

POST PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

BELLONA, DESTROYER OF CITIES

Transcription: Jay Scheib and Samuel Delany interviewed by Farai Chideya

Farai Chideya: I'm Farai Chideya, and I'm a friend of Tanya's and Jay's, and also a fan of Samuel Delany, who goes by Chip, so I will address you as Chip.

[applause]

Farai Chideya: What can I say, I'm a reporter, but I'm also a huge speculative fiction and science fiction fan and unfortunately I have not read *Dhalgren*, I have read some of your other novels, so, I will not even front, I will not even pretend, I've read small excerpts, I have not ---

Samuel Delany: Yeah, it's very long.

[laughter]

Farai Chideya: I mean I was just reading an excerpt of the beginning and one of - - there was just an image of holding coffee in your mouth that stuck with me. And the way that you play with sensuality in your work, as well as with ideas -- I'm a big Twitter person these days, and when I was announcing that this play was being staged, someone said, 'It is impossible!' Impossible to adapt *Dhalgren* to the stage. So what do you think now that you've seen it adapted, is it possible? Chip?

Samuel Delany: I think that this was an extraordinary job, I really really do, Jay, when people as creative and smart as you and Tanya get a hold of something like that, it's a very humbling experience, I recognized almost everything in the -- you know, everything, and that was quite a warming experience, that I would imagine that those in the audience who have read the book probably recognized a good deal of it as well. And so you know, what can I say, except, my overwhelming feeling is just one of thank you.

[applause]

Farai Chideya: Did you -- I'm going to go to something very specific in the play, that is a very basic difference between the play and the book, and in the words of

Mrs. Richards: 'I thought they were sending a man.' So Jay, why was Kid, who was played by Sarita [Choudhury], a woman and not a man. How did you get to that casting decision?

Jay Scheib: Uh, two, I guess there are probably two parts to the answer to that. You know you make a decision and then you figure out why, then you find a way to like support it. So part of it was just about wanting to work with Sarita, it's actually that simple, in a way. The other half of the idea comes from, at the very end of the novel, as Kid is leaving a city, they meet somebody else who is on her way in, and it's a woman, I think -- if I get the words right, an Asian woman is on her way into the city, someone coming from the east. So for us, because -- when Kid arrives, Kid finds a notebook and part of the book is already written, so to speak, and then adds more to it, and we just sort of thought, well, we're going to try to make the third, we're making a third sweep through this, you know, through an event that has already happened, but seems to be coming again, or seems to be, something has already happened but is also about to happen.

[00:06:06.20] Samuel Delany: It's very close to the book, I mean this is something that comes directly out of the book -- Kid himself is half American-Indian, and the person that he meets when he leaves, in the book, is an Asian woman, indiscriminate, and indeterminately Asian woman, and there are lots of references to things that you know, could have happened to her, as well, all through the book, so uh I think you -- again, it was a very familiar, even though it was a new story, in many ways, which I like because you know, I'm seeing something new, but at the same time I'm seeing something that is very much inscribed in the novel, so...

Farai Chideya: Again from Twitter, I feel like I'm channeling voices unseen and unheard, but on Twitter someone said, 'Well, isn't this just taking away the male-on-male sexuality and sensuality of the play?' I mean someone asked that question, and I want to get both of your perspectives, were you afraid that it would change the work in a way, that changed the sexual structure of the work?

Jay Scheib: Sure, definitely, definitely, our first workshop, the first -- so we've taken a few swings at this, and in the first workshop Kid was a guy, and so there were a lot of really hot guy scenes, like...

Farai Chideya: There's still plenty of hot guys.

Jay Scheib: We still have a couple of hot guy scenes from that workshop, um, but, yeah of course, definitely, of course it's a huge theme, it's a really rich theme, we tried like switching lots of genders at first, like, well OK, we'll just switch them all, and then it's not guy-on-guy but girl-on-girl and then it didn't always feel like the right idea, and so you know, we just keep switching it.

Farai Chideya: I was interested -- the person who, you know, again from Twitterlandia, saw it as a political decision. Like, was asking the question, 'Was this done to make it more palatable?' And I was just like, 'If you had seen his play you would not be talking about more palatable.' [laughter] But, you know, how has your work, Chip, been filtered through layers of politics and do you write, how do you -- do you write to provoke, do you write to frame imagination, how do you think about politics as you send an intent as a writer, and then as people interpret?

