Andrew Clark: Number one, I want to call attention to a book I read a while ago that I thought was tremendous. The author is sitting beside me. It's *Air Farce: 40 Years of Flying By the Seat of Our Pants*. As someone who writes about the history of comedy, I wish he'd written this a little bit before *my* book, because then I could've just used it as a secondary source. It's a tremendous book. It's a really, really funny, well-written book, and it's going to be valuable for people who study comedy for years and years to come, so on their behalf, I thank you, Don Ferguson…

Don Ferguson: You're welcome.

AC: And I welcome you once again to Humber College Comedy Primetime. *(applause)* And I have to say, I got to learn a few things about you that I didn't know, particularly, and I mentioned it earlier, that you didn't have a very direct route into comedy. There was no comedy school. I think you were always being funny one way or another, but can you talk a little bit about your early days in Montreal, at Loyola, and your march through the counterculture of the sixties, to a degree?

DF: *(laughs*) Well, I'm obviously a baby boomer, and I came of age, I guess in a way, in the sixties. Now I'm in my sixties. Funny, isn't it? At the time when I was in school, high school and then university, there were no comedy clubs of any kind anywhere. So people kind of did stuff to amuse themselves, and then you ended up getting a job and working somewhere, and you did the comedy on the side. I was very lucky…how much of the counterculture do you want to get into?

AC: A little bit. Well, I'm gonna put it out there. I have a lot of trouble believing that in… 1967 or '68?

DF: ’67, if we’re talking about the same thing.

AC: That you spent the year doing a hundred hits of acid.

DF: Yes. *(laughter)*

AC: It’s in the book. That’s public record.

DF: It’s true. We actually thought of the idea because it was the centennial of Canada. *(laughter)* There were centennial projects all over the country. People were walking a hundred miles, or giving a hundred dollars to a camp. Everything was in hundreds. Planting a hundred tulip bulbs in their front yard. So my friends and I, we were living in a flat in Montreal, and we thought it would be a neat idea to do some acid. *(laughter)* But we didn’t think of the idea soon enough. We started in late spring, so we didn’t actually finish until early 1968. But we did meet our target. *(laughter)* I don’t recommend this nowadays. Seriously, then, acid was kind of an amateurish thing. A few chemistry students made it, and people did it because it was fun. There were no big organized crime operations, there were no biker gangs involved in the distribution or manufacture of it, so the stuff was pure, and it was pretty gentle. You did have to wait about three days after taking some for it to wear off so you could take another one. That’s why we had to wait until ’68 to finish. Enough about that. *(laughter)*

AC: As a fan of the show, and with so much of it being topical, I think a lot of people watching the show thought that you spent your early twenties at McGill writing *A*

Modest Proposal sort of stuff on the FLQ crisis and things like that. Although, you grew up, and Roger Abbott was a childhood friend, I mean boyhood friend…

DF: Yeah. We met when Roger was twelve and I was thirteen, so he was pretty close to thirteen. Roger Abbott, for those of you who don't know, was my business partner and creative partner in *Air Farce*. He died in March of 2011, which was a very sad event, but we were friends for more than fifty years, and we worked together for more than forty. Roger had a couple of good friends who were very much into comedy, but in those days it would be viewed as pranks. You'd call up the local phone-in show… I gotta tell you, one thing that Roger and a friend of his did, they got a phone with multiple lines, and they called a guy named Pat Byrnes, who was the biggest talk show host on the radio in Montreal, one of these kind of rude people who would call women "doll." It was like, "Yeah, doll, whaddya got? OK, that's interesting, goodbye, next line, next caller." And he'd get rid of people really quickly. And they tied up every single line, so that when he hung up on somebody and went to the next line, the same caller was still there. (*laughter)* It was really funny. It was like a sketch but in real life.

AC: Early, early prank (humor). Also, you were at Loyola…

DF: Yes.

AC: And you had an incident where you put a fake name on an exam that cost you a year? I'm telling this as a cautionary tale for these guys.

DF: Yes. I was at Loyola College, which is now part of Concordia. Just because I was stupid, I thought it would be fun to make up a different first name for myself. So instead of calling myself Don Ferguson, I decided I'd call myself "Norbert Ferguson." I'd never heard the name before, and I heard it once and thought it sounded cute, so I decided I'd call myself "Norbert Ferguson". But what happened that year was that, over the summer, the university made a transition from manual records of student marks to a computerized database. And somehow, my mark got lost, so I went in in the fall to explain the joke (*laughter*), and the professor had moved to Dalhousie and was unreachable. She was actually quite unreachable when she was teaching, too. So the university lost the record. So because of that, and because I'd also failed one other course, and if you failed two courses you had to repeat the year, it cost me an entire year of university. But I'm not bitter. *(laughter)* But a cautionary tale, yes. Some pranks are really stupid.

AC: So throughout university, you were doing productions and things like that. And then it seemed like for both you and Roger, radio jobs, mainly on the technical side or promotional side, were your first show business careers.

DF: That's right. Roger was very much into radio, and he thought he had a career in it in the sense that he wanted to own a radio station or two and be in management. He actually was the promotion director of CKGM in Montreal, which was the top station at the time in Montreal, when he was twenty-four years old, and I think a year or two later, he was the acting general manager. He was incredibly adept, very well organized, and very hard-working. He got me a job, because we were buddies,

when I quit school. I dropped out of Loyola, and he got me a job as a technician at their FM side, which in those days just played records. So our first work together as professionals was on the technical or behind-the-scenes side. We then got a job in Toronto. We moved up here together with somebody else in Montreal, and we worked at a radio station here for several months.

Again, I screwed up. The station was then called, it may still be around, CHIN, which was an ethnic station. Foreign-language, I guess you could call it. It was dawn to dusk. They had a crummy license. It was AM, so "dawn to dusk" meant it could only come on when the sun was up, and you had to be off the air when the sun went down. And the reason for that was because AM radio waves carried differently at night than in the daytime, and they were interfering with some other radio station if they stayed on after sunset. My job was to turn the station on in the morning, which in the winter wasn't a problem, but in the summer, when you had to be on the air at about five AM, it was way too early for me. I eventually got fired because occasionally, well, too often it would happen, I would arrive at the station, and there'd be a whole bunch of Italian workers standing around, wondering what was wrong (because) the station wasn't on the air when they got up in the morning. And I'd be saying, "Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me," and I'd turn on the equipment and fire up the radio station. So I was not very successful as a technician.

