

AN INTERVIEW with DAVID GORDON*



Sally Banes

SB: Let's talk about your summer at Connecticut College.

DG: It's a really important and amazing situation to have walked into the middle of what was called, at the time that I did it, the avant garde. I had no knowledge of this work that everybody else had revolted against. So I registered for the Graham class and the Louis Horst class to find out what was being left behind. I took the Graham class for 1 1/2 weeks. She taught the first week, and she was extraordinary. And she pinched my ass and patted my cheek and called me "Lamb of God." But the second week she went away (she only ever taught the first week up there) and the new teacher didn't have her style and I couldn't deal with his method of teaching a class, which was so gooped up with schmaltz. In order to do a technical thing, you had to do so many other emotional-looking things. You had to wiggle your hands when you plied to get life in your plie. And clap your hands when you went across the floor to get life in your triplet. I didn't understand what he was talking about. And so I gave up on the Graham technique class.

VERY
FAMILIAR! →

(Louis) was a different story. He was teaching pre-classic forms, and we were learning things like the pavanne and all this real honest-to-god stuff. And I thought I was working within the structure he had set up but using my own content. I just followed what he said. He said ABA -- this many beats in the A, this many beats in the B, this many beats in the A. That seemed very sensible and that seemed to be all the information I needed. And if I were to stand and pick my nose for eighteen beats and then go back to it at the end, that seemed to be perfectly fine and you couldn't object to that, because I was following the form! ← I BELIEVE THAT I BELIEVED THIS, THEN.

I remember two pieces that I made in the class. The first one got my name put in bad. Because I did this ABA number in which the A part was sort of jumping around and shaking a lot and the B part had to do with a lot of leg lifts and the A part was a return to shaking again and he said, "What's the name of it?" and I said "It's called The Spastic Cheerleader." And that made trouble. The next thing we had to do was to make a duet. Another ABA situation. I asked Valda if she would be in my duet, and we went and worked our asses off in a gymnasium making this duet. My idea was that she would start it and do the A. Then I would come in and we would do the B, and then I would do her movement on the A at the end. Now that seems a perfectly legitimate, rational way to deal with ABA. Well, we came into class and he

WHAT THIS MEANS IS
THAT I BEGAN DANCING
WITH JAMES WARING
WHO INTRODUCED ME
TO MERCE CUNNINGHAM,
MERLE MARSIANO,
KATHERINE LITZ
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OTHER ARTISTS NOT
THEN IN THE MAIN-
STREAM OF WHAT
WAS REFERRED TO
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PROBABLY LOOKING
FOR TROUBLE HERE
BUT NOT HERE

asked for everybody's pieces and I said, "OK, I have a piece," and I don't think I did anything terrible although I don't remember and Valda got up -- VS: I think it was called Duet.

DG: See? And Valda got up and started to do the A and Louis said "That's not a duet!" Valda said "He comes on in a minute." Valda went on for a little while and he said, "That's not a duet!" and he didn't let us continue and he wouldn't see it and after that he wouldn't call my name. It was as if I wasn't there. And so I didn't go back anymore.

I DON'T KNOW → So that ended that kind of knowledge-gathering. After that I did work from what I saw. In between the time of the first duet that we did together at the Living Theater and the Judson situation, the Dunn classes, I didn't do anything.

SB: What was your first duet?

VS: Mama Goes Where Papa Goes. That was a duet done under the aegis of Jimmy (Waring), who -- *← I WONDER WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO SAY.*

DG: That was done in Jimmy's composition class and he got a performance date for all of his students at the Living Theater. I made this duet from chance procedures or my understanding at that time of chance procedures. Tearing up pieces of paper and tossing them into a hat.

VS: And an interesting thing was making me do something that looked difficult for me, awkward. You were very interested in awkwardness.

DG: Valda was so lyrical-looking and competent. It seemed to me that I had to find some way to make her --

VS: I wasn't very competent, in actual fact. I didn't have -- I don't have a very easy body for technique. I had a great sense of rhythm, which very often led to a kind of fluidity of movement of what I was doing. David was very interested in disturbing that.

