

RAYMOND FOYE Dan, describe your background for me if you would.

DAN RICHTER I grew up in Darien, Connecticut. My father was a cartoonist for *The New Yorker* and the King Feature Syndicate, which was owned by the Hearst Corporation. My parents were lefties so my father hated [William Randolph] Hearst, but he had a contract that said although they didn't have to run his cartoons, they couldn't tell him what to do. I grew up in a big house with servants, and I went to a private school—all from cartooning!

I went to prep school at the Kent School in Connecticut, which I enjoyed, but it was very challenging and eventually I got thrown out because I was drinking. I'd been on drugs from an early age because I had very bad migraine headaches. A psychiatrist decided the best thing to do was give me Miltown, which was a terrible drug. That led to a lifetime of battling drugs and alcohol. Thankfully, I've been sober for thirty-eight years.

When I got thrown out of prep school, my parents sent me to the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, which was considered the best psychiatric hospital in the country. They figured my problems must be psychiatric, the drinking and everything. I spent almost a year there. At one point I heard there was going to be a dramatic reading at the Topeka Civic Theatre of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* [1951], which they were casting that night. I asked my doctor if I could leave the clinic and go into town, and she said, "You're not ready, but I tell you what: I'll let you go, and if you get the lead part, I'll let you do it." Thinking I'd never get the lead part, you know? Of course I *was* Holden Caulfield—I'd been thrown out of prep school, I was an outsider, I was even in a mental hospital, so naturally I got the part. The play was a smash hit and I got a standing ovation, which began my time with the Topeka Civic Theatre, where I danced and performed. I'm always transformed when I'm in front of an audience, something happens to me.

After a lot of work in the theater in the US and Italy, by my early twenties I'd gravitated to the American Mime Theatre, which was run by Paul J. Curtis, a legend in the field of mime. A big part of my background had been in dance, and I just took to mime. Within a year I was teaching there and I was the lead performer. But I started smoking dope and taking peyote and reading Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley, and I started to think, My God, there's more to life than this. What's going on? I've got to know more. So after three years at the Mime Theatre I took a leave of absence. I took a steamer from Philadelphia to Rotterdam. The idea was to travel the world and study mimetic forms from different cultures.

From Rotterdam I hitchhiked to Berlin, because I wanted to visit Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. I wanted to understand his concept of the alienation effect—the *Vertfremdungseffekt*—which is a way of breaking the illusion by constantly introducing elements into the play that make the audience realize that they are watching a play. Brecht had made the very controversial move of leaving Hollywood and going back to East Berlin. He died a few years before I arrived, but I met with his wife, Helene Weigel, who was running the Ensemble. I told her my interest was in seeing not just the plays but the rehearsals. For me, rehearsals were more important because they showed how you got to the performance. I spent two weeks going to rehearsals every day, having lunch with them, and then seeing the play in the evening. This was in East Berlin and every night I had to go back to my hotel in West



A VAGABOND LIFE: DAN RICHTER

Dan Richter has enjoyed a career that has included acting, miming, painting, writing, and publishing. He comes from a time when it was much more common for artists not to restrict themselves to any one art form, instead choosing whatever medium at hand might best communicate their ideas. He is the author of two memoirs: *The Dream Is Over: London in the 60s, Heroin, and John and Yoko* (2012) and *Moonwatcher's Memoir: A Diary of 2001: A Space Odyssey* (2020), with a foreword by Arthur C Clarke. Now in his eighty-fifth year, he sat down with Raymond Foye to discuss some of the highlights of his career.

Berlin, which was an ordeal in itself, because they were constantly searching me. I mentioned this to Brecht's daughter Barbara, and she drove me back to the checkpoint that evening. When they saw her drop me off, they left me alone from that point onward. Barbara was a hero in East Germany, they called her Red Barbara—she was very important to the whole propaganda apparatus.

Allen Ginsberg had just been to India and I decided I wanted to hitchhike there to experience it, just get right in the face of it. That took a couple of weeks. When I got to Delhi I started going to music concerts, where I ran into a guy who said Allen Ginsberg had a friend in India named Zina Rachevsky, a Russian-born French-American heiress who later married the filmmaker Conrad Rooks. She was a friend of the maharaja of Kashmir and she was living up there on a big houseboat; she was welcoming artists and poets and I was invited to meet her. I went to a gathering at the American Express office in Delhi and Zina swooped in, over six feet tall with blonde hair in a red dress and a little dog in her arms and beautiful jewelry hanging off her. She and I fell in love with each other instantly, and I ended up spending the winter in Kashmir on her houseboat with a guy named Ronnie Vial, who I assume is long gone, and a fellow named Sasha Jung, who was known as the hippest guy in the world, he lived in the Beat Hotel in Paris.