AC: It's interesting, because we're doing a lot of radio here at Humber right now, and working towards radio sketches and that kind of thing. *Air Farce* had such a great

run as a radio entity. What were some of the early comedy lessons for radio that you (learned)?

DF: A basic lesson we learned about radio, for us, was to do it in front of a live audience. That worked for us. There were other troupes around at the time who were doing radio out of the states that did stuff strictly in a studio, and they would release vinyl albums that would be played occasionally on shows that had comedy hours, but for us we found that the key thing for us was a live audience. I can't stress too much how important a live audience was, and it was for a couple of reasons. One was, when we began, before we got our first radio deal on CBC, we were working on a theater about this size in Toronto called the Poor Alex. We charged, I think it was $3.50 to come in for a seat. The seats weren't as good as this. The quality of the seating wasn't as good as this. We did a show Thursday, two shows on Friday, and two shows on Saturday.

The way the show evolved was, we were doing sketches that were kind of just about stuff to begin with, but then we'd ask the audience at the end of the first act what they wanted in the second act. And the audience invariably asked for things that they had heard about recently. Either they'd read it in the newspaper or seen it on television. It could be show biz, it could be politics, it could be sports, but it was always something current that was on their minds that they wanted to see. We didn't do the kind of things Second City did, or a lot of places did, (where you'd say) "We need a situation. OK, we've got two characters." They kind of set up the framework of whatever it was going to be, and then you watch the magic happen.

We'd just simply ask people for topics. And then we'd go back at intermission, and we'd have fifteen or twenty minutes to work out what we were going to do. So it was just kind of a rapid-fire session of, "What do you think we can do with this subject?" And we'd try to work together a framework of an idea, and we'd always have a punch line. The guy who ran the lights was with us in the dressing room, and he wrote down the punch lines. His instructions were, "When you hear that line, turn up the lights." And that was the end of the sketch. But what this did was it kept us very current, but it was simply listing what the audience asked for and giving it to them.

When we got to radio, initially in the first two years, before we actually became the *Air Farce* on radio, we worked under a different name, and we had to do stuff in the studio, and it was so weird and so dead, because stuff that we had been doing in front of audiences that got laughs got nothing. It threw off our timing. It was really unsatisfactory. When we finally got to do the show in front of an audience, two things happened. One was, we were able to tailor our material to what those people wanted. The second thing was, you could hear the audience laughing at it. So if you were listening to the radio show on CBC Radio, you'd hear these comedians, and you'd also hear laughter all the time, as the real, live people who would listen to the show a week or two earlier were laughing. So for two reasons, our live audience made us. One was because they kept us topical, contemporary, plugged-in to what the audience wanted, not what we thought was funny, but what they were interested in, and what they thought was funny. The second thing was the laugh track was real. It wasn't producers sitting in a studio saying, "Well, that's pretty

funny, put a laugh in there." That happens in television all the time. So I really can't stress enough how important a live audience was for us.

AC: Listening to it, it made you feel like you were there.

DF: Absolutely.

AC: When you heard it, you felt like you were present, which is such a great thing with radio. We talked earlier about podcasts. The big appeal of podcasts like Marc Maron's show or Greg Fitzsimmons's or any of these comedians is that it makes you feel like you're sitting down with them, like you're the third party in the conversation who's just not saying anything. I remember those broadcasts being very vivid. You kind of felt like you were there in the theater. I was always listening to them sometime in the day later on, because often they'd air in the afternoon or whatever, but it gave it that spark, which I think was really critical, and you could feel it in the performance.

DF: And also I think that in general, radio is a more intimate medium than television. Television presents the picture. You sit back, you look at it, you see what's happening, but in radio you really listen. We did radio for twenty-four years, and after twenty years we started doing TV as well, which we did for sixteen. We had to change our writing from radio to television. What happened, we noticed, was that on TV, you had to pick one subject, stick to it, and get it over with and move on. In radio, you could start off with three people walking down the street talking about cheese, and then you run into a fourth person and they say, "Let's go to Niagara Falls," so you all go to Niagara Falls, and then you go into a bar and you have a couple of beers,

and then the Prime Minister walks in and you're talking to him or her, and the audience at home is just following like, "OK, I got you, I got you." The classic thing about radio is you can paint a picture. The script will say, "OK, there's a forest fire in Saskatchewan that won't go out." Well, it wouldn't be a forest fire there, it'd be a grass fire. "We have to put it out, but we don't have enough water, so we're going to get a balloon, a gigantic air balloon, and we're going to go over Lake Superior and lower a huge bucket, and we're going to pick up all the water in Lake Superior and we're going to fly it across the country, dump it on the grass fire in Saskatchewan." And in radio, everyone's going, "I'm there. I got the picture." They're following you. On TV, or in film, you could never do that. How could you ever actually afford to build a balloon, build a giant bucket, fill it with water, and show this? You can't do it. Radio is more like animation in some ways, because the animation goes on in the listener's head. It's a great, great, great medium, if you're going to write for comedy, to try your hand at, because you can do a ton of stuff in it, and you can do it inexpensively. It really frees the imagination. John Morgan in our group used to say that in radio, the technology is the servant of the actor, and in television, the actor is the servant of the technology, and he was kind of right.

AC: I'm just trying to find the quote, but there was one, going back to your early days, about your sort of Jesuit education, and the demands of precision in comedy. You're talking about radio and words. How long did it take before you got the necessity for precision in the writing? Because I was surprised how much of your background for *Air Farce,* and prior to that the Jest Society, was improvisational. That's not always a place where precision in words is counted, right?

DF: No, it isn't. It just becomes necessary, because you have to focus. If you want people to get the joke, and we did jokes a lot in *Air Farce* where we didn't just do a situation, we didn't believe very strongly, to be honest with you, about mood or situation. Character was important, but the characters had to be doing something that you would laugh at. But when you're doing jokes, and anybody who's tried to write a joke will know… (*to audience)* How many of you have tried to write a joke? Did you find that you could be imprecise? I think you have to be extremely precise when you're writing a joke. You change a couple of words, and the joke's not funny. It doesn't get across. So I think that's one thing we found out…

AC: Well, that's like Roger's line where there was a Premier Richard Hatfield…

DF: That's right.

AC: …who was caught carrying marijuana on a flight.