Samuel Delany: How do I think about politics? Obsessively and all the time. [laughter.] Yeah, the um, I'm very concerned about the political statements that are implied in certain relationships and how they are seen by most people and in one sense, the entire novel is a commentary on the usual way in which those relationships are seen. And this means that it's a very tricky thing to do, to reverse genders, and to change the gender content of a scene. And yes, was I worried? I was terrified that it wasn't going to be my vision at all, and as I said and I'm surprised how much -- at what a large percent of it really does work, which I think is a tribute to Jay and Tanya and the actors! Extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity. All of you guys are just amazing, um, what is Natalie's last name?

Jay Scheib: Thomas.

Samuel Delany: Natalie Thomas, you know, Jon [Morris] and Sarita, I mean, everybody, [Caleb] Hammond, and, I feel like I am here at Oscar night and I'm forgetting all the people I'm supposed to say thank you to. [laughter] And, but you guys have done, again, an amazingly good job, of bringing the nuances of what is going on, and this is the second time -- this is the third time I've actually seen a run-through, two times I've seen performances, and then once I saw a rehearsal, and this is certainly the one that I think works the best for me, and it's been also an interesting experience to see the thing clarify, each time I come to it, you were saying that you had seen an earlier production too, and had much the same feeling--

Farai Chideya: Exactly.

Samuel Delany: --so, uh, you guys are very lucky that you came tonight. [laughter]

Farai Chideya: You know it's the physicality of the space and the design which is so much a part of what you do as a director and someone who collaborates. I was there the night that there was the little preview, in The Wooster Group Space, and then when I came the first time on opening night I was sitting over here, and the video was not such a big presence for me, and my sight lines on the action in this space were in some ways more direct from over there, and then sitting here, the video was more of a presence for me and my sight lines in some

ways were more blocked. So you know, if you think about the number of performances you've had of this play, and the number of seats here, probably nobody saw the same thing. Was that intentional?

Jay Scheib: Yeah, very much so, then you could actually sit in a different place, and enter, and really have a very different experience. But hopefully like, every-- all of them have their own advantages and they all deliver maybe a slightly different perspective but the same general idea, you know, generally.

[laughter]

Farai Chideya: And how do you work? And I'm going to ask this of both of you but I'm going to start with you, Jay. How do you work in terms of putting together the concept, putting together a team of actors, putting together a team of people who help create the visual aesthetic, and, what's your process?

Jay Scheib: Really backwards, in a lot of ways. Like I'll try to put together an ensemble first, actually even before knowing what the roles are, right, so the adaptation of this is actually really made for the people who are in the room, and they take part in making it, so, you know they're -- you know, we're definitely improvising with a lot of texts, things are rewritten sort of on the fly by the performers, live and on camera, but re-done live, I'm sure you heard a lot of new text tonight?

Samuel Delany: Yes.

Jay Scheib: And actually the truth is, that happens every night, right, but it's because we try to stay loose with some of the syntax and really specific with the language, is really specific. Um but you know, in the process we start out a year or so in advance, and we start talking and getting the people in the room. We try to meet two or three times a week or ten days to work on ideas, throw things, sort of throw paint at the wall, and look for a shape.

Farai Chideya: And Chip, as a writer, what is your process? I mean, um, you know, I've written books as well, mainly non-fiction, but I tend to write in like, sprints. Some people are you know, a page-a-day is a book a year, or some variation thereof, on a very basic level how do you write but also, how does it -- how does it change you, to write? Are you always writing? Or do you have periods where you are not writing?

Samuel Delany: I think I am always writing, basically, um, I think of myself as the world's laziest writer, although the last -- not the last time, but a couple of times ago I was having a conversation about this, and my daughter who has just graduated from medical school...

Farai Chideya: Oh, excellent!