When the end of spring came my goal was to get to Japan to study the theater—Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku—as part of my study of mimetic forms throughout the world. I got on a slow boat, one of those steamers that stopped in every port. It had a dormitory in the bottom where the Chinese workers slept, and it was there that I ran into Jed Curtis, a crazy madman with red hair and a sitar. We immediately became friends, and he said to me, If you're going to Japan you've got to meet Yoko Ono, you're going to love her. Jed had done some performing with Yoko in Germany and New York. When we got to Tokyo, Jed took me over to meet Yoko and we became fast friends. She had grown up in Japan during the war, but later her family lived on Park Avenue and she had attended Sarah Lawrence College, so she spoke English, which was unusual in Japan at the time. Foreigners in Japan were so unusual then that people used to approach me on the street and ask for my autograph, just because I was a Westerner.

RF So you hit it off with Yoko right away? Was she strange?

DR Well, she was Yoko. I mean, Yoko is a force of nature. She's not like anybody else. She's completely unique.

RF Do you think she's a great artist?

DR I think she is. And I thought so long before John [Lennon] came on the scene. I mean, I was very aware of what she was doing. I think her *Film Number 4* [1966] is an absolutely wonderful work. Yoko has a great sense of humor, which most people don't realize. I always had a lot of fun with her. She sees the world in her own way, and she sees it very clearly.

RF How did you go about conducting your research in Japan?

DR I did the same thing I did with the Berliner Ensemble: I explained to them that I wanted to watch the rehearsals to see their process and talk with them about it. Why are you doing this? Why are the bonsai trees on the long runway entrance so large? They said, Because the gods are so big. One thing I was fascinated by was the assistants

who were on stage, adjusting the costumes and things like that—they simply wear black, so they don't really exist. You see that also in the Bunraku, the puppet theater: the people who manipulate the puppets are in front of you all the time. It was another manifestation of the alienation effect, and that's very much a part of the Japanese aesthetic, to always remind you that what you're watching is a creation.

RF How were you supporting yourself?

DR I was selling poems on the street. I'd stand in front of the Shibuya Station with a sign saying "I'm traveling through the sea of life, and I'll write you a poem, and you may give me money if you like." Yoko translated my sign into Japanese for me. People lined up to give me money. Eventually I was able to buy a ticket back home.

I came back from Tokyo to the United States around 1965. I spent the summer in Provincetown using dope all the time, and then Zina, my Russian princess, decided that before giving up the world and becoming a Tibetan nun in Nepal, she would take a place on the Lycabettus hill in Athens, and she kept sending me messages saying all these wonderful people are here—Philip Lamantia, Harold Norse, Alan Ansen, Leonard Cohen, Nanos Valaoritis. . . . So I moved to Athens because I didn't want to be in the United States because of all the civil unrest. I rented a house up near Zina and people just started turning up. It became a stopping-off point for people on the way to India.

RF Your magazine *Residu* was one of the few cultural artifacts of that brief but important moment in Greece's cultural history in the 1960s, when the influences of Surrealism and the beat generation surfaced in the work of Greek poets like Spyros Meimaris, Nanos Valaoritis, and Panos Koutrouboussis. Then it all got shut down by the junta, the poets were sent to jail or exile, and the scene was over.

DR It was a tragedy for everyone, everyone suffered. I had ten years of my notebooks seized, which I never got back—all my theater research from New York, Berlin, Tokyo. . . . We called the magazine *Residu* because the work itself was the residue of a great consciousness, the expansive experiences everyone was having. That's all the work was, a residue. It was a little teeny piece of



the whole. Great art has to be about great subjects, deep feelings, life and death—that's what we were responding to.

RF You organized one of the most famous poetry readings ever, the subject of a film and of a book from Grove Press called *Wholly Communion*. How did that come about?