DF: Yeah, it was during a royal tour.

AC: And you guys did a show with him, and the line was supposed to be, "Hi, hello," and Richard Hatfield said, "Hi." And then they changed the opening to, "Hi, how are you feeling?" "Hi."

DF: We did this in Fredericton, New Brunswick. It was his home, where he was the premier. He was supposed to say, "Hello," that was in the script. And the line Roger had was, "Hello, Mr. Premier, good to see you," or something, and he would say, "Hello." But Roger changed it on the night to, "Hello, Premier, how are you feeling?" "Hi!" *(laughter)* Brought down the house.

AC: We'll get ready for questions here in a minute. *(to audience)* Do we have any questions? We've got a microphone coming. *(to Roger)* So making the transition from radio to television, that's still a trajectory that most people want to make in comedy, in part because the audiences are different and it's a challenge. You hadn't had experience in television. We kind of laughed about this in Vancouver, which is that it's always a bad sign when you live in Toronto and the CBC tells you that they want to do your show, but you're going to have to do it in Vancouver, because the money's there in the envelope. So the second time around, can you just talk to us a little bit about your experience again transitioning from radio to television, and some of the things you kept an eye on?

DF: The second time?

AC: The second time, which is what these guys would know, in the sixteen years. That's sixteen years from then, right, from '89?

DF: Yes, we started in '92.

AC: '92, sorry.

DF: On TV. Well, I've already touched on the transition in writing. You couldn't start somewhere and basically take an idea for a walk, which you could do on radio. You had to say, "This is what we're doing," and then you had to do it, and then two minutes later or three minutes later, or maybe if it was a really great sketch, five minutes later, you had to move on, but you couldn't just keep it open-ended. For us, the learning curve was really, really steep, because although we'd seen a lot of

television, as everybody had, doing it is a totally different thing, and Roger Abbott and I, apart from being in the show, were also producing it, and the sheer scale of the operation, for one thing, was very, very different. In radio, everybody involved was about ten people. Everybody doubled up. That's writing, performing, directing, recording, sound effects, all that was ten people. Those of you who've worked in television will know that you can't even have a good meeting with ten people in television, it just doesn't happen. I think on our weekly credits on our show, there were so many that we actually used to alternative creative credits, technical credits and general credits every week, because in any given week, maybe 100-120 people got involved in the making of our show. Even if it was a painter working one shift painting a flat, that person would get credit.

We learned as we went along on television that stuff had to be short. We did sketches, we didn't do a sitcom, so we weren't narrative, we were sketch. The number of media outlets increased. When we started TV, for instance, all non-mainstream broadcasters, the mainstream ones being CBC, CTV and Global, everybody else apart from them totaled something like twelve to fourteen percent of broadcasting. And now they account for something like seventy percent. The networks have really shrunk. So increasingly, there was competition from specialty channels, and then of course the internet came along, which made it even tougher. And we found that, for our purposes, material had to be really tight and really short, because basically television viewers have something that radio listeners don't have, which is a remote control. People watching television think nothing of dialing around, changing anytime they feel like it. Generally on radio, if you tune into

something, you stay tuned in until they drive you away, until you have no reason to listen anymore. As long as you've been given a reason to listen, you will.

I'm trying to think of what else was a major transition from radio to television…the hours. The amount of work was huge. And Robin knows this too, I'm sure. Anyone who does television knows how much work is involved. It is incredibly hard work. One of the reasons why it's incredibly hard work is because everyone wants to do it. I'm sure most of you people here would say, "I've love to be on television and star in my own show." The competition is ferocious, and the two things you have to master…well, three things: you've got to get a show. It's got to become a hit. And it's got to remain a hit. And when you have the enormous competition you have in television, everybody wants your job. You can't let up for a moment. It's a bit like being a professional athlete. The minute you get out of training, you start goofing off, develop some bad habits, unless you're a real, incredibly good superstar with great natural gifts, your career's not going to last. I don't know how many hours a week we worked on television, but we seemed to be practically living at CBC the first seven or eight years.

AC: And then working in the summer too. I remember, from the book, the idea of feeling almost uneasy about having that summer off. When you're working as a writer or performer, you're still working contract to contract, and any time you're not working is time you could be making money or doing something like that.

DF: Yes, planning the next move to survive in this business. Our longest contract we ever had was five years, which was an enormously long contract for television. This

year we did a New Year's special, we still do one every year, but including those, we've been doing radio and TV for thirty-nine years, I think. The longest contract we ever had was five years. In all the time we were on radio, which was twenty-four years, we never had a contract longer than a year. In television, the next longest to five years was three, and everything else was a one or two year contract. Personally, I'm in favor of that. I think that security in this business can breed complacency, and that while as individuals we all would love to have the security of knowing where we're going to be working next year, for creativity, sometimes anxiety and fear and nervousness is what you need to keep you going and keep you sharp. I see Robin nodding. (*laughter)*

AC: *(to audience)* Are we ready for our first question? Yep, right here.

Audience member: Being so successful in this country of Canada, did you ever feel overshadowed by anything American?

DF: Well, sure. I think anybody who works in Canada exclusively is aware of that. You have to realize that if you're working in Los Angeles, you pretty much consider Canada to be part of your domestic market. You don't consider it a foreign country. The population of California alone is larger than the entire population of Canada. And anybody who works here as a Canadian knows how difficult it is to get media space for what you're doing, because the great American publicity machine comes pouring over the border in all kinds of ways and through all kinds of pipelines twenty-four hours a day. I have to say, it always irks me when I'm at the supermarket and I see that some kind of B television star in the United States is on

the cover of *People* or one of those things. An A Canadian star will never, ever, ever, ever get on that magazine (cover). So just through the simple act of buying groceries every week, viewers are exposed to everything America has to offer, and nothing Canada has to offer. Virtually nothing. That makes it enormously difficult to succeed in this business. Andrew and I were talking before we came in today about this. We touched on it, anyway, how there's enormous competition, and how difficult it is, even in a place like Toronto, to get noticed. If you pick up *Now*, the newspaper, and you see how thick that is, and you see how thick that is with the listings and the ads, how the hell can anyone afford to buy a big enough ad often enough to get noticed? It's really, really difficult.

AC: And that's tied to, and you describe it in the book, I think it was the Jest Society…

DF: Right.

