An Interview with Denise Clarke
Part of the Canadian Dance History Project
at the University of Victoria

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Interviewer: Sandra Drag
Interviewee: Denise Clarke
Transcribed By: Sandra Drag
Interviewee has read the transcript: Yes

Introduction:
Originally from Calgary, Alberta, Denise Clarke has been involved with the performing arts since childhood. She first trained and performed as a dancer. She has been a member of the One Yellow Rabbit theatre company since 1983.

In this interview, Ms Clarke discusses how she first became involved in the performing arts and the significance of One Yellow Rabbit to her artistic life. Also discussed is the collaborative, creative process of devising theatre, as well as the challenges that come with being in a male-dominated work environment. The ecology of present-day theatre in Calgary and Canada is also discussed, as is the future viability of theatre.

Rationale of editing/transcription choices:
The following transcribe has been edited for clarity, though the content remains an accurate reflection of the conversation.

-Interview-

Clarke: Double recording – smart.

Drag: Yeah! The last project I did, I actually lost one of the recordings, so…

Clarke: Do you know what – I have been interviewed probably, oh I'm going to say 200 times in my life. And – minimum – and… several times, people's – professionals, have gone: (large intake of breathe)… "I wasn't recording!"

Drag: (Laughing) I'm just going to double-check that I am recording – and I am.

Clarke: Okay. Shoot.

Drag: So first of all, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your career and how you got started in theatre and dance?

Clarke: Okay… I'll try to give you the concise version. I was a classically trained ballet dancer, from a very young age. Ridiculously young – three. All the

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way through until I was nineteen years old. I completed the R.A.D. [Royal Academy of Dancing] and the I.S.T.D [Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing] syllabi in classical dance training, as most dancers at that time did in Canada. And, was absolutely passionate about it, and then moved on, danced semi-professionally, and then professionally in Canada, for a few years and at the age of, I'm going to say twenty-two, I sustained enough injuries both emotionally, psychologically and physically that I decided to leave that career behind and strike out as a poet, which I did in Montréal. I was at Montréal at the time, this would be 1976, and, of course that meant I was a waiter. But I began my autodidactic journey training myself and educating myself, because I was a high school drop-out. Which I had done in order to dance. And somewhere along the line, somebody convinced me to teach them. And in teaching them dance, I realized that I really loved this idea of giving movement that I had designed. I'd always made movement and always been very, very much an improvisational dancer, but suddenly I realized: Oh, I really like dancing again. The emotional distress of the world of dance, and the – at the time – the very undeveloped ideas of size, body image, and so forth. You know, the aesthetic was very tall, but extremely thin, and I wasn't that thin – I'm this thin. And to be the size I was as a ballet dancer was undoable, and I was just too damn hungry. And so I had left it behind, kind of angrily and with great pain. It really hurt – like a bad relationship. But I suddenly realized: Oh. I actually really dig making my own work. And performing my own stuff – oh! Okay. And so I came back to the performance world, in my very early twenties, as an independent choreographer, and performer.

And at the same time, One Yellow Rabbit was pitching its tent, and they were my best friends, and very quickly I was drafted in as the movement person. They were very interested in physical theatre – in Grotowski, and so forth. And I was kind of following them around, and helping them out, and finally agreed to perform and choreograph a show during which they were trying to figure out a song, and I was like: "You guys," and sang it for them, and that was it. All of a sudden my voice was in the realm of my performing abilities as well, and I launched my career as an actor. And so the parallel life as the independent dancer/choreographer continued alongside the theatre development and the acting and writing and directing world until – probably I was thirty. At the same time I was teaching at the University of Calgary, and… loved it. I absolutely had a passionate life as a teacher and I developed a really huge interest in a system of pedagogy that was really meaningful to me, and really forwarded my own ideas of movement and movement for non-actors and movement for dancers. But I realized at around the age of thirty, that if I didn't get out of the University of Calgary, I would remain there. I didn't have a degree or anything, but had been drafted in as a sessional teacher, and was teaching in the Fine Arts department and the Phys-Ed department, which was called then, and not the Kinesiology department yet. And… you know, I kind of realized I

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think I'm going to just devote myself to One Yellow Rabbit because I just really liked what we were doing, I really loved the work, and… I don't really remember leave – well, I do remember *leaving* the dance world. It just felt too limited and square for me – which is interesting because at the time the dance world was the hippest place to be, but there was a lot of regionalism and, you know, western Canadian dance artists were considered not good enough. And that enraged me. And, so I think it was easy for me to leave that behind and push my shoulder against the One Yellow Rabbit wheel and, have been there, you know, devotedly – and, working as an independent when I'm choreographing big shows, big musicals. Less and less of that because I put more and more of my energy towards the Rabbits now, and my own teaching systems and so forth. But, for many years, I continued to choreograph and work with bigger companies: The Citadel, Theatre Calgary, opera companies – choreographing and staging big work.

Drag: I noticed that there is a difference between choreographing and staging. Could you maybe just go into that a little bit and explain how that differs?

Clarke: Yeah… well, choreography is the actual movement-to-movement step-making. And staging is the overall picture and patterning and design. So it's the movement, the design of the piece, the concept, the style, and within that – this is my definition – is the choreography. So, a lot of the work I do now, and have done for years, and especially with the Rabbits, has been to set the performer/actors to task, doing very specific vocabulary work that I oversee the design of, but that they create. And then I arrange that movement.

Drag: Okay. So that's how of the performers become an ensemble?

Clarke: Yeah… well, it allows the actors full ownership. Quite often I also do set small vocabularies for them to learn, and so we're mixing and matching my choreography and theirs in my staging design.

Drag: Could you clarify what you mean by "vocabulary"? Is that just, here's a dance step, or…?

