard [Elovich] and Daniel [Wolfe], and Ron [Goldberg] and Joe [Chiplock], right, are the only couples left from ACT UP who are still together. So it would have to be their stories.

SR: I guess it could be, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

SR: Yeah. I only say Housing Works, because Housing Works is still alive, doing good work; so is Charles King. And you know, the bottom line is, you know, Keith Cylar did great, great work. Sure, he had problems; did great, great work.

SS: Why do you think so many people from ACT UP have had crystal meth problems?

SR: My own feeling about people using crystal meth is that for some people, I think they want to restore that feeling that they are 25 years old again, or they just want to escape. I think it's more addictive than heroin. I think that there are a lot of people out there who are burned out and hurting and looking for an escape. And there are probably as many straight people addicted to crystal meth as there are gay people. It's just another terrible drug that's entered American culture. And we can't say that it's really just a gay problem. It's a problem for people who have no money. It's a problem for people who want to feel young again. It's a problem for people who want to escape.

SS: Right. Guys, do you have any questions for Scott?

JW: Maybe I have a question, but it's going to sound bad – I don't mean it to sound bad. Maybe it has something to do with footage appropriation; maybe it has something to do with lack of support within our own communities.

On your trailer, you use a lot of my footage. And I'm just wondering why you never contacted me.

SS: Okay.

SR: You mean the one that's up on YouTube?

JW: Yeah.

SR: Yeah, we pulled all of that off of the Internet.

JW: So.

SR: So – yeah. We – yeah, it's all off of the Internet.

SS: Oh, okay.

SR: And so we wanted to put something up quick, that would get people to say, yes, we'll put money behind this. But all I did on that project was lose money. It's one of the big reasons I'm broke today.

SS: And out here. So basically, you think that the story that needs to be told is the story of the pharmaceutical neglect, sort of social engineering by pharmaceutical companies. You feel like that's what's missing from the public story.

SR: Well, I think the first story that needs to be done is the ACT UP story, so that the American public really understands what ACT UP was and why it did what it did. Because there's still a lot of misunderstanding – not just in the straight community, but in the gay community, about what ACT UP was, and did. And quite frankly, when I talk to young people who are in their twenties, they have no idea what ACT UP was, or –

SS: Right.

SR: – who was in it, or who Larry Kramer is. They have no idea. So it's a historical record that needs to be given to the greater population. After that, they can tackle the pharmaceutical industry, and my feeling that the pharmaceutical industry has hell to pay, in some karmic form, in the future.

SS: Okay, so I'm at the end. Is there anything else that you think we should be discussing?

SR: No, not that I can think of.

SS: Okay, so I only have one last question, which is, looking back, what, in your view, is ACT UP's greatest achievement; and what do you feel is its biggest disappointment?

01:15:00

SR: I would say that ACT UP's greatest achievement is that they saved the lives of millions and millions of people – not just in the United States, but all over the world, by making sure that a priority was put on developing a cocktail that would make the disease a chronic, manageable disease – at least until a cure is found or released.

As to what its greatest – what disappointed me the most was that toward the end of ACT UP's most vital life, that what happens to any grassroots organization, or any really vital organization dedicated to instrumental change in society happened; was that it was co-opted. A lot of people who were part of ACT UP went to work for pharmaceutical companies, and became lobbyists, and accepted pharmaceutical money. And they were co-opted. And many of the

leading HIV docs that I knew back in the '80s went to work for pharmaceutical corporations. They were co-opted.

So I think that –

SS: And what's the result of this co-optation? What do we not have, because we were co-opted?

SR: We don't have a cure.

SS: Okay.

SR: There would be a cure today, had we not been co-opted.

SS: Okay. Let's end on that. Thank you.

I haven't heard that before. No one has said that. That's really interesting, Scott.

JW: TAG gets pharmaceutical money, but there is no single person in ACT UP I can –

SR: I had a call, when I was trying to raise the money for the film, from a lawyer in Texas, who said that he had a client who was an ex-pharmaceutical head of a research group, who wanted to go on record to tell us what they had done, in a very planned way, to stagger the treatment drugs, and the expense of the treatment drugs, to the buying public; and that he claimed that there is a cure to AIDS, but it will not be released.

SS: And you didn't go interview this guy?

SR: The guy was in a legal battle, the lawyer said, with the pharmaceutical company that he worked for, because he had signed contracts with

abiding gag orders. If he would go public that he could lose his house, that there would be lawsuits. And so until that was settled, there was not going to be – and who knows what's true.

JW: I just don't think we're smart enough. It's a really complicated disease. And if one pharmaceutical company, if somebody had to stumble on it, then some private college researcher would have stumbled on it, too. I mean, it's a complicated disease. I just don't think we're smart enough.

SS: The science is going more toward preventative meds than to a cure.