AC: The first show at the Poor Alex, getting all three reviewers. And in fact, each paper had a reviewer, number one.

DF: A full-time reviewer.

AC: Not just someone they would hire once in a while to come out to review your show. And then following up the run. That just doesn't happen anymore.

DF: No, not at all.

AC: I think it comes partly out of the structure, and partly out of a certain self-loathing, to a degree, among Canadians. They can genuflect, if you will, in front of

Hollywood, and not take care of their own. But you were tempted, I guess, or at least had a moment…

DF: Yeah. I mention that in the book too. Roger and I had an in with a fellow named Stan Daniels, who was one of the producers of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which was a sitcom that was around in the seventies, I guess most of the seventies. We had gone down because of another friend. We were sniffing around Los Angeles. At the time I was married to an American woman who wanted to live back home. So we gave it a shot, and we went in to see Stan Daniels, and they were just staffing up the writing for a show called *Taxi*, which was another sitcom that lasted…I can't remember if it was five or six years. Basically, we were offered to come in and be part of that. Roger and I went back to our motel room, one of those great Los Angeles motels, they're two stories and they've all got balconies and there's a pool in the middle and a courtyard, and you think, "This is so cool."

We started feeling very successful, but we sat there for about an hour talking about it, and we realized…we were doing *Air Farce* at the time on radio, and we realized that we really couldn't leave the radio show. We wanted to see how it was going to turn out. It was our creation, and basically, to be honest with you, the difference was that we felt that *Air Farce* on radio meant more to the (fans) we had in Canada than any sitcom would be to viewers in the United States. Because no matter how successful (it was), it would just be another sitcom. Whereas, possibly because it dealt with contemporary issues, and dealt with people Canadians knew—we did a lot of impersonations of politicians and such—we felt that the contact we

had, and what we represented to listeners, was far more important. So we declined the offer and came home. I've never regretted it. I've regretted (missing) the money sometimes. If we had been as successful in America as we were in Canada, we'd all be very wealthy. In Canada, when your hit show ends, you have to look for a job. It's just the way it is. Long answer to your question, and I don't know if I even answered it. *(laughter)*

AM: No no, you did, you did.

AC: *(to audience)* Any other questions? Yeah, right down here, Jeff.

Audience member: Hi.

DF: Hi.

AM: I used to listen to the radio show when I was a kid. I really dug it. But I was always wondering, could you describe how one of those shows would be performed? Were you just sitting at a table, and you had scripts?

DF: No. I'll tell you, what we did was, the radio show evolved over time. We always performed it in front of a live audience, we always stood at microphones, we always had onstage, right *there* would be our sound effects guy, who had a complete setup. We always wanted him to do as much live as possible too, not just push buttons or play tapes. In those days you had to play cartridges, nothing was digital. If we needed water poured, we asked him to actually pour the water, and if we wanted somebody opening a window, he had a setup where he had a car door, he had a window that worked in a variety of ways. It could hinge open like this, he could

throw open the sash, he could close it. He would occasionally break things for us. They don't make them anymore, they were a great loss to live sound effects, but little wooden strawberry boxes, now they come in green paper, a paper box, but they used to be made of wood, and whenever you had a fight, and you wanted something to smash, they were a great element in making that (*makes crashing sound*). But he did that live.

Some of our best gags for radio were actually for the live audience. We used to love mixing up serving tea and urinating, so that some gentleman would be having a pee, and Alex, our first sound effects guy, he would get a teapot and pour it into a basin, and he would pour and pour and pour and pour for an impossibly long time. Then he would finish, then he would shake out a drop, and he'd do it all in front of a live audience. And then occasionally what he'd do is he'd pick up a teacup and actually drink some of it. So the audience would be killing themselves laughing, because they'd know we were talking about somebody peeing, but they're actually seeing this other device for it. We always had that live onstage, and he was surrounded by microphones. He had one at his feet for walking, and he had the whole rig where he could walk through sand, he used cornstarch for (that) and he'd squeeze a bag. He had coconuts for the horses' hooves. The whole array. He was amazing, this guy Alex Sheridan. We'd be onstage, and the recording guys would usually be at the back of the hall.

As we evolved, we started touring across Canada, and we eventually did all of our radio shows at big halls. So in Toronto, we used to do Massey Hall every

December. We would do most other cities in Canada every second year. So we'd go to Vancouver every second year, we'd do Calgary one year, Edmonton the next, we'd do Regina one year, Saskatoon the next. We'd do Winnipeg every second year, we'd do Thunder Bay every second year. And we'd always do the biggest halls. They generally sat somewhere between 1800 and 2500 people. We did the Arts Center in Ottawa. When you think about it, it was just four or five people standing at microphones reading scripts. That's what it was. We'd dress nicely if we could, but we're reading scripts. We had one great experience in Ottawa at the National Arts Center when we first started doing this. There was a fella who was an Executive Vice President of CBC Radio, and he was stationed in Ottawa at headquarters there. He was a big fan of our show. He came backstage after the show and he said to me, "Don, this is amazing! The Arts Center! Sold out! For a fucking *radio show!*" (*laughter)* He was just beside himself, he was so happy. The reality is, at the time, I don't think there was another product, another show on CBC Radio or television, that could've sold out the Arts Center. It was just this crazy thing for a radio show.

There's a lot of this in the book. Our way of doing it was, we used to do it in Toronto at one point on Parliament Street, and we lost our studio because they converted it into a newsroom. We had to find a place to perform, and through serendipity, a woman from Vancouver called me and asked if the *Air Farce* could perform at a fundraiser for her charity. It was Big Brothers of Greater Vancouver. I said, "Well, we'd love to, but there's no way we can get there." She said, "Well, CBC would pay for it." I said, "CBC can't even afford to give us a studio. There's no way they could afford to fly us out there." So we worked out a deal. She rented the

Orpheum, which is a pretty big theater in Vancouver. I think it'd be a couple thousand seats. She said, "I know I can sell the tickets, because you guys are pretty popular out here, and I've got an organization that can sell the tickets," her volunteers.