Clarke: Yes – sometimes it's like: five, six, seven, eight. You know, counts of phrases, of movement that I have set. And sometimes it's – and more and more, it's based on the text we're using, and exactly how I would like them to design the movement – and then how I will distil what they've designed. And it can be very arbitrary, but my research and discovery and eyes have told me over the years that if I ask you to take a text you're interested in playing, and break it down and find some very key inspirational segments, or words, from that, and I set you to the task to arbitrarily pick a movement, and link them together really fast, I can make

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you look – I don't know how trained you are as a dancer – but I can make you look amazing really, really fast, and you'll know what you're doing because you made it up. And once you've really memorized what you've made up, and repeated it fifty times, which is easy to do, because you know it… you will inform it. And I can then begin to say: "Now you can add to it. Now you can do it walking. Now you can do it sitting. Everybody learn Sandra's movement. We're just going to use the first quarter of what you did, and I just want everyone to do that. And now, Sandra, keep going on your own, and now everybody pick their own movement phrase." You have an enormous set of building blocks to build your design out of.

Drag: Yeah. That sounds like a really neat way to do it.

Clarke: It's very effective, very efficient, and especially, you're looking at the hive mind, the collective spirit in the room, creating beautiful movement. Because all movement is beautiful, and in particular, using repetition and distilling that movement, you can make it even more potent and powerful because you can isolate it. And if I can get you to understand I don't want you to beat your hands in the air and your head in the air with your rhythms whilst you're trying to deliver a text, but that I want you to sit very still and deliver the text, and at some point begin your vocabulary, I can guarantee you that it'll be much more of a powerful engagement visually for the audience as they listen to you. And then we can make the choice that now you're just talking with your hands and being normal, and… suddenly it just bleeds out, so we have a lot more choice to play.

Drag: How do you find when you're doing this kind of choreography, or staging work, and you're not also directing the piece – how does that relationship play into it?

Clarke: Well, it's really important that I work with people who know me, and appreciate the system I'm giving them. So I've worked for years and hundreds of years with Blake Brooker, at One Yellow Rabbit. And he calls himself a movement dramaturge, and sometimes I believe I'm also supplying partially that job. But our agreement is that I will lay out the physicality of a piece and he will yay or nay it. So you give your director – you have to, you know, understand that the director's vision, if you're in the piece, is the one you must defer to. So if you've agreed – that the agreement you all have is that, at some point, he or she may say: "I don't think we can use that" or, "I think that that's too much," or "I just want to use that beginning image" or – and as long as you're not like, married to it and have decided you're a genius – which has happened – you can just go, "Okay." So the director has the final say.

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Drag: Nice… You've said you worked with Blake Brooker for a long time – how does that kind of lasting relationship influence your work? Do you find it carrying over to other things you do, or…?

Clarke: (Denise reacts with amusement) Ughh, yes. I was married to him.

Drag: Okay.

Clarke: I'm no longer – I'm now married to Chris Cran. But he – I could not even begin to tell you where it starts and ends… I could, but it would take many more hours than we have. And it's a very symbiotic relationship, and it involves not just him, but all the Rabbits who I've worked with for thirty years. Michael Green, Andy Curtis. Richard McDowell, the composer, and videographer, and tech genius of our company, is someone I've known since I was fifteen … our relationship is also incredibly connected. So, they – we're all just so involved with one another aesthetically, that you wonder sometimes whose idea's whose and, it's easy for me to sometimes take credit for an idea, or give credit, because I can remember very specifically devising that idea, or using that as my *cri de coeur* in a rehearsal process, but um, it – a lot depends on the agreement between the ensemble to not constantly claim credit and need.

Drag: Because Yellow Rabbit has been around for – since, I believe, 1983, is that correct?

Clarke: [For the past five minutes, there's been a noise in the air like something knocking on wood, and Denise points it out.] Do you think that's something in the air – is that a, it sounds like a woodpecker.

Drag: I think it… yeah, it might be…

Clarke: It's a woodpecker! Cool! Oh look, it's a, it's a… oh, that is so fantastic. Can you see it up on top of the… just look at the very top outside [there is a telephone pole but the woodpecker is blending into the wood and I cannot see it]. On the side, come over here, see the top?

Drag: Oh yeah! Oh, it's so tiny!

Clarke: I know. They're beautiful.

Drag: That's so cool.

Clarke: That's so great.

[And we take our places back at the table.]

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We've been around since around '83, yeah.

Drag: How do you see – how have you seen the geography of theatre changing? Has there been a lot of changes you're trying to incorporate into the company, or – how have you managed to be around for so long? Because it seems like a really long time for a theatre company.

Clarke: It's enormously long – especially the same people. Many, many, many, many, many, many theatre companies are around for a lot longer than thirty years… not normally with the same team. We are, and have always defined ourselves more as a rock band than a theatre company, in our own minds. And that might give you insight into why we're still around. Everybody does their solo album, everybody… we need a bass player, we need a drummer, we need a songwriter, we need the songwriting team. If we're the Rolling Stones, we can't – it wasn't just Jagger, it wasn't just Lennon or McCarthy, it was it magic of them together. It's mysterious, it involves friendship, tension, the right kind of irritations that get you to the pearl place, um… it is mysterious though. And we've really had a lot of fun together. We're very playful, and we've had a lot of fun together.

Have we incorporated a lot of other – of new ideas? You know, and the risk of sounding like a complete egomaniac, not really. We're very interested in our ideas, and the implementation of what we're into. None of us are theatre school trained. I think Michael and Andy dipped their toes in and jumped back out as young guys, in their university years… We're interested in really good theatre, but we don't often look outside of ourselves to go: "Oh, we really dig what's going on with Lepage, let's do some of that." Not really. Never. Much more, really down with what our ideas, and our passions and interests… so I guess what we're influenced now by, you know, all our young friends that we try and bring into the company and work with. The Lab is a huge development for us because it was a place where we could be surrounded by artists who were fascinated by the similar theatre making systems, and want to come and see what ours were. And that is spawned an enormous network of like-minded artists across the country. And they influence us with friendship, and spirit, and curiosity…. We've just witnessed the explosion of small independent creation theatre types.

Drag: That's really interesting.

Clarke: Yeah – because there really were very, very, very few. We had lots and lots of friends who were doing the same things. More in Toronto, when we were kids, but we didn't, you know, we didn't see the, (Denise's phone goes off for a second before being silenced) we didn't see the final results of a body of work. And you know, that was another thing I credit Blake Brooker with. He was absolutely visionary in his decisions as a very

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young guy that we needed to devote ourselves to a creation of a body of work. Not a hit, not a great show, but a body of work. So, we are very proud of that, and it's sustained us.