DG: So she had a solo in that piece of all jumps, which came from nothing and each jump was immediately followed by another jump going in another direction with another part of her body involved in it, so she really had no time to prepare in between any of them. She just had to keep jumping. And the piece had -- I had great ideas for spectacular moments like blackouts and I couldn't abandon them. The two things I remember most from that piece were: the opening of the piece was that I was standing on stage with an armful of balls. And the curtain went up and I opened my arms and all the balls dropped and bounced on the floor until they stopped bouncing and rolled away and then I walked off. And then another thing that happened was that Valda came on with a pair of crutches to the center of the stage and I came on behind her, reached underneath and pulled out the crutches and Valda walked. It was fantastic.

VS: A tribute to the movies.

DG: All those slightly sexist manipulations of her, and the title -- it makes me a little uncomfortable to think of it now.

VS: It was years ago.

DG: And also at some point in the piece you carried me.

VS: Uh huh. Well, that has to do with a reversal of the obvious and easy way, the idea that dances always make everything look easy. You were very involved in that, I think much more than in a sexist act.

DG: But I believe that I was really not thoughtful about those things.

SB: About which things?

DG: About any of the information that I was passing out. I was dealing with it as theatrics. And not as ideas, or -- I had no understanding of the

consequences of some of the statements I was making. I mean, I insisted in that piece that Valda lift me and carry me off. Eight years later Yvonne dealt with, in an intellectual way, the fact that men and women would be equal on the stage and that if I was going to get lifted by her and she was going to get lifted by me, it was going to happen clearly as part of her work. I didn't understand it in that way as part of my work. I was simply dealing with the effect of -- a woman lifts a man, look at this.

So then when the fiasco happened, which I was heading into and had no understanding of, by the time I got to Walks and Progressions, I was totally unprepared for the kind of negative reaction that I got. Because I was just this person who went out and did outrageous things, and called it my career! Anything that I would have thought peculiar enough is what I would have done. And there's something wrong with that system of thinking, it seems to me. It's just not responsible. I don't feel that I was responsible to my work, whatever that was, at that time.

VS: I think one also learned from Jimmy -- which was useful -- why shouldn't something be put in a dance? And what was art, why was it special and particular. One got to be able to do all sorts of things that one might have earlier thought were just not suitable, not proper, not appropriate. One learned not to evaluate things as they came to mind.

DG: I think I went into those Dunn classes because by that time, I had left Jimmy and I wasn't anywhere. And I was looking for something else to belong to.

SB: Were you studying with Cunningham?

DG: No, I was -- what Valda did there could be called studying. What I did couldn't be called studying very well. I went sometimes frequently and sometimes not at all. I was very frustrated by the situation and I never understood what that frustration was about. Until the last few years, when I've begun to understand that I didn't have the patience, the energy or the discipline to insist that my body function in the way that it needed to, to maintain that technique. And I was incredibly lazy.

VS: I enjoyed the class for itself, I think, whereas David indulged in it in fits and starts and rushes, particularly when a performance was coming, because that was when you had to pay attention to it, it prepared you for the performance. I found it a daily activity that I enjoyed. We differed very much in that way.

DG: I found I could always fairly comfortably -- in my head, emotionally -- get through the warmup. But when we had to go across the floor, I died. It was the most horrible, embarrassing situation, I just couldn't deal with it. I never got very much better in Cunningham's classes as far as I could figure out. My turnout never got better, my leg never went higher, my turns never -- nothing got better. I just got more and more frustrated. And I never understood what it was about for me. By the time I went to the Dunn classes, I wanted to be with a group of my peers and see what everybody else was doing and see what I was doing.

It was an amazing class. It was really exciting to work with all of those people. I was turned on by the people more than by the teaching. Judy and Bob (Dunn) were really very rigid about this chance procedure stuff they were teaching. And I had already been through a lot of this chance stuff with Jimmy, I wasn't very religious about it. Both of the pieces I made in that class -- Mannequin Dance and Helen's Dance -- were made because of real discomfort with the rigidity of the situation. I was really trying to find holes in the



I THINK I MUST
HAVE MEANT ONCE
OR TWICE A WEEK
ALTHOUGH I THINK
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BECAUSE I
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THIS ALL SEEMS
RATHER OVER-
EMPHATIC. I
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teaching. And I did manage to make them feel uncomfortable which was very useful to me at the time. The only way I knew how to make work was if I could sense a discomfort in the people I was making the work for. If I could sense discomfort, I knew I was doing ok. And right out of that situation came the Judson Church concerts and those pieces were performed.