Samuel Delany: And I am proud, proud father of a doctor now, at any rate -- she was sort of sitting there and I was saying well, I'm a really lazy guy, I mean I spend a lot of time just sort of sitting there not doing anything and staring, and she said, 'Dad,' she says, 'Come on. You get up at four o'clock in the morning, you have a cup of coffee and you get started working, then you work all day, and then about nine o'clock you collapse, and then you do the same thing the next day, and the next day -- I would say you work harder than anybody I've ever seen do anything.' And I said, 'Is that what hard work is?' And quite honestly, I just, you know -- that feels to me like total laziness. I do remember once having a job in an office when I had, you know, back in the middle 80s, and I used to get there an hour and a half before anybody else got there, and I thought, 'Wow, this is so easy, people who come in...' You know, I'd get there at 7 o'clock, 7.30 in the morning, while other people drifted in at 9.30 and 10, and I would get home and I would have enough energy to help the kid with the homework. You know, and um, I thought, 'Gee if I'd known that the real world was as easy as this I'd have tried it out!' [laughter] It doesn't take quite as much energy. So you know, I don't know, as I said, I feel lazy, I feel like a lazy bum, but I -- you know, obviously something gets done, you know, in the midst of all this staring at the wall.

Farai Chideya: And who are the people in your novels? Are they -- what I mean by this, is: when you're writing, do they seem like companions, do they seem like people who are bugging you to tell their story and they won't shut up until you do? Are they -- I mean, who are they to you as you're in the process?

[00:16:57.27] Samuel Delany: Well they tend to be -- the people I write about tend to -- I have two criteria for people I write about -- I want to write about people doing things that I have done myself. So I will know what it feels like, to do those things and I will know what it feels like from the inside, but I also want to write about people whom I have watched do the same things so I know what it looks like from the outside, so there's kind of a limit, the intersection of the two -- people I have watched do certain things, people who do things I have done myself, so that I have both the subjective and the objective, point-of-view about both, and it's been holding, it's been serving me in fairly good stead for the last 45 years. And I hope it will for another handful, so you know, so that's about all I can really say.

Farai Chideya: That's a lot.

Jay Scheib: I have a question.

Farai Chideya: Yes! Please!

Jay Scheib: Uh so, we added these two words: speculative fiction, tonight.

[00:18:06.25] Farai Chideya: Yeah.

Jay Scheib: I've thought about this a lot -- I'm curious about science fiction versus speculative fiction.

Samuel Delany: I cringed.

Jay Scheib: I thought...

[laughter]

Samuel Delany: No I get...

Jay Scheib: Can't win 'em all...

Samuel Delany: No and it's OK, it's perfectly fine, speculative fiction is not a term that I use, it's, I think it's kind of an inflated term that academics use, it means the science fiction that they happen to approve of.

[laughter]

Samuel Delany: And, so, and it had -- it was a useful term for about 4 years, from about 1968 to 1972. And I did use it during those 4 years. And you know, and I haven't used it since. And I've, you know, people use it in various and sundry ways, and I, you know, I'm not against -- one of the things that is a big part of my aesthetic -- there are no words that I'm against as words, you know, I don't think there's anything wrong with the n-word, I don't think there's anything wrong with the f-word, I don't even think there's anything wrong with speculative fiction, but you know -- there are ways to use all of them, and people do.

Jay Scheib: Yeah, this one's history though, it's gone.

Samuel Delany: Yeah, it's a historical term. [laughter]. It locks the thing into the early 70s.

[00:19:36.26] Jay Scheib: So with Dhalgren -- OK so Dhalgren I think, sort of, I had a hard time describing it as science fiction, when people have asked me...

Samuel Delany: It is science fiction. [laughter]

Jay Scheib: Of course, so this is my question. I also think it's like...

Samuel Delany: I'm pulling your leg, Jay.

Jay Shchieb: It's um, I mean, I would, I guess that I would put it on the shelf next to Dostoevsky, or I would put it on the shelf next to these like, sort of, a much different kind of writing, of literature, whatever, book. It's a big book. But science

fiction -- do you mind, talking about what science fiction, how you landed in science fiction?