Drag: And would you say that the Summer Lab that you run helps keep that fresh? That body of work updated and…?

Clarke: Well, it allows us to refer to it and use it as a teaching tool, and it's allowed us to actually under- you know, when you've done something with a lot of intuitive presence and, non-cerebral, non-intellectual – I mean, we're deeply intellectual as a bunch of, you know, we're sort of geeky that way, but we're… not in the rehearsal room, in the creation room. We're much more active and… we like to work fast and put a lot of ideas on the table fast, and then begin discerning. It's allowed us to create the working vocabulary. And really, really name it, define it, for ourselves, so we can use it as a organizing principle for whomever we're working with, and that has been a really valuable part of what we've become. Because we hear ourselves often say: "Like we say in the Lab" or, you know, "Just like what we tell everyone in the Lab" and we're hearing ourselves define it – you've made work and then someone goes "how'd you do that" and you go "I don't know… wow, I guess if I really think about it – for seventeen years – I can probably come up with that."

Drag: Yeah… Uh, could you explain the process of the summer Lab a little more? And just how, how that starts and what goes on during it and what the end product is?

Clarke: Mhmm. It has been a… gathering of like-minded artists every summer for three weeks. We work Monday to Friday. We work 10:00 to 6:00, as a group. The morning sessions are – I'm in charge of the body, and we – take apart the systems that I've developed, but also, I pay homage to yoga, and I break down for the artists within the practice that we begin to engage in together, why I've used yoga as the company's physical – as opposed to a dance system. And how it has influenced and helped me in my theatre practice. And then I take that work and really encourage the artists to devise their own practice and then I… [Denise has received a second text message in less than a minute and sighs] God, go away… – and then I, finish that session with them and – which is also very helpful to giving them a very important beginning to the day, and, we really believe in, you know; our triad is precision, economy, and relaxation. So we've begun with some very precise and economical explorations that result in them feeling more relaxed and – and one, as we begin, then we do a lot of very specific physical work, task-making, vocabulary building, examination, postural analysis, special work, um, distillation notions… and then the day transfers.

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There's lunch, and Blake takes over for a few hours and he does his systems – a small lecture series, and his systems of devising text. So he's in charge of the word. The text, for making text out of the word, and in the world; and moves the gang towards group creation, which they begin in the second week in his sessions, and which is presented – each group, small groups, we divide the gang into two groups, or three depending how many people are there, and they present their group pieces as a staged reading in week three, and then Chris Cran takes over the last part of the day, and is the observer and the observed, one of the most important relationships for me, in my life, is with Chris, who's a visual artist, who – our conversation had been for many, many, many years before the Lab was invented, he would always tell me what he could see on stage. And it was a very informative thing to me as a performer, and I always was fascinated by what he could see, and how he could name it, and why he saw what he saw, and how he liked to watch shows over and over and over and over and over! I was fascinated by that; he brings some of that to the artists, and his own body of work to freshen their palette, and give them something else to think about in terms of the visual. And then, we… devote a portion of the day to discussing punctum and studium – what has pierced them in the day, what the general information package is, and within that, what has leapt out for you individually… and then they spend the evenings and the weekends creating their own ten-minute piece, and/or working with each other on ten-minute pieces, to be presented at the end.

Drag: Okay. Is this meant for people who have specific dancing training, or do you just take –

Clarke: No, it's not dance – It's theatre.

Drag: Okay. Because it sounded like there was a lot of movement involved –

Clarke: There is! But, you know, human beings on a stage are in a body. And what kills a lot of good theatre is that they forget that. Or nobody took into account that they're standing yakking at you for a long time, with no understanding of… the body that was attached to the talking head. So we're doing total theatre, baby.

Drag: Okay.

Clarke: We're saying – it's not this [Denise makes a dance motion] – it might be! But you better be very clearly making that choice. Oh no, there's a great deal of performance conversation in the observer, in the third part – portion of the day. They are observing, recording their observation, manipulating that recording and feeding it back, on the stage. So you're constantly in the light, you're constantly delivering text, you're constantly thinking about your own body in space. That's what matters when people

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come to a theatre. It really doesn't matter what the play is, or what the set is, or what the design is – if they came, and you blow it… they don't really care how good the play was. If they come and you really don't blow it, and are able to deliver it with ever- equanimity and with power and the right kind of emotional temperature… they go "that was fantastic," right? "Was it a good play?" "Yeah, it was a pretty good sho- I think the play was okay, but it was a really amazing experience – I was glad I was there" as opposed to "[sigh] kinda sucked."

A great performer can elevate any material. So – of course, we really like good plays, and we *really* like good performance templates, and we're very, very attentive to that. But we are a performance theatre.

Drag: I noticed on the website that –

Clarke: So it's open to dancers, actors, writers, song-writers, architects, anybody with advanced study in their field.

Drag: Okay.

Clarke: So no beginners. Right. Somebody says to me, "Oh, I'd love to do all that, I'll work my ass off" – and, "I'm an advanced practitioner in something, I know what it's like to work really hard, and be really good at something."

So you're kind of just, putting everyone together, and seeing what you get… that's really interesting. Sorry – what you were saying –

Drag: I noticed on the website that you guys put a really big emphasis on music… I'm wondering if that's just for the dance pieces that you do or if that's just in general, for everything.

Clarke: We don't really do dance pieces, everything's mixed up. So there's – most of our theatre involves a very strong physical component. In the past, even more so – highly choreographed. Less and less, but still, enormous attention paid to whatever's going on. Fingertips, how the hands touch the surface of the table, all of that – we don't do dance work.

Drag: I think I'm getting mixed up with the choreographed aspect, and the dance aspect, because for me those are kinda-

Clarke: Yeah, you're brain says dance.

Drag: Yeah.

Clarke: Yeah, and you know… It's just a word, but, it's not a dance company. It's a theatre company.

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Drag: Yeah, definitely.