The Judson people, of whom I was one, would meet once or twice at the Judson and they would work together and they would offer to be in each others' pieces. I was never in anybody's work until I began to be in Yvonne's pieces some years later. I did no other person's work. They were all in each other's work because it was a democratic situation and if somebody asked you, you had to say yes. Otherwise it meant you were making a qualitative judgement and you couldn't do that! I made my qualitative judgement clear by just not showing up. At all.

So the next thing I remember doing was Random Breakfast which came about because the Judson group was going to go to Washington and do this big Theater Rally thing and they asked me if I would come. It was in 1962 when I began that piece and about 80% of it is improvised. And in 1970 when the Grand Union began to exist and everybody said, "We'll improvise," I said "You're crazy, I can't improvise for a whole evening. I don't even know what to do." And for the first year of the existence of the Grand Union, I walked into those performances and did Yvonne Rainer work. I thought they were all out of their minds. How could you get through a whole evening with nothing prepared?

SB: When you say you did Yvonne Rainer work, what does that mean?

DG: I did Continuous Project. Whatever parts I hung onto, I did Trio A upside down and backwards, fast, slow, lying on the floor, sitting, standing, anything I could do to that piece I did, it was the only piece of material I could hold onto and do over and over and over again while everybody else was trying to figure out how they were going to work together in an improv situation. I was desperate, I thought they were mad. But I didn't want to leave.

But I didn't realize that I did it all those years ago. That's what I mean about that thoughtless situation; it never occurred to me that what I was doing then was that. Certainly now I realize that I realized then that it wasn't necessary for me to make steps in certain situations and to learn them. Because sometimes what could be revealed as a situation was simply the quality of that situation and then you had it, you were doing it, you didn't have to outline that situation any further. And so when (in Random Breakfast) I put on that strapless evening gown and wig and mantilla and came out to do a Spanish dance, that was all I set up for myself: I am going to put this stuff on and I am going to go out and do a Spanish dance. And it's going to last for three minutes and I'll just do it! But what is it you're going to do? I don't know, I'll be made so uncomfortable by appearing in a strapless dress and a wig and a mantilla I'll do anything!

The whole prefabricated dance section in which I talk about how you make a dance was all totally improvised. I said in my head before performances similar things to what I say in my head now. Oh, I'd like to talk about Yvonne, I'd like to do something like what she did in that last piece. I'd like to stand still like Merce. But I had no outline and I had nothing written down and I had no rehearsal of it, ever. I just knew I was going to come out and talk about making a dance and demonstrate how you do it. And make fun of what I didn't like and honor what I liked and in some way deal with that. It would have to last from this time to this time because at the same time Valda

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ALSO THOUGHT
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ALSO THE STYLE
OF PERFORMERS
TAKING OFF LATIN
ENTERTAINERS
(MILTON BERLE'S
CARMEN MIRANDA)
AND TRIED TO
PICK UP ON BASIC
MOVEMENT +
GESTURE AND
USE THEM.

BEFORE G.U.
PERFS.

would do a very structured thing. And I would drag certain things out or repeat them. I would listen to the audience response and play with it, I would improvise. But I didn't know that it was called that ~~SOUNDS NAIVE. I WAS!~~

And now it seems to me that some of those things were crazy. That Spanish dance was crazy. That Judy Garland thing at the end, in top hat and tails -- with a record of Judy Garland singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" which lasted at least three minutes -- in which my only intention was to come out and smile, and I kind of shuffled around and smiled for three minutes. How or why I thought I could get away with that or what that was, I don't know! Years later Steve (Paxton) made a film called Smile and he has a piece called Smile in which two people come out (I've done it with him on 14th Street) and sit down and smile at each other for however long they can stand it. *I DON'T QUITE KNOW WHY I SAY THIS HERE EXCEPT PERHAPS TO LET YOU KNOW THAT*

I think I was very prone to underestimate myself and not to take myself seriously and to assume I would not be taken seriously. I didn't understand what the fuck an artist was, I still don't. *I SMILED IN PERFORMANCE BEFORE STEVE DID. I MADE SMILE ART FIRST! OH EGO!*

SB: What's the difference between an entertainer and an artist?