What eventually happened, and this became our pattern, was that we hooked up with nonprofits, with charitable organizations across Canada, and in fact they would come to us eventually once the word got out, and the deal was they would rent the hall, they would rent the hotel rooms, they would provide the airfares. All expenses would come out of ticket sales. Once they recouped all their expenses, they got to keep what was left of the box office—they'd split it with us. They would get, I think seventy-five or eighty percent, and we would get twenty or twenty-five percent. Probably 75/25. We took that as a lost opportunity cost, because we couldn't come back and perform again in the same city a few months later. And over the years, we raised, I think it was millions of dollars for charities, and it didn't cost CBC a nickel. Actually the only thing CBC had to pay was per diems and overtime for the crew. But it was basically, considering what an impact the shows had, and how beneficial they were for CBC just in a PR sense as well as being the top-rated show on CBC Radio, it was a gift for them. But the radio show was always done standing up in front of the live audience. We tried to make it as theatrical as possible, but basically we had to stand at mics and read scripts.

AC: You guys toured so much, and you mentioned when the show was on CBC Television in the early nineties getting a million viewers, which was great, and they

were amazed, and you were like, "Well, we met each and every one of them." Did you learn anything about the Canadian sense of humor? Any tips you might give about what makes Canadians laugh?

DF: Well, what worked for us throughout our career, and especially on television, was that because Canada in some ways, in the nineties and the first part of this century, was the most international comedy market in the world—we get it from everywhere, we get all of the American stuff, no other country gets all of the American stuff, and we also get a lot of British stuff, and we get some Australian stuff—your competition is really the best in the world. You have to make people laugh as well as anybody else practicing in the English language in the world can do it. You have to be that good. Our big plus is that we dealt with Canadian subjects, which nobody else did. It was the one thing we could offer on TV, for instance, that American shows could not offer Canadian viewers. Because our total reason for existing was to serve Canadians, and for Americans it was strictly peripheral.

So that's kind of a preamble. I think if you're going to work in Canada, it's a rule of standup if you're working in a club, "Know your audience." If you're going to work on radio or TV in Canada, know your audience. Be cognizant of who the viewers are, and the viewers here are Canadian, they're not American. But as far as a Canadian sense of humor, I think one hallmark of what Canadians have done for years, it may be changing now, but have done for years, is topical comedy. In the United States, that kind of stuff is pushed to the margins. It's after the 11 PM news. You don't get it in primetime. In Canada, it's always been in primetime. (*This Hour*

Has) *22 Minutes* is still on the air, they're a primetime show. Rick Mercer is a primetime show. And dealing with contemporary events, we believe, to be honest, that there is an audience for this in the United States, but they're never going to get it, for commercial and political reasons. If they do something audiences don't like, a group will sure as hell come out of somewhere and say, "We object to this because you're making fun of our children," or "You're favoring homosexuality, and we're going to organize a lobby group and we're going to boycott the sponsors." And the sponsors will call the network and say, "That show, we're not going to sponsor it anymore," and then the show is gone. So there's an enormous special-interest group pressure on American network television to prevent anything really interesting from getting on. That's why the most interesting stuff is on HBO or other channels.

And there are also political reasons. America doesn't believe that PBS should exist. It faces constant pressure to survive. Congress keeps spending to remove their budget or make it smaller. And if you don't have a funded, fairly healthy economically independent arms-length broadcaster like in Canada with the CBC, or the BBC in the U.K., you're not going to get this stuff, because no commercial broadcaster will touch it. A big difference within Canada, having moved on now from the topic of topicality in the business, is that there is a difference between east and west. The westerners in Canada, they hate the east. It's something you just have to accept. They have about a hundred years of resentment of Toronto's banks, and Montreal's banks prior to that, running the country and making economic decisions and bleeding the west dry. So there is a bit of a divide when you get west of Thunder Bay, we've found, in terms of audiences. There's resentment once you get west of

Thunder Bay about Toronto and the east. I would say that Nova Scotia audiences or eastern audiences are the best at laughing. They love to have a good time. They're the most relaxed and they're fun people. Toronto is always changing because of the mixture of influences in Toronto. Population, immigration, have had a bigger impact on Toronto than any other locale in the country. As I said, out west, you can always get a laugh, or you'll get applause for sure, if you dump on Toronto. But it doesn't really work here. By way of illustration, when we toured once, I'd just played Pierre Trudeau in a show, the former Prime Minister. He was coming to the end of his reign. In the east, people loved to hate him, and in the west, they just hated him. So the jokes worked much better out west. But there was definitely a divide, and that divide still exists.

AC: The year that you were our guest host for the industry show was also the year that the markets had all crashed, tying it back into topicality. At the time, we'd discussed that there was almost no mention of the biggest financial crisis since the crash in 1929. And we brought it up with the students, and they kind of said, "Well, it doesn't really affect us." And then I would meet the same students a year later, and ask, "How are things going," and (they'd reply) "Not so good, I can't get a job." (*laughter*) So is it just a product of, and this sounds quite patronizing, but people becoming more interested in the political system as they become more affected by it, and the way you get affected by it is that you move out and get a job, so is it just a natural thing that as you progress through your life as a comedian, you get more drawn to topicality?

DF: I think maybe…

AC: There was always an element there, maybe because of the early days in Montreal, and this idea that there was going to be a satiric versus humor or comedy… I've jumbled my question, but I guess what I'm getting at is, is it a natural growth that you go towards topicality, or is it something that you kind of…

DF: We all live in the present, no matter what our subject matter is. CBC has always been obsessed with getting a younger audience, and I've said to CBC managers for as long as I can remember, "You're never going to get a younger audience with the programming you have, because younger audiences aren't interested in it." I know that when I was in my early twenties, I didn't give a fuck about CBC Radio. (*laughter*) And even when I started working on it, a lot of the stuff that they were programming, I didn't hear about. (I'd think) "This has got nothing to do with me." I think if you're heavy on news and heavy on political commentary, you do get an older audience, there's no question about it. Because it's something that people come to later. I believe that, the last time I heard certainly, Jon Stewart's audience is among the oldest, if not the oldest audience…is it Comedy Central he's on?

AC: He's on Comedy Central and Comedy Network in Canada.

DF: Right, Comedy Central. It's the oldest audience they have, the one for his show. A lot of people in university I know love (it), they say, "This guy's really on the money." But the fact is, those of you who watch him and think that are in the minority. Most people would sooner watch other stuff, other kinds of comedy. Older people like him, and by older people I mean people in their forties. They'll watch Jon Stewart

because they think his commentary on the political system is brilliant. The same thing with Stephen Colbert. But they have old audiences, and it's kind of an embarrassment for the network, because they don't know what to do. They have this great show, it's kind of a marquee show, it's the one that people think of when they think of Comedy Central, but the audience is much older than they want it to be. That's just the nature of the beast, and I think you have to accept that.