Clarke: And… it's a total theatrical [Denise moves her finger in a circular motion on the table] devotion. As opposed to a… dance heavy, or musical – we don't do musical theatre, although we have a dozen musicals in our repertoire. We're very, very, very passionate about cabaret work… we always are singing and none of us are trained. But we don't worry about that because we're only worried about how the song was delivered. Obviously we care if it's really flat and pitchy and awful and people are going, "Oh God!" but we don't have that problem. People normally go, you know, maybe a trained opera singer or a legit mind is going to say, "Well" [Denise appears unimpressed] – but most people are hip enough to understand, this is what it is. More like a pop, or a rock sensibility, where you don't go, "I don't know if I liked that, that voice didn't hit its notes," – that's not what you're doing, you're delivering music.

Drag: Do you find that a lot of people who come and see the shows understand that aspect, like, understand what you're doing? Are they very receptive to it?

Clarke: Yes. We're really good at what we do. Sorry –that's sounds egocentric, but it's not. We're very good at what we do. Maybe when we were younger, people were like, "I don't get it," and it would be like, "You didn't get what?" and I used to engage them – we've always tended to come out and speak to the audience and hang out with people. And I – one of my favorite games was: "Oh, what didn't you get?" "Well, I don't know, it was kind of poetry, and then like, dancing and stuff?" – it's like, "Yeah, and what didn't you get?" "Well, I don't know. Like, I thought it was going to be a play." "So, do – you don't like poetry?" "No! I don't mind poetry." "Did you know what it was about?" "Yeah! I mean, it was about this and that and this." "Ah. And the movement, did it make sense to you that, you know." "Yeah, well, I knew that, you know, she was dancing with her husband." "Yeah… so, what didn't you get?" And it used to be quite often that people would be like: "Well, I mean, I got it," but it was just, new to them.

Drag: Yeah, it was different.

Clarke: And, you still have a little bit of that. But, now that we're older, our delivery system is mature, and has a great deal of ownership. And that puts a lot of audience members at ease immediately, because they're not looking at a young person really trying hard and being weird – but we sure had our share of those days! And maybe we educated our audience, for the most part, I'm sure there's still lots of people who come and go, you know, "I like going to a nice play!"

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Drag: (Jokingly) "Where's the Shakespeare?!"

Clarke: Yeah! But, lot of people now are way educated.

Drag: They're a little bit more receptive to –

Clarke: Oh yeah, and they, they don't want to – if they, they know. I mean, if I'm going to see a Noel Coward, I'm going to see *A Christmas Carol*, or something that is very familiar to me, and predictable… We – we don't do predictable. And I think a lot of people appreciate that and, feel like they're in on it.

Drag: So what influences you guys to do the work that you want to do – I know you said that, Brooker takes things from the everyday and creates out of that… Is that just a general thing for everyone, or…?

Clarke: We bring – each artist is responsible – whenever you want, you can bring something. It has tended to be myself, Michael Green, and Blake, who have brought. That's who brings the project to the table and says, "I'm doing" – I'll give you an example: right now I'm working with Peter Hinton, who used to run the National Arts Centre – he's now directing and, he's more known as a director. But he and I are old friends, and he wants to perform. He and I wanted to do trench poetry together in a choreographed performance. And I presented that to the company, they all went, "Oh, we want to do that too", there's touring possibilities in Europe for this project commemorating World War I – everybody leaps on, so now we're doing a project called *Trench: A Ballet Macabre*. Michael Green brings his *Making Treaty 7*, a project he's been working on with First Nations, to reenact and delve into what has happened – what is the aftermath of the signing of Treaty 7. And so we will be interacting very closely with First Nations, which is very meaningful to all of us, and very exciting; and giving us an opportunity to suddenly really understand where we come from and what was here before we arrived, and, and how we can now interact together.

Drag: So, where… what do you look for doing the most? …That was a weird way to phrase that. Where do you find the most meaning in the work that you do?

Clarke: Well, once we – once we decide we're doing it, it's – that's a done deal. I mean, once we go, "Okay, we're gonna investigate the poet – the trench poets, those who took the time and/or were so moved during the war – Great War – to write about it. And write about it poetically, and to record what happened to them," well – we're in. Once it's agreed… we're in. If we're going to do a piece about alien abduction, once we make the

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decision, you know: “Let’s do it,” “Yeah, yeah, okay, let’s all –” “Yeah, okay,” we’re in.

We take great inspiration and meaning out of a simple idea. We don’t judge. We don’t begin a process, and with each idea go, “I don’t like that!” “No, I don’t like that,” “I don’t want to do *that*.” Everything goes on the table, and then up on the wall. And then, later on, it’s like, “You know, I just – I’m still not responding to that,” “You know, me neither.” “Me neither,” “Why aren’t we responding to that?” … “Maybe we don’t want it,” or, “Oh my God, I know why, because it’s really important sticking point.”

Drag: So, do you find that you bring a lot of things that you’ve done before, into your current works?

Clarke: What do you mean?

Drag: If you… I’m imaging… little cards that have ideas on them on a corkboard, and then developing a grander idea out of all those little ideas, and maybe with one as a focus, but I’m sure, or, I assume, there must be some ideas that get left behind –

Clarke: Oh yeah.

Drag: – or forgotten. Do you ever incorporate those into the new works that you do – ?

Clarke: Yep. Yeah. Yeah, sometimes, you know, maybe not really specifically – we do not have a card catalogue – we should. We should. That’d be a really good idea. Because we do put cards up on the wall. And we do put notes up. And to tell you the truth, It’s like, where are all the notes? I’ve got, for instance, a sheaf of cards from when we worked with Bruce McCulloch from *Kids in the Hall*, and he’s a very close friend, and I loved our cards from that session, and I kept them just almost out of affection. Moreover the tone, and the energy and the overall lesson from something… resonates. And we get back to it.