DR I'd fled Athens for London, where my wife Jill and I took an apartment. We met Allen Ginsberg at Alex Trocchi's flat when he was passing through. Allen wanted to give a reading in London and I'd always had the idea of renting out the Royal Albert Hall. Wouldn't that be a great place? We went over there and they said there had been a cancellation and it was available in three days. Jill had a little money in the bank so we put a deposit down. Allen gave a television interview the next day, and he announced the event as a great big coming-together of all the poets of America and the UK and Europe, and the response was off the charts. It sold out immediately. I was about twenty-four at the time. Gregory Corso flew in for the reading and that was the first time I met him; I'd publish him in *Residu*.

After that, London became my base, and in the fall of 1966 Yoko turned up with her husband, Tony Cox. They'd been sent an air ticket for a symposium at the ICA, "Destruction in the Arts," and Yoko was very good at destroying things. We ended up getting apartments side-by-side for a couple of years. This was on Hanover Terrace, just at the bottom of Regent's Park. We had two enormous apartments that shared a common balcony. A lot of Yoko's art actions took place there. I spent a lot of time in Regent's Park at the zoo, studying the gorillas, their body language and ways of communicating with each other. This came in handy when I was working for Stanley Kubrick.

RF I want to get to that, but first I want ask about the meeting of John and Yoko. There's some question as to whether Yoko even knew who John Lennon was when she first met him.

DR Well, Yoko is a unique artist. In those days she had no TV or radio or record player, and she never read the newspapers. She was in her own world. One day she said to me, I met this musician today at John Dunbar's Indica Gallery, and he says he's with a group called the Beatles, and people tell me that's a very important group. Is that true? I took her at her word.

RF And Yoko wasn't intimidated by him?

DR No, not at all; in fact, in her mind, he wasn't nearly as important as her, and I don't mean that in a mean way. He was a popular musician, whereas in her mind she was an artist.

RF From all the time you spent with John Lennon, what was the lesson you most learned?

DR That it's lonely at the top. The main problem is the higher you go, the fewer people tell you the truth. One of the cornerstones in my relationship with John was that I was not a big rock 'n' roll fan. I'd tell him what I thought. And that was extremely valuable to him.

RF How did you come to take that famous photo of them on the cover of John's first solo album?

DR That was very simple. John and Yoko came down to breakfast one day, and John had done a drawing of himself leaning against a tree with Yoko in his arms. And he said, We had the idea that we'll do one photo with me holding Yoko for my album, and another photo of Yoko holding me for her album. They'll look the same. [Editor's note: both albums had the same title, *Plastic Ono Band*, and both were released in December 1970.] Can



you take the picture? And I said sure. I had a good Nikon camera, but I had this idea, I know it was sort of risky: I picked up the cheapest possible camera, which was entirely plastic with a little plastic lens. I thought it might give a better look than a sharp image.

We went into the garden under a big tree and I took a bunch of photos. I'd built a color darkroom next to the recording studio, so I could process the film myself. I began experimenting with printing, trying to make it like a Seurat painting. There are three color wheels on the printer and you're not supposed to use all three, but I was playing around with them and I was getting what's known as neutral density, where the image begins to break up. The original one broke up far more than the final print we used, we could never get it exactly the way it originally was, but it was very moody and it looked great. Then, I don't know whether it was their idea or mine, but I said, Do you have any pictures of yourself as a child? Because I thought the child is a symbol of innocence, which seemed to me to be what the albums were about. Yoko had that lovely photo of her in the sailor suit, and John had one that was just an old reproduction and when we blew it up and printed it, you saw all the dots, which went with the pointillist theme. And that was it.

RF It's such a perfect album, and the cover is so much a part of the whole ethos.

DR When the album first came out, I had the unenviable job of going in and telling John what the sales figures were, and they didn't start out very well. The album ended up being quite a big success, but it was a slow starter because everybody thought it was just more of his weird stuff. A lot of very strange conceptual John-and-Yoko albums had preceded this one. Of course, the record has so

many masterpieces on it: "God," "Isolation," "Hold On," "Working Class Hero." . . . "God is a concept by which we measure our pain": those are Yoko's words. The great gift that Yoko gave to John was the words, she's everywhere in those lyrics. "Imagine" is the perfect example of that.