DG: Well, as an entertainer, your really upfront goal is to be entertaining.

If you're an artist, that may be one of the aspects of your art, but it may not. Whereas if you're an entertainer, it is the aspect. Obviously one of the clearest ways to be entertaining and to know that you're being entertaining is to be funny. You can't tell if when you're being serious they're really interested. And unless you hear out-and-out crying you can't tell if you're being poignant. But you sure as hell can tell when you're being funny! But at the same time the thing that goes along with it, which I have discovered, is that you are not taken seriously if you are funny. If your work is continuously amusing, when it's time for the heavyweights to come in and do a concert, you're not asked. I wasn't. And for the years between '65 and '70, I was nowhere.

SB: Was it hard when all those other people were working together to do stuff on your own?

DG: It was impossible. ^{FOR ME} I just didn't. After Walks and Digressions -- Walks and Digressions got made in a very interesting way, for me. It was the first and only piece I've made in which I allowed myself to do the things that occurred to me without editing out things that might reveal me in a light I did not want to be revealed in, that unglamorized me, that I couldn't see the obvious theatrical quality of. If something looked like work, I got rid of it. If it looked like magic I held onto it. When I began to work on that solo it was because Yvonne and Steve had asked if I would share a concert with them. I had these two solos I did whenever anybody asked me. And I decided I would do them again -- it was three years later -- and I would also do a new solo.

I remember going to work at the Judson to make this solo and making notes as it came out. It was a sequence of events, non-related, with bridges. And I remember very clearly as the material came out, thinking what the fuck am I doing, this is really grotesque. I'm walking around holding my crotch and pulling my pants down and spitting. These are really ugly things. Why do I want to do these things? And I thought all right, I'll keep it, I'll see what happens. And when it came time to perform it I was really exceedingly uncomfortable. I was in a transitional stage which I didn't understand. I was working with Yvonne who wanted no makeup and ordinary clothing and then there was me and my glamorous past -- I would run off stage and take off my makeup and run on and do Trio A and run offstage and put on some

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NOT ASPECTS.

PURPOSE,
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BULL
SHIT!

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makeup and run on and do my own work. And I didn't really understand that. The costume at that point for Mannequin Dance was a biology labcoat, but with flesh-colored tights underneath. You have hairy legs, you wear tights. One of the things that got written in the Bob Morris review (of Walks and Digressions) was that when I pulled my pants down, I had underpants on underneath. I wore underpants. It never occurred to me not to wear underpants! Revealing myself in my underpants was the most I'd ever done so I didn't dream of revealing myself naked. And when it came time to rehearse it in the space and to set the lights, I realized that I was scared shit of doing that piece, I had never been so frightened in that way and so I set the lights so you could barely see it.

It had never occurred to me that I would be booed, it was just not in my experience or in the experience of anyone I knew. And I decided not to risk that anymore. I stopped making work. Retired. At the age of 26. And I didn't choreograph again until 1971.

The Grand Union opened up an incredible number of possibilities for me as a performer and as an artist, learning the strength of my decision-making process. In Grand Union performances, you must believe in yourself. You have no choice. You're called upon to make decisions constantly and you must have that faith. You must have faith in your failure and in the possibility of it and the willingness to stand behind it as a public act. And also the possibility of succeeding. Success or failure does not necessarily have anything to do with audience response but with one's own evaluation of what one has done in performance and what is interesting. In Grand Union, I am always aware of and made uncomfortable by my excess. I always hope that my excess is balanced by Steve's sincerity.