Drag: What kind of things–

Clarke: But our rules, our sort of rules of engagement always shifting, always changing, but they’re very important to us. You know, because sometimes it can be like, “You know what? You’re judging me,” and it’ll be like, “(gasp) Sorry… yeah I am,” it’s like, “Well don’t, because it’s bugging me right now and I don’t feel like I can… rock, you know, I’m not – I’m feeling…” So we have the language to go, you know, because we have tension. We’re human beings, and there’s times where it’s really tricky –

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and it's very hard sometimes to be the only woman. And they would all look at me right now if they were here and go, "What!?" But there's many, many an occasional where it just – it strikes me – I can give you an example. Blake's relationship with me is such that around a table – his relationship to Andy would always be if Andy feeds in on something: "Oh, Andy, that's a fantastic idea!" – he uses that kind of language to encourage Andy, and to make Andy feel like his idea's are so welcome, because Andy tends to be much more of a listener. If I am forwarding an idea, he'll go: "Yeah, yeah – you know, yep, yeah", and he'll literally say, "Yeah, no." [Denise puts her hand up between us, demonstrating] And use that kind of a thing where his hand will do that, I'll have to: "Please don't, please let me finish". And there would be always a little tension, that it's like, "Don't, don't, don't take up too much air and time, D". So, for me it's strange because it's like, is this a gender thing, is this a relation – a relationship thing? But, he and I have learned over these years to talk about that. To go, you know, to say: "No, I wasn't, I wasn't at all, it was this", I'll go: "Okay, it felt like you were…". So we have to be very, very respectful with each other, and constantly, you know, understand. But the energy of… you know, the woman's point of view, sometimes – I know he would be horrified if he heard me say this, but sometimes it's almost like [Denise makes a motion and noise that implies brushing someone off]. So that's something that sometimes I'm exhausted by, having to really demand my time and place for. Right, and, you know, occasionally you just want go like, (quietly, exasperated) "Oh, fuck off! Fuck off man!" But we have a great joking life together, and I can say that.

Drag: How long does it take one of these shows to develop? Because it sounds like there's a lot of things that go into- and a lot of thought that goes into it, and a lot of shaping…?

Clarke: It depends. Remarkably quickly. Again, I think we have systems and trust and shorthand that allow us to… one of our last shows called *People You May Know*, we incorporated Photo Booth, we built, you know, digital puppets out of Photo Booth characters that we all found, we projected Photo Booth with enormous projections above our head, so that if you're watching me on stage, you can watch me- I'm looking in my computer, and I'm playing one of those Photo Booth people, and that's who you're seeing above my head. And, that show came together in – and it's very complicated show, but it came together in a month. After a workshop. I'm going to say, on average, four or five weeks. But sometimes we work on something for three years. *Gilgamesh*, we took a couple of workshops on that one, and then the development process. So, all told, two months. Two and a half, three months – with a lot of time in-between.

Drag: Do you – when you present a workshop, it's obviously different than when you actually put on the show, but are you still trying to make a

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adjustments to the show even if it's in performances, or do you guys just try and like, for the sake of everyone, just stop it and do the same thing.

Clarke: Yeah- no, we're, you know, that's the show, let's do the show. We're not big on… it's interesting, because we feel extremely free on stage, but we feel free within the show. We're not big on, "Oh, it didn't matter – take it in that direction tonight", because we calibrate them quite carefully. That being said, I know that we all feel very deeply empowered to deliver our own performances every time. It's a very interesting relationship – I never feel like: "(sigh) God…", I always feel very, very lively and very in control of what I'm doing and, it's the art of subtly. You know, we're very respectful of each other, and we value tremendously the magic- we don't do a lot of yakking about each others performances in rehearsal. I don't say: "So Sandra, when you do that… it's really hard for me, because I feel lalalaa lalaa la, and you lalalaala, well"- we don't do that. If you're giving me that, that's what I'll work with. And if I've made a choice that I'm doing this, it's like, nobody ever gets to say: "Is she going to do it like that?" That's the way I'm working, and unless, there's a really wrong, like, "You know what, it actually will really". Then it's a director's triangulation, but, once we've decided the tone, the actors are in charge of building their own work. Big part of probably why we like it so much there, because Blake is not that kind of director, and neither am I, to be too specific with… "What's you're motivation?!" and, you know, "You're overall intention with this line?" – you know, you might be sometimes, you can help each other, like: "I don't know what I'm saying here – what is this?" and somebody might go, "Well," and it's like, "Oh oh yeah, yeah, yeah, got it, okay!" But for the most part we're just, that's the actor's job. Not the director's.

Drag: Do you do co-ops with other companies, or do you tend to stay- how does that dynamic change when you introduce new blood, who hasn't been as… or who isn't as comfortable as you guys are?

Clarke: For the most part people love it. People love playing with us. There's been some times where it was just overwhelmingly… you know, I remember years ago a piece. We had a Scottish actor working with us – the other two Scotts loved being there and had a ball. But one woman took things very personally all the time, and she was deeply offended on a couple of occasions by a more improvisational moment that happened – it was a comedy. And the actor got really excited about the riff he was on, and it kept growing. It was one of those where it was like, "Ohh-kay, that little one-laugh riff is now five minutes long". To me, it was more just like: "Oh brother". To her, it was like, an absolute travesty of the theatre. And you know… she was infuriated. But, I'd have to tell you that's pretty rare. We did John Murrell's play, *Taking Shakespeare* a few years ago. Now John Murrell's a playwright-playwright, playwright – one of the most esteemed

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playwrights of the well-written play in Canadian theatre history. Very close friend of the company, and he had brought a play to us to say: would you guys like to premiere? And I was to play the prof, and we would find a young man to play the young man. But I could only hear John's voice, and so I put it to him that he play the prof, and I play the young man. And because I have a history of playing, young men – I really like doing it – he went for it, and we had an extraordinary experience and, I guess if you were to talk to him, he would have a lot to tell you about how… free he feels and how relieved he is in our room.

Drag: Nice. Do you tend to… well, I guess you personally, do you tend to work with bigger casts, or smaller casts…?

Clarke: Smaller now!

Drag: What's the different- do you find that there's a lot of a difference between the sizes, or is it just getting people to understand the same vocabulary?