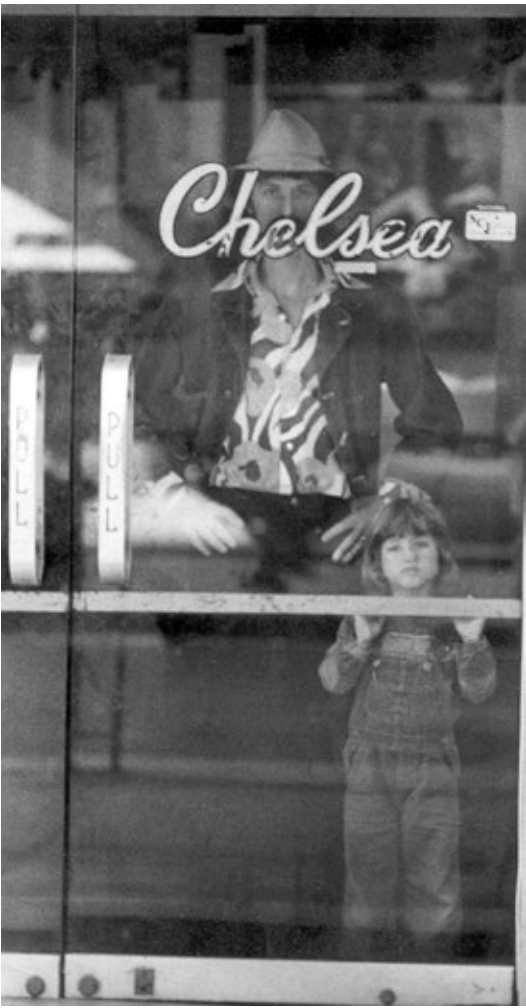
RF How did you get involved with Stanley Kubrick and the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968]?

DR I met Stanley through Arthur C. Clarke. Kubrick had filmed most of *2001* but he still didn't have an opening sequence. I went to see him at the MGM studio in north London and he explained the dilemma with the apes—the Dawn of Man sequence. It just wasn't working. I listened carefully and I said, What you have here is an acting problem. Being a mime, and having studied the gorillas in Regent's Park, I realized that what was missing was an emotional connection with the animals. I performed it for him on the spot in mime, and he recognized something. Then we spent a good long time getting it right, because once Stanley recognizes something, he takes the care and diligence to do it perfectly.

RF I was eleven years old when I first saw that film, and that scene made a tremendous impression on me. It's so beautifully choreographed and acted. You see the ape learning to use a bone as a tool, and then learning to kill with that tool, and you realize that killing is part of the evolutionary path to *Homo sapiens*. But the whole time you're watching the sequence—and it's eighteen minutes long—you're wondering, What's going on here? I came to see a movie about outer space. Suddenly there's an edit that's pure Kubrick: the ape throws the bone up in the sky, and Kubrick cuts to the spaceship moving across the sky. Three million years in one edit!

DR It's arguably one of the great moments in film

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RF Was Stanley Kubrick as strange as his reputation?

DR He was never strange. He was just a family guy who went home and watched cheesy television with the kids and the dog on his lap. He had a great sense of humor and he was a good friend to his friends. He just happened to be burdened by genius. He wouldn't let go of something until he got it right, and he wouldn't settle for brilliant, he had to go beyond that. Stanley once told me that if he could get five or six moments in a film that are just so special and memorable, all he's got to do is fill in around them. I think a lot of directors are willing to settle for less, that's all.

RF There's a drivenness to all these great artists that the rest of us just don't have.

DR Yes, I think they have to be that way, and they also have to be able to leave people behind. That's a very hard thing to do. Art takes so much work and dedication, you really have to give your life to it, it's a form of sacrifice. And quite often families suffer, or you have to give everything away. For everybody who turned out to be a great artist, there were other people with the same gifts who just didn't develop them.

RF I remember you when you were living at the Chelsea Hotel. Mostly I remember your kids riding their bikes around in the hallway. How did you end up at the Chelsea?