AC: *(to audience)* Question? Right here.

Audience member: So what would your advice be to someone that's created their own radio show and has done a podcast and really wants the CBC's attention?

DF: I'm sorry, ask that again? What was your…

AM: So the question was just, for someone that has already kind of created their own radio show, has done the podcast thing and really wants to get the CBC's attention, what would be your advice for that? What would be the steps to take?

DF: Are you talking about yourself, or somebody you know? I think the one thing to do is to find the person or people at CBC Radio who are in the business of listening to new ideas and contact them. I don't know if CBC Radio has that kind of information on their website… Robin?

Second audience member: There's a "CBC Pitch" that you can go to under "Radio", and you can download the whole (application)…

DF: Yeah. And there's a fella there, what's his name…

(At this point, the second audience member says something unintelligible.)

DF: He's one of them, yeah, and there's somebody else, oh gosh, it'll come to me, he's a bit senior to him, but I think Tom is the one…is he from Winnipeg originally? I think he's the one who's riding herd on that stuff. I know the process, because I've been through it recently with a couple of guys who are trying to sell them a show. These guys had a show that was part comedy and part music, and the creator of the show is really into the music part of it. We had a conversation, he came to see me, I gave him some advice. He had a breakdown of what a typical half-hour would be, he had a sample script. I said I thought the CBC would be much more interested in the comedy than in the music, but I gave him somebody's name and he took it to CBC, and he got a good response, but not the response he wanted. And it turned out that what they did want was more spoken-word comedy and less music.

One of the problems with comedy and music in a half-hour show, and for comedy a half-hour is a good length on radio, as well as television, one of the problems is that they really don't mix. If people are digging the comedy when the music comes on, the comedy stops, and they're going, "Ugh, how long is it going to be before we get back to the stuff I want?" Look at *SNL*. They have a couple of music hits in the ninety minutes, only a couple of hits, and they're spectacular. Generally, it's a big brand-name star or an emerging star. And you sort of tolerate it because it's part of the ninety minutes of entertainment. I don't think you could watch ninety minutes of sketch comedy without some kind of break.

The one thing I would say is, if you have a radio show, make sure it's the best you can make it. A lot of people go in saying, "This is a pretty good idea, and I think they'll help me develop it." Well, they won't, because they don't have the time, and they don't have the manpower. There are lots of people with good ideas coming in every day. So make it the best you can. I would say, as I mentioned earlier about live audiences, if you can have people laughing at it, if it's that kind of show, I would definitely make sure, if you're recording it in a club, for instance, or any kind of venue, mic the audience, record the audience. Because that is the most convincing thing of all to anybody that this stuff is funny. Because especially with new comedians, a lot of broadcast executives, and even people who are my age, I spent my entire career in comedy, you'll hear something and you won't get it, because it's a different generation speaking. It's you guys; it 's not my generation. But if you come in with a recording that has your generation, your audiences laughing at you, then right away I go, "OK, whatever they're doing, they're doing something right." The other thing is, don't give up. If they say, "We're not interested," try a follow-up conversation saying, "Well, what would make it interesting, what are you interested in, what have I missed?" And be persistent. Keep going back and bugging them.

AC: Because again, with your career, there was a long trajectory. You're always working, whether you're sweating in the Bayview Playhouse when they didn't have air condition in July and it was like, was it eighty-seven degrees or something like that?

DF: Yeah.

AC: But you're always kind of working. One question I really want to hear the answer to is, how do you build an impersonation? You were very well known for your Trudeau, your Lucien Bouchard. You seemed to have the Francophone thing down.

DF: Right, coming out of Montreal.

AC: So as a comedian, I guess you looked at the newspaper as your friend, (thinking), "What's going wrong this week?"

DF: That's right. Bad news is great news for comedians.

AC: So when Bouchard first comes out, do you then start thinking right away, or do you draw straws to see who gets to do it?

DF: By the time we were doing people like Bouchard, the writers on the show pretty much knew what I could do, or what the cast could do and couldn't do. So they would write stuff…first of all, they would not write stuff that nobody in the cast could do. There were only four of us, we were all older by television terms, rather than newbies, so we didn't get a lot of really young roles, emerging roles, to play, because they simply didn't write them, they knew we couldn't do them, it would look stupid. Talk about mutton dressed as lamb. It would be quite cringe-worthy. So they always gave us something we thought we could do.

My own personal way of (seeing) it, and I think everybody has it different, is that there are two ways to create a character. You can create a character from the inside out or from the outside in. With impersonations, I'd mix them both. I'd start

from the outside in and then end up doing it inside out. So I'd look at the way a person walked. Usually, if I got the way a person walked or stood or moved physically, the voice would start to come. But it's not like you do one thing and ignore everything else. While you're looking for that hook into who they are, you're also trying to work on their voice, especially when you're doing radio. Obviously it's the most important thing as far as the audience is concerned, but you try to deliver stuff the way you think they would. What you're ultimately doing is you're going to try to sell the audience words, dialogue, that that person would never, ever say. So that's when you have to internalize who that person is, and think, "Given the situation, how would this person react?" I would find that I would spend a lot of time simply thinking about them. "What goes on in this guy's head? Why, when this happened, did he do that? What does that tell me about him as a person?" And through that, (I'd) try to take that outside information and internalize it, so when I pretended I was that person, I really felt like I was that person. Does that answer your question?

AC: Yeah. Is it awkward meeting someone that you've impersonated in front of a million viewers?

DF: It is if you've been really harsh on them. *(laughter)* There was a former Prime Minster, Joe Clark, I had great fun making fun of. I felt so bad at one point that I met a Conservative Party organizer, and I sent him a message and asked him to pass it on to Joe's daughter Catherine. I said, "Please let her know that her dad's not an asshole," *(laughter)*, "but it's my job to make him look like one. I'm sorry, but I'm just

doing my job, and I actually admire your dad." But I did feel bad. I felt, "Oh God, this is so mean."

AC: You guys, though, you didn't have an agenda.

DF: No.

AC: It never appeared like (with) certain shows… *The Daily Show* for one has a leaning.

DF: Yes.

AC: It tends to come from the left. Whereas you guys seemed to always be picking on… whoever was in power was going to get more hits…

DF: Absolutely.