Clarke: It's just working with, you know, the best way you can. It's hard, making theatre. And, you know, it's got to be a fairly good vibe in the room, it's got to be without forcing people like they're supposed to be… laughing all the time, or feeling, you know- sometimes I think that might be where we, you know, would be a little bit, intimidating, is when we riff, when we get really going on internal riffs. And I do notice – like, we just were working with one of our younger artists, these last two weeks, and I thought, you know, he must at times just get so bored with our endless riffing. Where it's like: "Oh-kay, yeah, I'm not in on this riff- and I can't even try, because they just sort of look at me like, "You're not invited in!"", and when he told me that- when he told us that, I did laugh, because it was like: "Oh hon… that's true though, I know what you mean, I totally know what you mean". But then also, that's kind of paying your dues. When I was a young person, I didn't try and get in on the riff.

Drag: Yeah, it's kind of, you've been there that long.

Clarke: Eh, one day it's just funny, and you just, someone starts, you know.

Drag: It sound like you guys have a really good thing going. It sounds like you guys have a lot of fun.

Clarke: We do. And we struggle, and we have monumental, epic things that we go through, including divorces, and breakups, and you know, family stuff, and… enormous challenges, you know? Periods of time where you don't feel like you're on the same page, and people seem to be pulling in different directions. But… we've just finished a two-week session, and here we are all again going, "Unbelievable", you know, this is so much

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fun, we had so much fun together, and we were so excited by our future. And felt so… encouraged and inspired, and… I was like: "Wow. Well, here we go. Next thirty years".

Drag: Where do you see yourself going in the next thirty years?

Clarke: Well, to… to the end! "Dance me to the end of love", says Leonard Cohen… you know, thirty years, I'm going to be eighty-six. And I fully intend to still be working. Because it doesn't feel like work, it feels like engagement, and… life. It feels like life to me. And I think probably, I would like to imagine we will go more and more into the world of subtly. It's something I value enormously, in watching others, and in watching theatre, I value enormously, [Denise demonstrates with subtly movements in her body] someone who can deliver subtly, performance. And yet, that will reach me. I have an allergy to, you know, schmak-ting, and, when I can see people acting their hearts out, it causes me tremendous embarrassment, and I'm forever trying to move the work I'm doing away from that. Even though we're very bold performers. But I'm most happy when I see someone inhabit, and not act. You know, I mean, that's a very important distinction for us, we're very, very committed to the emotional reality of whatever artificial world we're in. We can be as crazy and emotionally… I mean, as comedic and as ridiculous as something can be, it would not excuse us from being incredibly committed to the emotional reality of that character. Including its tragic side. His or her tragic side.

Drag: How do you preserve the work that you've done in the past? Or do you just let it go… I know there's not a lot of ways, because theatre is intimate, and obviously a large part of it is how the movement is, and how everyone moves, and how the whole picture works… do you wish there was a better way to preserve it, or…?

Clarke: Yeah! I tell you one thing I see us doing in the next thirty years, and it – probably a lot of it to do with me, is finding some brilliant grad student and committing to a thorough development of a really exquisite library of our work. With video component, with, you know, an online presence, with… You know, I'd like to teach an online university course, for One Yellow Rabbit which would include amassing all the video components we can find that we haven't lost, putting all our scripts back in one spot. Talking – finding all the photographs we can, amassing everything we can. We've been, sometimes, really good at it, and most the time, lame. Lame, lame, lame, lame. It's just, it's one of those details that, you know, it's like: "Oh shit, did we hire a videographer?! Oh, are we videoing the show!? Oh God, (dramatic gasp)" and now we're like: "Oh God, phone Joe Kelly" – who's a brilliant videographer in town – "Oh, thank God we remembered!" but for years it would be like: "You know what? Never got a video of that show…" Or a good one. We got like, some weird camera

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where you're in and out of the frame most of the time, and it's like, (dry sarcasm) "That's helpful". Dumb. Stuff that breaks your heart, you're like: "Oh God, I can't believe how lame that is."

But you know, maybe that's part of all the magic? It's like travelling… I've abandoned my camera, and, I've just abandoned it all, because… I - you know, I'm just – all of this? [Denise picks up her phone and imitates taking a picture through it] This constant looking at the world through the- it's just, it makes me fucking crazy! And I saw people- well, I've actually seen people in the theatre, watching the theatre through their phone, and I'm like, "You're in the theatre!" I mean, I'll say to someone, "Shh" [Denise imitates tapping someone and waving down their phone]. You know, I'm rude that way, because it's like, [Denise repeats the motion], because I can't stand the little light interrupting my experience.

Drag: It drives me crazy. Especially in theatre, like- movie theaters, when they're really far way. I mean, it still drives me crazy, but you can't get to them, but in the theatre-theatre… you're watching people…

Clarke: Yeah. Hawksley Workman just did a show through the ATP festival in our theatre, and, I guess because he's a rock musician, there was a permission for some people, younger people? But… you know, there was several people who, the show started, and within two minutes they were like, doing this! [Denise holds up her phone as if filming] With people behind them!

Drag: That's crazy!

Clarke: And, you know, it was like, at one point I was like, "Psst!" [Denise waves another person's phone down]. And she was literally like, I could tell, she was like, [intense confusion] "What?"

Drag: "What am I doing wrong? What's happening!?"

Clarke: You know, and I did it again, and somebody else beside her went like, "Put your phone down", she was like: "Oh. …why?" and you could see it was like, "Why? Why should I put my – why can't I –" So anyway, part of me goes, you know, it's awfully nice to think about things and remember them and… I think for the most part, we'd be able to find the scripts of everything.

Drag: Yeah, somebody has a copy hidden somewhere with some stains on it and-

Clarke: Yeah, and we've all saved our own, and whatever we've all written. I think there are bibles of the show, still in the theatre, scattered around, so… I feel confident that if you actually did go, "Alright! That's it! I'm taking

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three years, and I'm going to start…" Which I said I was going to do this spring, but I'm not going to now. I'm going to wait. You need time to start it, and you need some help.

Drag: Do you think that the theatre is changing in a way that makes people think it's okay to have their phones out?

Clarke: Yeah.

Drag: Do you think it'll soon embrace that, or…?