DR Well, in the '60s, eventually everybody did. John and Yoko had moved to New York and I moved with them. After about five years the scene with them just got too crazy and I left and moved into the Chelsea, which was full of interesting people in those days. I was most keen to meet Harry Smith because I'd heard so much about him. As it happened, Harry lived a few doors down from us in the Chelsea Hotel. We were in 724 and he was in 731. I wanted to meet him but I didn't want to be one more person knocking on his door saying "I know Allen Ginsberg," or that sort of thing. So I had an old LP recording of a muezzin singing the Islamic call to prayer, and I put it on the record player and turned it up and opened my door a little bit. I waited about fifteen minutes and suddenly there was a little tap on the door. Hello? What is that music you're playing? Oh, you're Harry. Yes, I'm Harry. You must be Dan. Yes, I am. And these are your children, oh you have a dog, hello doggy. Harry walked in and he became part of our family for the next several years. He loved children and he loved dogs and we had trees in the room and birds that were flying all around.

Harry would come over because his room was so full. It only had one little window that opened on an air shaft and a little bathroom with piles of boxes filled with his collections: tarot cards, alchemical manuscripts, Seminole textiles, everything you can imagine. He was a white magician, magical things happened around him all the time. He took me out to Max's Kansas City one evening when we first met, and he walked down the street in the middle of the traffic, all the way down and back, and he never got hit. He used to rip up money and throw it away—that would be his way of getting more. He was an amazing creature, like an angel. And he was psychic. His psychic presence was very intense, it far outweighed his physical presence. With most people you sort of sense that they have some psychic thing going on every now and then; with Harry it was overwhelming. He could walk through the world and not be touched.

RF I always thought the one person who could



stand up to Harry and meet him on his own terms was Gregory Corso.

DR Yes, Gregory could be quite volatile, but not around Harry. I don't know if he had his own room or if he was just staying with people like Peggy Biderman. Harry and Gregory got along very well, it was just like a little family, you know?

RF That sounds strange, but I was thinking about this the other day, how all these people we're discussing—they all really loved one another. Sometimes I think that's something that's missing from the scene today: people are always ghosting or flaming or canceling or judging, there's often not a lot of love there.

DR Gregory was a big star, particularly in those days when there was still a scene, when there were hangers-on and people around the periphery who had money. He'd hustle them to pay for things. He expected people to give him whatever he wanted. He just kept taking life on his own terms. He had excellent taste in food and clothes and always wore beautiful Italian leather shoes. He would go to Columbia University and steal his own manuscripts and sell them back to them through the Gotham Book Mart. As far as he was concerned, it all belonged to him, it was all his property. He was so bad, but everybody loved him. I mean, what else can you do? If he was hustling me, I let him hustle me, if I could afford it.

RF You really did manage to get out of the scene, going off to Hollywood and becoming a big executive. How did that happen?

DR I owed a lot of money. I'd maxed out credit cards when I had luxurious taste and was flying high. So I went to my father-in-law, who was a captain of industry. I said Tom, I have to get a job. He said Dan, you can't afford a job, you owe too much money. At that point I had four children. He said, You have to start a business, that's the only way you'll make this kind of money back. I said I don't know anything about business. He said Don't

worry, I'll show you how it all works.

I went to the Small Business Administration and took some free courses. They helped me start a business called Production Systems, we handled payrolls for all the big studios. Eventually I sold it to Entertainment Partners, who do budgeting and finance for all the big studios. They wanted to start a commercial payroll division because they didn't have one. They offered to buy me out and make me a vice-president. Everyone at that point was trying to buy me out. I'd reached a certain point in my business where either I was going to have to raise \$20 million to go into competition with these guys or I was going to let them buy me out. At that point I was already fifty-five and I thought, I'll just sell.

I ended up working for them for almost fifteen years. I have this ability to identify a key problem and then figure it out. If you solve that problem, it's like a keystone for the whole structure, and I just have that instinct. I was enjoying it. I took people to lunch all the time because I was trying to get \$80 million worth of business from them. I ended up president of the associates of the Association of Independent Commercial Producers, AICP. I went around in a tuxedo giving speeches. Meanwhile I still kept a foot in with my friends in the hip world.

RF You've had a pretty incredible life. Do you believe in karma?

DR I don't know about karma. I think about it, yes, in the sense that your behavior defines who you are, and who you are is what you will become. I don't think there's some personal God sitting up there with multiple hands keeping track of everything. I think it's much more beautiful than that. When I was young I used to be afraid of death. Now that I'm eighty-five, he's my neighbor and I just find him annoying. As I age, I'm amazed by what's going on physically. Rather than being afraid or worried or bothered by it, I'm interested in it.