Samuel Delany: I read a lot of it as a kid, and enjoyed it, muchly, uh, some of the most emotional reading experiences that I had came to me through science fiction, and so when I started writing, I wanted, initially, I wanted just to write novels. And, I've told the story many many times, my then wife was working as an editor at a company Ace Books, that published science fiction novels, and she would come home and complain about these science fiction novels that she had to edit, and so I began to write a novel that was basically just for her, and it changed some of the things, it dealt with some of the problems that she was complaining about. And after I was about a half way through, she said, 'You know--' and she would read it, and she would say, 'You know this isn't half bad, you should submit it,' And I said 'Oh come on,' and she said 'No, you really should,' so, we submitted it under a pen name, Bruno Colabro, where I got that I will never know. [laughter] and we, it was, she brought it in, and one of her monthly jobs was to read the slush pile -- the slush pile was the pile of unsolicited manuscripts that came in -- and so if she found anything interesting she was supposed to point it out to the editor in chief, the late and wonderful Don Wollheim, whose daughter Betsy Wollheim now edits DAW books. At any rate, she handed it to Don, and said, 'Oh look, I found this in the slush pile, it was fairly interesting, take a look at it,' and, so Don read it and he liked it, and so he drew up contracts and only after the contracts were drawn up, we had a discussion the night, and she went in the next day and confessed, 'That's my husband,' and so Don said 'Thank god, because I hate the name Bruno Colabro.' [laughter] and so I went back to being Samuel Delany, and you know, that's how I got started. And since after I'd written one, I decided to write another one and then another one, and then another one, and then I -- number 10 was 879 pages, 35 years ago, here it is, tonight!

Farai Chideya: Absolutely. Well I'm going to go to questions in, after this question, I know we don't have an unlimited amount of time, and, you know, but I did want -- since you said there's no words that are off-limits, including the n-word. Nigger is invoked in this play, um, and there's another play which I can't remember the name of that was criticized in the New Yorker for being racist, can anyone help me out...? It's on stage right now.

Samuel Delany: Was it written in America?

Farai Chideya: No.

Samuel Delany: [laughter] Oh well then, there you go.

Farai Chideya: No it's the, um --

[Audience shouts out]

Samuel Delany: What was it?

[Audience shouts out]

Farai Chideya: Yes. Behanding in Spokane. It was just -- I have not seen that play, I want to see it, but it seems to me -- it seems to me that the use of the language seemed uncontroversial in a certain way, to me. I don't know how --

Samuel Delany: I don't know the play, so...

Farai Chideya: No -- in tonight's play. I mean, how -- I don't know, I'm just curious. Was anyone disturbed by the use of the word nigger in the play? I guess that's an unfair question for an audience.

[laughter]

Farai Chideya: I mean it struck me that --

Jay Scheib: Like uh, we are.

Farai Chideya: You guys. It strikes me that there is a fair amount of mean-spiritedness, sexual violence, and, racial tension exhibited by characters in this play. And, some of it provokes laughs. How do you appropriately use laughter, Jay, as a director? When you're dealing with subjects like this.

[00:24:27.20] Jay Scheib: By trying to, um, by trying to go over-the-top far enough, that like, the funny things stay funny, and the difficult pieces, the difficult, more sort of [??] philosophical problems -- things you have to think about a little further -- become accessible.

Samuel Delany: I think laughter can diffuse certain orders of anxiety. Not all. And sometimes -- one of the -- and something can -- something that -- laughter used to diffuse things that it should diffuse produces more anxiety, so, certainly, but I think that it can work the other way around, I think -- I'm still very fond of the exchange between Tak and Fenster, I think -- I liked it when I wrote it, and I like it -- I like the way it sounds from the stage, the audience seems to find it -- seems to respond to it kind of the way I wrote it, so yeah.

Jay Scheib: It's like, you know, watching a dissolution white supremacist sort of falling in love with a great activist, I think its funny. Its funny and its interesting. And they're talking about it so openly, I think like people actually like talking and making jokes about their problems in a really intense way -- that's pretty much science fiction in some way.

[laughter]

Farai Chideya: Well I will go to -- do we have a mechanism for questions, or...? Are folks going to yell them out or, people can bribe me?

Samuel Delany: People can raise their hands.

Farai Chideya: I see someone raising their hand. Yup.