Clarke: Yeah. I hope not, but I think so. I think theatre's got to change. You know, it's tough to talk people into coming.

Drag: Yeah.

Clarke: And we do not have a big house. And we have faithful people, and they love it, and we get standing ovations, and, even then, word of mouth doesn't even always work. So many people say: "Oh! I heard your show was fantastic! Oh, I heard it was just amazing!"

Drag: "Did you come see it?"

Clarke: It's like, "Wow. You know, it was on for the whole month." And they'll be like, "Oh, I really wanted to come to that!" I'll say, "Yeah, well." I mean, you know, you don't want to go like, "Well why didn't you?" But it is a big question. I really am like wow. I have a reputation now, and I'm kind of a senior artist, and, quite well known, in that kind of way. And, so people really do talk to me a lot like that. And if they only knew how it just makes me crazy! "Oh my God, I heard your show was stunning! People were raving to me about it – I really wanted to come" and it's like, yeah.

Drag: If it was a one-night show – but…

Clarke: Yeah. It's like, "Wow, you just didn't though. You just didn't" – people just don't. And I mean, we are engaging against a very difficult battle and that is an absolute onslaught of stimulus. And I think that people are – what they really want to do is hang out with their friends and laugh. Drink, and party. More than they want to organize themselves to get to a place and observe. Quietly. And yet when they do come, I think they're like: "Oh man! That was great – I really liked that!" People do, they'll say to me all the time, "Oh! So good to just come and, hang out at the theatre!" You know?

Drag: Do you think it's that way just in Calgary? Or is –

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Clarke: No, I'd say everywhere. It's everywhere, and I can guarantee you that – [Denise looks down at her phone] Sorry for checking my time.

Drag: Oh no, I've been keeping track too.

Clarke: No, it's… every single place in the world is the conversation with every theatre company, everywhere. Cirque du Soleil even, will be going, "Now, why are our numbers falling off a bit?" Because they want their 150% houses.

Drag: Well, they've got *Amaluna* in town right now, and I saw an ad on Facebook: "Buy tickets!" It's like, "Oh, they're not sold out? I thought they would be all, you know, sold out and gone."

Clarke: Right? Now it's like: "Oh yeah, Cirque du Soleil, right…" where it used to be like, " (excited) Oh my God!"

Drag: "Got to go see that!"

Clarke: It's a huge, huge conversation in what we talk about all the time, is we are a boutique theatre. Now our executive producer doesn't like hearing this, but, you know, this would probably be why she would leave us, our company, because, it's like: "Look. We are not going to do *Chicago*. We're not going to do *The Christmas Carol*. We're not going to fill, a 700 seat house… we're not going to do *The Nutcracker*. We're not doing that. We never have, and we never will. Occasionally we stumble into hit shows. Can't even tell you what they are - it's always just like: "Oh, that's crazy, how popular that was." It's very peculiar timing – perfect storm creates an actual, real hit show. And that perfect storm is harder and harder to formulize, and plan for. Because we certainly never, and I mean never, do shoddy work. It could be that we do a show that's like… "Wow, that was kind of weird," but we never do shoddy work, so you could never fault us for like: "… wasn't that good." It's like: "Well, I didn't like it." It's a very strange show, but it's never shoddy.

Drag: Do you guys have the capability of extending the run or…?

Clarke: No.

Drag: You just do what you do, and that's it?

Clarke: We bring them back.

Drag: Okay.

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Clarke: We have our own theatre. But you know what? It costs a lot of money, so you know, executive producer, that's one of our big, huge, conversations, endlessly. "Well, it costs this much for you to put, you know, your little show in there for just a cool weekend party." It's like, if we don't? Then we won't.

Drag: When you bring shows back, do you find that they lose something, or do they gain something?

Clarke: Oh no, they gain.

Drag: They definitely gain.

Clarke: They gain. Yeah, we have done a lot of that. And, you know, it's steeped. You bring it back, it's a little bit richer, the broth is a little more distilled. We have much more understanding of what we're saying. We're subtler. Repetition is the key to anything being good, so, more times you repeat it, the better it is, just technically. So, you know, it's only good to repeat work. Tour it.

Drag: Yeah. Is there anything specific that you'd like to bring back in the future, or…?

Clarke: I just finished a show called *Nightingale Alley*. Now, this is a show with other artists, this show that I forwarded, and we do this a lot too – we have a stable of artist we've worked with a lot, and this was a lot of long-time Rabbit collaborators. […] So, you know, we'll bring that show back. That's a show that had a limited run. And I've been developing, and I did it last spring. And it had one show, and it had an ecstatic response. I was like, "Oh, people like this." I brought it to the Rabbits and I said I want to do it in our theatre. Okay. We did it two weekends – big response. So now my push would be, with our producer, is to say: "Okay. A run." So that the first week builds for the second week, that we really try really hard – it's hard though. You can have an amazing first week, and without massive advertising budgets, you're hooped. It's like, you know, if you could run something for – I'd love to try this, but it's so hard to do, because of the risks, financially. But, if you could just run something for six months. Every weekend. Just on every weekend, for six months. And it just becomes the word, and you just let that build. That would be something I would love to do.

Drag: Just see how it goes.

Clarke: Just to see! Just to see like, well that did it. Because I know our work's never, it's never shoddy. And people are usually like, "Oh, I loved that. It was so different, fresh and cool… it's over?" So if like, "No!" You know –

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again, all those people who: “Oh, I really wanted to see your show!” What would happen to all of them, if for six months, it was like, “Oh, I’ve totally wanted to see it, let’s go. I finally found a little hole in my calendar, and I’m going.” Because in our modern rush, rush, rush world, Facebook, Twitter, (Denise makes a muffled sound of these things amalgamating and becoming overwhelming) – it’s like, “God, is that already over?” I do it all the time too.

Drag: It’s like: “Oh, I’ll totally go see that – wait a second…”

Clarke: Yeah, it’s like: “What?! I heard about it for a month… it’s over?”

Drag: Yeah.