AC: …satiric hits.

DF: Yes.

AC: But it wasn't a sort of left-right-middle thing.

DF: No.

AC: Was that because you were just dismayed by everyone?

DF: Partly. Also, the longer we did it, the more experience we had with these people, and the more cynical we became about politics and politicians. Our idea always was to get the audience to enjoy the world the way we enjoyed it, to see it the way we saw it. We weren't trying to change anybody's politics. We weren't trying to

influence anybody's opinion about anything. There are much more effective ways of doing that, I think, than a bunch of comedians. What we tried to do, I think, was to show the foibles of everyone. The reason we picked on the government of the day was because the Prime Minister was on television practically every second or third day. There's probably nobody on TV more in Canada, apart from maybe a hockey player, than a senior federal politician. So they became our targets no matter who they were, and we looked to have fun with all of them.

I wanted to mention something. You were talking about Jon Stewart being slightly left. It's funny, do you guys know Bill Maher? You must know Bill Maher. Bill Maher to me is left, in the classic liberal sense of left. I think that Stewart to some extent is more of an anarchist. He sort of says, "They're all assholes." It's indiscriminate, which people may or may not agree with. I like Bill Maher's approach, which is quite selective, where he says, "This political group is wrong, and here's why they're wrong, and I gotta make that point." He'll make fun of left-wingers and right-wingers, but he's definitely more of a classic small-l liberal, which is a rarity these days in America. You just don't have that. In fact, I can think of only a couple of other people (like that). Anyway, I had my editorial for the day. *(laughs)*

AC: Do you find now that you look at the paper and find yourself wondering, "What would I do with that," or "What would we do with that?"

DF: Oh, yes. It's diminishing now that we're not doing the series as much, because we stopped doing the series three years ago. It had become a lifelong habit. Something would happen, and you'd go, "Oh my gosh, I can't wait to get my teeth

into that." The withdrawal process was fairly long, and kind of painful at times, especially if no other show was going after something, and you'd think, "Oh, this is such raw red meat," and other people weren't touching it. It used to drive me crazy, but I'm kind of resigned now to the fact that I'm more of an onlooker than a participant.

AC: Were there any particular politicians you really loved playing? You mentioned Joe Clark. Any others, or maybe even events that were just wonderful for you?

DF: Anybody that does impersonations or writes comedy…the best thing you have in comedy, I think, is a strong character. Trudeau was great to do. Clark was great to do. Mulroney was great to do. Stephen Harper? Fuck him. *(laughter)* What have you got to work with? Paul Martin before him was like Mr. Bland. They're very, very difficult to really get into and have fun with because there's just not a lot to work with. Harper's a bit unusual in that usually people who are kind of bland aren't all that successful as politicians, but he's very successful.

AC: And they become angrier the more successful they get. I think you mention that in the book, that that government has become angrier. As it gets more of a majority, it gets angrier and angrier.

DF: The Harper government still acts like it's being persecuted by a left-wing cabal. *(laughter)* They've been in power for eight years now, and they've got a majority at the moment, and they still are so defensive. It's bewildering. But I think that's part of that western resentment that I mentioned. I should say, "western," as they kept saying in their campaign last time, "western and rural voters." That's who they're

targeting, and I think that's who they see themselves representing, people who felt left out.

AC: *(to audience)* Uh yes, right here.

DF: Hi there.

Audience member: Hi. First of all, I just want to say, (I was a) huge fan of the show growing up, loved it.

DF: Thank you.

AM: There's something I've noticed that a few of us can agree on. We're the Youtube generation.

DF: Right.

AM: We have podcasts, and that's kind of where we get most of our comedy from now. Growing up, I watched *22 Minutes*, *Air Farce*, and even now Rick Mercer, and I find that the humor you see on those shows is more structured. There's a build-up, you see more opposing characters to the straight man, where I feel like stuff we watch on Youtube, even Picnicface and current groups, it's just random. Sometimes even just a cat with a rainbow at the end of it is what we find funny now. And some people even in this room know what I'm talking about. Do you find this is a trend towards comedy that's something you're going to see, maybe for the next ten or fifteen years, that it's going to be this less structured but more outrageous and kind of weird outlook on life? Or do you think there's a way to keep going with what I grew up watching?

DF: I don't really know. The world is changing so much. One of the ways that Youtube has changed it all is not only the delivery system, but the access to it. Anybody can make a funny video. They can make one video that's funny in their entire life, and it can go on Youtube and everybody can see it. The challenge if you're going to have a successful show is, you have to do two things. The essence of comedy is basically a happy surprise. The audience ought not to see it coming, and when it does come, they ought to be delighted by it and laugh at it. So a professional is able to do that on a regular basis, consistently, just like a tennis player can make the same excellent shot time after time. And a professional in comedy has to be able to do the same thing. You've got to be able to deliver so that the audience, when they watch you, they know what they're going to get, and they're going to be thrilled by it.

So Youtube I think has changed, as you say, what the current generation, your generation, finds funny, reacts to. Often, a lot of the stuff that you guys are reacting to is kind of reactive comedy, or not reactive, but you're commenting on some other comedy. Something you've all seen on Youtube or seen in a film, and the bit that you do, everybody else who has seen it and goes, "Oh yeah, I get that, I know what's going on there." The trick is going to be to build a career out of that. That's the challenge. How do you do it time and time again? *(The Rick Mercer Report)* is one of the most structured shows I've ever seen, and I think, frankly, the audiences are beginning to catch onto it now as well. There's virtually nothing spontaneous, no room for deviation from the way that show is put together week after week. I don't know. Comedy, I think, if you're going to make it yourself, it has to have some kind of structure. You have to know what you're doing.

What you find funny, though, is going to be what you find funny and what your audience will find funny, and it's not going to be what my generation necessarily found funny. God knows, when I was growing up, my parents used to laugh at stuff (and I'd think), "Are you fucking kidding me? That's *funny*?" And then I started doing my own thing with my friends, and at some point, younger people looked at our show and said, "Are they fucking kidding me?" That's what happens. That's the way it works. You come in, you have your shot, you do it for as long as you can. But I do think you have to, again, know your audience. You've got to know your audience, and as long as you're making them laugh, the challenge is to do that consistently and successfully so you can actually get some money for it. Otherwise, it's just amateur night at the Comedy Bar or Yuk-Yuk's or something.