[00:26:08.02] Audience: Hi, I tried over a period of many years to read Dhalgren, I hit the wall the first few times. This is ridiculous. I found it completely inaccessible, and then someone actually came to my house with this flea market find, and it was a copy of Motion of Light in Water, and after getting through that, and sort of understanding your thoughts and ideas about time, and memory, and just little motifs and vignettes that you speak to that echo themselves in Dhalgren, the text just opened up for me. And I just fell in love. And people always ask me, well, 'Oh yeah that book Dhalgren? How'd you read that, how'd you get through it?' And that's obviously just my answer. How would you tell people, to get into Dhalgren? How would you describe it?

[laughter]

Farai Chideya: (aside) That's a great question.

Samuel Delany: Well I -- first of all, I think it is wrong of the writer to try to bully the audience into reading his own book. [laughter]. I really do!

Farai Chideya: Come on!

Samuel Delany: No, I don't do it.

Jay Scheib: I'll do it.

Samuel Delany: No quite honestly, I mean, which is to say, as far as I am concerned, you know -- um, what people ask questions like that I say, pick it up, read a page at random, if you want, read another, and go on and read if you want, if you don't, close it, put it down and go on and do something else. I mean I think that's the only thing that the writer can say, that isn't some kind of -- you know, of some sort of version of advertising hype, and god knows we are inundated with enough of that. I don't want to add to that, it's just not what I am about. So I don't, there's nothing I can say. If you have read it, you've read it, and you liked it, I am very grateful. If you've read it and you know, and you didn't like it, OK, you know, that is absolutely your right.

Farai Chideya: But it sounds like, some -- you know, what you're saying is that there are gateway drugs that will lead you to Dhalgren

[laughter]

Audience: That's what I am saying. It's not that I didn't like it, it's just that I had no way to recognize what was going on.

Samuel Delany: Right.

Audience: And then something opened the door for me, and I was able to appreciate the text. And people often ask me, 'Well how did you even -- how do you get there? It's so strange when you first start.'

Farai Chideya: Well -- I'm going to take two more questions and then we'll wrap up for the night.

[00:28:41.18] Audience: A couple of years ago -- five years ago or something, disaster happened in the south, and I remember writing something online about, 'Could this be Dhalgren? Could this transform, and -- this is for both of you, um, when I read Dhalgren I was traveling back and forth across the country and I remember coming up out of subways in San Francisco and New York and being like, 'How do these people not know the world is over already?' Because I was so engrossed and lost in the text. Seeing the show tonight reminded me that I kind of -- because I wanted New Orleans to become Dhalgren because I want - there, this kind of freedom and chaos to exist, and one of my friends responded [??] saying that Dhalgren is a porn novel, a [??] to accuse [??] that reality such a horrible thing to even think, and you know -- things that are happening in Baghdad right now, and in Africa where there is chaos, and these people are living in utter chaos constantly, um, there's still part of me, that seeing this, like, I want this kind of racist/artist/faggot/war zone reality [??] somewhere, that's accessible. [laughter.] Is that why you're bringing this, you're keeping it alive?

[00:29:58.05] Samuel Delany: Dhalgren is a porn novel, which is, you know, many people have said over the 35 years that the book has been out. Dhalgren in its first edition was 879 pages long. And after about the first 5 or 6 years when people were talking about this amazing porn novel that just is either so awful or so great, and people were on both sides of the fence, um, you know, and it's just dripping with sex from the very first page to the last page, so I counted. I decided -- I went back and thought, 'Well let me count how many pages in the text actually deal with sex.' There are 36 pages, out of 879 pages, that deal with sex. This is pretty poor money -- this is a pretty poor shot for a porn novel. You want a little bit more sex than that, I would imagine, in a porn novel. So I don't think it stand up terribly -- you know, I have nothing against people calling it a porn novel, but I do -- I'm a little surprised at people calling it a good porn novel.

[laughter]

Samuel Delany: That's the thing that seems a little odd. Because there just isn't enough sex in it, you know. There really, really isn't. In a deeper --

Audience: But the sex is really good.

[laughter]

Samuel Delany: What? There you go. Maybe you're right, I don't know. But the point is -- and I think, one of the things that probably bothered me the most of the second time that I saw, and I will say, everyone -- there are some things -- you know as I said, overall, I think it, this is an extraordinary piece of work that you have done, but I was surprised that somehow it seemed, uh, it seemed like um, about 845 pages of the book had been sort of cut out. You know, um, and that's - - you know, that was an interesting -- that was interesting, to see, you know, to see that and I sort of wondered why it was like that. I don't feel that about this version, about the version I saw, now it seems to have gotten its proportions back, which I really like--

Jay Scheib: Good.