Clarke: So, you know? Anyway, those are all the challenges that we are going: How do we build a smaller and smaller need for our boutique items? Me, I like going to a really fine little restaurant, where it’s a small operation. The food is fantastic and it’s one chef and a sous chef, and a server and it’s like, “Mmm, now this is my idea of a fine, epicurean event.” I like going to a small shop, going like, “Who’s this designer? Love this work. Oh, and you just got a couple pieces by this designer too, and these little accessories. Cool shop.” Right? So, I’m hoping that the boutique nature, you know, that’s what I’d like to sell. “This is wonderful; you might not want to come,” you know, “Only come if you like boutique things.”

Drag: Yeah. Only come if you’re looking for a unique experience.

Clarke: Don’t come if you’re looking for Theatre Calgary. I have nothing against Theatre Calgary – I love Theatre Calgary. It’s fun working for those companies too, they’re normally just excellent people, and excellent endeavor. Just not my personal aesthetic.

Drag: Looking back at all the things you’ve done, what is the one thing that kind of sticks out at you – is it like, an emotion, or, a piece of work that you’ve done, or a moment in time where you just felt like it was… this is it?

Clarke: No, I’ve never felt like that. I guess, what’s most powerful for me is that so far, each thing is a new – what I’m working on is my favorite thing.

Drag: That’s so neat.

Clarke: Yeah.

Drag: That’s amazing.

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Clarke: So, I mean, I really hope that continues. You got to just take what you get in this life, but, it's a really wonderful experience. I have a new solo show called *WAG*… I premiered it in a festival in Edmonton, and it was just such an incredible experience, and I was like: "I- this show- I can't believe how good this feels." It feels very honest and real, for me – it feels like exactly what I want to say. I'm really happy with it.

Really, really excited with *People You May Know*, which we just finished doing. It was just like, "I'll guarantee you've never seen anything like this…" You know, a comedy using Photo Booth, with a really developed narrative stream, and very, very effective comedy. And very effective storytelling. And an actor's wet dream – all the actors who saw it were like, "Ughohh God, did that- " Because it's a combination between film and theatre. Because they're watching you, and you can't move your face on Photo Booth. If you do this [Denise moves her head to the side a few inches and demonstrates the subtleties to me], you wreck [it]. So, it's really distilled, and because everything's real large, you have to be very, very subtle, but also very, specific and yet, you can't be like, big like a drawing. So it was wonderful experience.

I loved playing Murph to John Murrell's Prof. and having people afterwards meet me and not know it was a woman. You know, that's a fantastic – my experiences playing men are quite a special category for me. Because it's just such an unbelievable thrill, to be talking to someone who goes [Denise imitates someone having the realization that she played the young man, and was in fact, not a man], and slowly realizes that… One example was a guy who came – it was the Minister of Culture's husband. And we were talking after the play, and he was listening to me, and he said, "And what did you do in the, in the play?" and I said, "I was Murph" and he went, "(gasp)," and he burst into tears.

Drag: Wow.

Clarke: And went: "(panicked) Oh! Oh, oh, oh, oh!" And, I think he was just so shocked. And he had been weirdly attracted to Murph, and he was, I think, a very straight man, who'd been sort of feeling this kind of funny, "something about that's really like…",It was such a great experience for me. You know, I felt bad for him, I was like, "Sorry you're crying, but I love this."

Drag: "This is fantastic!"

Clarke: And that's happened to me a few times with Fred James from *Thunderstruck* as well. It's a similar experience where you just know people are going: [Denise appears staggered and confused, an audience member making the connection]. Talking to me about the young actor in

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the production… [at] the Edinburgh Festival, and me going, [Denise nods as she imitates an audience member]: "He's amazing. That kid's amazing," it's like, "Thanks. I'll tell him."

Drag: "I'll make sure to pass that along."

Clarke: Yeah. Now, have you read *The History of Wild Theatre*?

Drag: No I have not.

Clarke: Okay, you need to read that.

Drag: I will put it on my list. I have a record of it, so.

Clarke: You have a record?

Drag: Oh, to remind me to read it [pointing to the recorder].

Clarke: Oh, okay. Do you have it?

Drag: I do not have it.

Clarke: Okay, because you might have to get it from our office. [Denise gets up and starts looking through the books on the shelf, searching for the book]

Drag: Oh, okay.

Clarke: I don't know how you can buy it anymore. I'm looking for Chris' copy… you can borrow it, as long as you promise to give it back to me.

Drag: Oh, definitely, I will.

Clarke: [Denise leaves the room to look through another bookshelf in another part of the house] Jeez…You would think I would have our own book… I know there's one here, so hang on… It's a pretty good read, is the good news. [Denise returns from her search, with a small book]

Drag: Oh, you found it!

Clarke: This is my play, you can borrow that. It's the only play I've had published, so. I don't normally [Denise starts looking through the shelf once again]… people don't normally want to publish my work, but, let me find this, because I think. It's so crazy it's not leaping out at me. It is a book that was written, it's our history, like, fifteen, nearly twenty years ago, so it would be the fifteen year mark?

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Drag: Yeah.

Clarke: And it's really, really informative. I think it'd be very valuable for you.

Drag: Yeah.

Clarke: Ah! [Denise finds the book, behind one that was propped up] There it is.

Drag: Ah, it was hidden.

Clarke: Now, like I say, it's super important that you don't wreck it.

Drag: Oh, I'm very good with books.

Clarke: Okay. So I'll lend you both of those.

Drag: I'm a stage manager.

Clarke: Okay, help yourself! Are you?!

Drag: I am. Yeah, I'm just finishing my degree at U Vic.

Clarke: Okay!

Drag: And I'm doing the Calgary Fringe this summer, so.

Clarke: Are you?

Drag: Yeah, I've been working as Michele's assistant – Michele Gallant's assistant for the past two years.

Clarke: Oh! cool!

Drag: Yeah, love that stuff.

Clarke: So you're stage-mangler.

Drag: Yep, yep, that is what I do.

Clarke: Cool.

Drag: I love it.

Clarke: You love it.

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Drag: Yeah I do. Just to wrap up, is there anything you wanted to add, or… any last words you wanted to leave?

Clarke: No, I don't want to give you my last words. Too superstitious.

[…]