My work picked up great momentum when the Grand Union started going out and doing residencies, because of teaching classes, I took the option of making pieces wherever we were. And I would have a captive crew of people who would be the cast. I had between 25-40 people in Oberlin and made a piece out there. And I didn't have to deal with people having jobs and other commitments and not being able to get to rehearsals. And then I came back to the city and got hold of 40 people and re-staged the work, and got no coverage whatsoever. After I did The Matter, I realized that I'd had it with large groups of people. Back to that feeling of being anonymous, not being the sole performer -- I thought that if I had enough people I'd be hidden. Well, it was horrendous, although they were all terrific.

I did a solo concert at the Dance Gallery which was a half-hour version of a work for 40 people, Sleepwalking, half hour solo matter and half hour of solo improvisation. I was so petrified the night of the performance that I couldn't stop shaking. It was a terrific performance, and I felt very comfortable about it. And that led me to think about doing another solo concert. And yet I wanted the work -- a specific thing that I was involved with: hand gestures which continued; whatever was going on, whatever happened, whatever other movement the body was doing, whatever voice, music or sound happened, this continued to happen -- I wanted it to be seen on a group as well as on a solo performer. So I worked with 11 people, and one of them was Valda. I taught them the work. I tried to set up a situation in which they could do anything they wanted as long as this (he does the gesture) kept up. They could look like anything they wanted, say anything they wanted, do anything they wanted. I just had to see this all the time. I had four weeks of rehearsals, and by the end of the third week I was saying, "OK, everybody stand still."

THIS IS NOT
USUAL FOR ME. →

I somehow thought I could teach them all to improvise and function in some fashion I could tolerate, but they were making decisions that were horrifying to me. And what's more, they could not judge, as I could, what those decisions would do to this (gestures). I made a tape for that piece about an idea of working: working either to present work or to work. Which is not clear to me ever. If I enjoy the act of work and of working with somebody, and if the idea of eventually presenting that work is so uncomfortable -- dealing with the audience, waiting for approval -- why can't I just make work and not perform it? Does work include performance? Is there work if you haven't performed it?

SB: So what's the matter?

DG: The answer was obviously right there. I made a tape of my quandary and played it at a performance. That's the only answer there is.

I feel that working with other people when you don't have a company -- maybe even when you do, I don't know because I never had one -- is like selling yourself. I go in there and I have to make them love me and I have to make them trust me. I have to subtly manipulate them in some fashion, which makes me uncomfortable. Starting off inevitably by saying "You're free! You're free!" and then saying "You're not so free, you're less free than you were last week." The ambiguous state of being the boss and then wanting to be one of the gang is very difficult for me and I decided I didn't have the energy last fall, although I had thought of a work for six people. So I asked Valda if she would work alone with me. And we began to go over to the Cunningham studio mornings and just work quietly together and we did that for a month. Improvising. We began working with two chairs and I had an idea for a second piece of material. The second month we worked at Trisha (Brown)'s. The chair piece came spilling out -- it was all there. The material was easy and clear and accessible to me and Valda is amazing to work with. She has an incredibly keen eye and an attention to detail and is amazingly disciplined. All those years of working at the Cunningham studio have just -- I can't tell you what it's like to discover over again, as if for the first time, what it is to work with a disciplined dancer. I mean, I've been working with non-dancers all this time, not -- as Steve or Yvonne or Deborah (Hay) used them -- because of the body, but because they were less fearful. A dancer I would have felt I had to interest physically. Why would a dancer want to come to me to stand still? Or to walk? And so I worked with non-dancers simply because they don't frighten me so much. Suddenly I realized that the shorthand between a dancer and a dancer is incredible! You just don't have to talk your brains out every time you want something to happen. You just imply what it is, you just suggest the movement and it is clear to somebody who has the vocabulary.

SB: But you had some dancers working in those group pieces along with the non-dancers, right?

DG: Yeah. In Sleepwalking, which was the first piece after the long retirement, a piece made on non-dancers, students of Yvonne's. The Grand Union got a job in the American Dance Marathon and I decided to do a version of Sleepwalking and asked the Grand Union to be in it. That was horrendous! Once you have become your own boss -- I'm sure this is true of any business -- it's very hard to work for somebody else. In The Matter, except for Doug (DOUGLAS DUNN) and me and Valda, everybody of the 40 people were non-dancers. Valda had a very interesting solo in that, made of a score of photographs. She was on tour with Merce, and the only way I could figure out for her to have a solo



NOT TRUE. ABOUT
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(IF I DO SAY SO
MYSELF)

was to send her a score of positions and ask her to memorize it and when she came back we set the transitions between these poses, which she then did nude. It's a beautiful solo. And Doug and I were working at the same time on a concert which we did together, and part of the material that went into that concert was material that went into The Matter. The most interesting thing about that piece for me was the use of nude people along with clothed people. And there was to be a larger proportion of nude people, but very few people will take their clothes off.