Samuel Delany: --very very much, so that was just an interesting way you know, an interesting thing about it, you know, I don't know whether, did you feel? The two?

Farai Chideya: Well see, not having read the novel...

Samuel Delany: Oh right, yes OK.

Farai Chideya: I definitely, like I noticed certain, um, - you know for example, when I saw it on opening night, the character who is pregnant, just you know, like in that opening sequence,

[00:32:51.03] Jay Scheib: Oh right, we cut it.

Farai Chideya: The chair was pulled out from under her. Which is a very -- I mean it's the ultimate mean-spiritedness, to repeatedly pull a chair away from a pregnant woman, and I am wondering, did you cut that for time, did you cut it because you thought it was irrelevant? Or, too mean-spirited, or...?

Jay Scheib: I cut it because I -- I cut it because I felt like it was such a huge gesture that it was making it impossible to pay attention to the next six sentences, actually. And so getting rid of that little thing actually does make it possible to concentrate. It makes the story launch quicker. Its, you know -- in the novel there's a -- we see one pregnant person, which is really caught my attention, and she uh -- and somebody throws a can of beans at her, I think -- and I thought, my god -- what an unbelievable -- its one of those sorts of images

that you can't actually fathom, and so, we felt that, it's too hard to throw a full can of beans at somebody in the theatre, I mean it can, that could be kind of dangerous. We would try that probably, because that's the kind of people we are, but, bad idea.

Farai Chideya: Yeah I'm just wondering about like...

Jay Scheib: So the chair pull was --

Farai Chideya: ...you know, the medical insurance for this entire production.

[laughter]

[00:34:06.25] Jay Scheib: We have it. [laughter]. So, but, pulling a chair out under -- you know -- first we throw an empty can at her and he says, 'Oh, man, don't throw a can at her, she's pregnant. Come here, sit down,' and then, as she sits he pulls the chair out from under her and she falls on the floor, which, we actually thought it would be funny.

Samuel Delany: OK, you're a strange man, Jay Scheib!

Jay Scheib: Well, I mean, but, in rehearsal we all laughed, because it was like, you know, I mean -- they do crazy stuff on the Simpsons, everybody laughs. [laughter]. But it was not funny, and so we...

[laughter].

Farai Chideya: I'm going to go to the last question over here.

[00:34:47.18] Audience: [?? I can't make out this question]

Samuel Delany: Well thank you very much, but alas there, uh, one novel is under option, and for every, you know, for every movie that gets made, there are 500 works that are optioned that never see the screen and so I suspect my movie -- one of the 149, or one of the 499.

Audience: Which story?

Samuel Delany: Nova.

Farai Chideya: Any final thoughts, Jay?

Samuel Delany: But one thing that was most interesting to me, um, that uh, in the novel, I go, I put out a lot of rhetorical energy, into never having the readers see any of Kid's poetry at all. Yeah. You never see a phrase or a line, or even a word, that uh Kid actually writes, and anything that he does, you know, that does get

into the notebook, very quickly you hear that either that page is destroyed, or he crosses it out, or you know, its obliterated, or he rewrites it so you never, you know -- and here a lot of the internal stuff becomes the poetry itself, which is an interesting, um, an interesting thing to watch that happen. I actually rather enjoyed it.

[00:36:43.05] Farai Chideya: You haven't been voted off the island.

Jay Scheib: No, I mean, we love the poetry, the poetry in the book is so fantastic, and, finding a way to deal with it is something that we were really interested in.

Samuel Delany: Yeah. But it's not -- in the book it's not poetry -- its very definitely prose. [laughter] Prose I worked very hard at, but prose nevertheless.

Farai Chideya: Well this has been extraordinary, um, I know that there are more questions but I also know that it's 10:30 at night, so I will just say thank you, [applause] thank you so much Chip, thank you, Jay, thank you to the cast and the crew, thank you very much and thank you everyone for coming.