

Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	David Harrison
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
Date of Interview:	January 27, 2020

Summary:

The interview begins with some technical set up, and then David talks about his part in a new play in New York that discusses white male privilege. We talk about what work has been like as a trans actor - and David talks about not being “Trans enough” to get roles as a trans person due to cultural perceptions of trans people as being in early transition. David’s day job is as a bookkeeper, but his passion is in his artistry. He has noticed, only in the last year or 2 that the landscape for work as a trans artist is changing. He talks about his role in TransAmerica in 2004 and how he felt it was a political steppingstone for trans visibility and rights at the time and recalls that Felicity Huffman was respectful and great to work with as a non-trans actor in a trans role. David’s approach to change is that that lasting, sustainable change happens incrementally, little by little. He talks about identity politics and his primary identity as an artist who wants to inspire people to live authentically. Vanessa Redgrave is a particular inspiration to him, based on her 1986 role as Renee Richards and he recounts getting to meet her at a stage door and getting to thank her as a trans person. Evan talks about looking up to David years ago, and he then remembers some of the early folks he worked with on an early hotline in the 80s, as well as community connections. He recalls how his sexuality changed with transition, and connects this to an early sexual memory and also talks about the significance of the Peter Pan story to him.

In 1996, James Lowen did a photoshoot of him and one of the pictures ended up on the cover of a book by Jason Cromwell that he had no idea about until he saw it in a bookstore. He was also on a cover of Tapestry magazine with Kate Bornstein in a photoshoot with Mariette Pathy Allen, and they both felt very uncomfortable with the shoot and how it was gendered. In 1993, David and Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg were on the Joan Rivers show (1993?) with a ‘gender expert’ and he was inauthentic about being a cross-dresser and had ideas about gender that David felt were very pigeon-holed. At a certain point, he decided not to do any more talk show that were about his gender. He talks about his stage show, FTM, and the cathartic nature of the show. He recalls taking the show to Saskatoon, Canada, where he went to high school and the positive reception that it got there. One year, he had a show at noon on Pride weekend that was very sparsely attended, but a couple years later someone approached him and told him that it changed his life. Activism is a tricky word for David, and he has an uneasy relationship with it. However, he does have very blunt ideas about people who call themselves trans activists but who police others within the trans community harshly. And gives a specific example about a recent film and the way some community members responded to it. He talks about not feeling welcomed in the FTM community because of his sexual orientation and also connects this to politics in the lesbian community that were very similar. He was very much ostracized from his lesbian community. He talks about his sexual practices with other men and what it means to him to explore different types of masculinity.

David talks briefly throughout the interview about jobs he has had: a dominatrix, professional psychic, actor. Reggie Wingnutz is David’s new character that he makes videos of and he talks about how this character is part of his work on sexuality, death, rebirth. Much of his focus in his art is on “having conversations and talking about things that are taboo in a way that’s non-threatening”. Humour is particularly important to him and he has been working on this as he sees the potential it has to help people tune in to difficult conversations. He talks about approaches to privilege and activism and how individual kindness is the key to large scale change. He reflects on the history of gender and sexuality categories since the 18th century and projects that similar trends in change will continue into the future, with gender and sexuality becoming arbitrary to measurements of interpersonal relationality.