The idea of either doing some one activity for a very long time or some small activity many times is of constant interest to me. The original intention of Mannequin Dance in 1962 was to present the piece ten times in one evening with the mannequins moved around the space. I've never gotten to do it -- it meant you had to get mannequins, have a whole evening, all that stuff. But the chair piece is a situation in which the same amount -- approximately eight minutes -- of material is done with the chair in three different versions. (NOW 4)

SB: What kinds of things are done with the chair?

DG: The chair serves as a kind of partner. It's a solo situation which we perform simultaneously, except the simultaneity gets off, because of the various times we take to do things. We keep an eye on each other, we are aware of where each other is, we catch up, slow down, pass, fall behind, and end vaguely at the same time. The chair is a partner and we do -- anything I could think of doing with a chair. Stand on it, walk on it, fall off it, turn over it, get in it, get out of it, climb on it, have it climb on me, anything that can happen to a chair. The movement is very organically composed, (WHATEVER THAT MEANS!) it moves along at a regular pace so that it doesn't appear to be the mechanics of how do you deal with a chair, but really a duet between a human and a chair.

There began a process which I am now going to examine. There was the material -- the original eight minutes of working with this chair. And I think what I started to do then was to decorate it, elaborate in some fashion. The original piece of movement was simply a turn down to the floor, turn around on the floor and stand up. I was interested in it as movement, we began working on it, I abandoned it at some rehearsal, and the next thing I knew I was sitting in a chair. But I get tired sometimes of leaving behind ideas. So I insisted that this thing would occur, at the beginning of every time we went to the chair we would do this thing. There are three versions of the chair piece. There are five versions of the entire thing, including the turn with nothing, the turn with a tape, the turn with another tape, the turn with the first chair, the turn with the second chair, the turn with the third chair, the end. I had the idea to sing during the third version of it because the energy of singing and the energy of doing the chair piece the third time around would be horrendous, and it would be very interesting to push that singing energy, since neither of us is a professional singer and we have no idea of where you get it from. The thing I thought of singing was "Stars and Stripes Forever." Well, now we've got "Stars and Stripes Forever;" let's start with it. Well, let's end with it. I'm back to ABA, what is that all about? And making the tapes -- I came up with two different versions, both of them nonsensical, about how this piece was made. They really had nothing to do with how the piece was made. Making a comment on Barbara (Dilley)'s mysticism, and the attention to what seems to me irrelevant details in an intellectual theory made the first tape happen. And chance procedures taken

to an idiot level made the second tape happen.

But the most interesting part of that piece to me now is what happens with that chair. It's not the tapes and it's not the music. We're going to be performing it this year and I want to do it in its original form enough times to really understand what the use of that material is, whether it makes the other material more accessible, by candy-coating it, whether that need occur at all, whether the piece ought to simply be any unlimited number of versions of the chair until you die doing the chair.

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DG: There is a terrible lot of pain that is attached to the moment that a performance is over. The moment that his image is ended, my pain is severe. My discomfort and insecurity and lack of confidence is awful at the end of a performance. So whoever he is out there -- and I'm not somebody who thinks that the way to get off in a performance is to go away; I'm right there, I understand precisely what's going on every minute, I'm making decisions every minute about what to do next -- it's as if for a moment out there I am a god-like creature and the minute after the performance I'm really just mortal. I know everything I'm doing during a performance; I don't know what the fuck to do after it. In the old days getting drunk or getting stoned or partying didn't help. Now I don't even do that any more because I'm getting too old to get drunk after a performance. Because then I can't perform the next night. It was never any good anyway, it was just a way of disappearing. But those moments of performing...

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DG: I don't know how anybody has the energy to keep on making work.