AM: Thank you, thank you very much.

AC: Do you think part of that is touring? Because you mentioned that now in Toronto, you can stay in Toronto, you don't have to leave. It used to be that as a standup, there just weren't enough venues.

DF: That's right.

AC: So you went on the road, you were a road warrior. All those guys, like Norm MacDonald, they were out on the road, and they got to know the country. We were talking about the Dumbbells, they toured the country. Ron James right now, I don't know if there's a theater he hasn't played. He hits every town and city. So I don't know if it's touring or what…

DF: Part of the reason it's important is you have to work in front of audiences, especially if you're Ron James. Anybody who's doing that kind of comedy, you have to work in front of live audiences to stay fresh, to keep your material fresh, and to keep testing that you're connecting with them. There's a line about what you can and can't say, or there used to be when I was starting out. The only way to find out where the line was was to put your foot over it and have somebody scream at you. You have to do that in front of real people. You can't sit in your room writing your stuff on your computer, or just making videos for your own amusement, and expect to find out. You have to expose your work to the public to get a response.

Touring, I think, is an excellent way to do it. First of all, it is a grind, it's hard work, and you learn a lot. It's like playing hockey in the AHL, or being on the international tennis tour. We all know who the stars are, but there are another two hundred or three hundred people you've never heard of who are working that circuit. But that's how you get your chops down: repetition, being in different venues, trying to perform to different people, trying to find out what of your material works for the most number of people, or the most diverse group of people possible. So it's partly just practice.

AC: You mentioned what you can and can't get away with. Now, it seems like you can do whatever. In a standup club now, there's, in certain clubs, almost complete free speech.

DF: Yes.

AC: But what I find is that there's a period in most stand-ups' careers where it's like in adolescence, where they're going to say the bad thing and do jokes about abortion, whatever thing they think will offend…

DF: Yeah. Shock humour.

AC: And there's nothing at all wrong with being edgy, but how do you get through the whole…because the opposite side of that is, if it doesn't work, they're almost marginalizing the material. Because if it doesn't work, you can say, "Well, they just can't handle my edgy stuff."

DF: That's right.

AC: How would you advise someone to work through that? There's nothing wrong with going back. People will hold up Louis C.K. as someone doing (edgy humour), and he *is* doing (edgy humour), but they forget that his career started out as him doing absurdist sort of material, and he came around to it. Would you give any advice to someone who's stuck in that? It's almost like the potty-training phase of comedy.

DF: *(laughs)* Well, my advice again is to pay attention to your audience. I know one guy like that, Alan Park, who's part of *Air Farce* these days. Alan has basically two acts. He has one that he does in clubs where he can get away with that stuff, and he's got another act he does for audiences where he can't get away with it, because he's smart enough to realize that, although he loves doing the edgy stuff, if you want to call it that, it's not for everybody. So the way he's fighting to survive is to (say), "This

I can do for *this* audience, and this I can do for *that* audience." And sometimes there's crossover. You have to be open to all possibilities. But he's aware that there's a difference. A lot of it is survival. If you're doing stuff that's appealing to a marginal audience, and you're not getting a lot of gigs, then you have to decide whether you're right or the audience is right. You have to make up your mind. It's certainly true that the comedy breakthroughs, or breakthroughs in any art, happen because somebody comes along with a new idea and has a conviction to stick to it, sometimes a long time, before people come around and say, "You know what? That person has really got something." Because the easier way is to adapt yourself to what the audience wants, if you're going to make a living at it, and that's frankly what most people do. You have to really be exceptional to survive otherwise. You really do. You either have to be really stubborn and stupid, or have a lot of courage. But that's pretty much the only way you're going to make a breakthrough if you're doing stuff that nobody else gets.

AC: *(to audience)* Any other questions out here? Back there.

Audience member: Hi.

DF: Hi.

AM: I just wanted to ask, now that you're not doing *Air Farce* anymore, when you're not writing books to compete with Andrew Clark *(laughter)*, what do you like to do in your spare time?

DF: To be honest, I haven't had a lot of spare time, because there's been a lot going on. We're doing a fair bit of development at the moment in our office. I still have an office; I still have some people on staff. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to keep it up, frankly, because the money's all going out and it's not coming in yet. But I've got a couple of people whose job it is to develop stuff, to look at new ideas primarily for television comedy. We've also taken stuff to Space, we're taking stuff to CBC, we've floated stuff by the Comedy Network. We're working with another producer trying to develop a reality show. Development is aptly referred to, generally, as "development hell," because you could spend months, years, trying to get a project going, ultimately to have nothing ever come of it, and you have to invest your time and money and emotional energy, your passion, because you really want to get this thing done, you believe in it, and there are no takers. And then you say, "Well, no takers, put it aside, pick up something else, try and sell that."

That's what I'm doing. It's a very long and tiring process, and there are no guarantees of success. But I am busy. The development stuff I enjoy. I like sitting down with new people. One thing that's great, I found, about comedy…I'm not a standup, I did some of that for several years, mostly banquets and conventions, I didn't do clubs because I was too old when I started doing it. When I was at that age, twenty-five years ago, the only thing you'd be able to talk about in clubs was your first date, or your first airplane flight, or how was high school, and this kind of shit. Coming from a guy who was in his forties, it wouldn't be believable. But working with new people is terrific, and I've found that in my career in comedy, one of the most stimulating things has been working with other people, sitting in a room with a

group of people who have diverse ideas and pitching out ideas and trying to make something happen, trying to create something out of your own brains, out of your own imaginations. And that's why I'm still interested in development, and why I'm still involved in it.

AM: Thank you.

DF: You're very welcome.

AC: *(to audience)* Um, Brie.

Audience member: Hello.

DF: Hello, Brie.

AM: Oh God, he knows my name! *(laughter)* I was just wondering: it seems to have worked for *22 Minutes* that when cast members move on, they get replaced by somebody new, and I don't know why it didn't work out the same way for *Air Farce*. Could you see a big rebirth? Could that be something…

DF: To be honest, it was a bit of a puzzle to us. I think we'd become too expensive, to be honest with you. This is another aspect of what you run into when you're working as a professional in this business. We had higher ratings than *22 Minutes* always. They never beat us ever in a rating. But CBC decided, after we had done our fifteenth year, that they didn't want to give us a new contract. At the time, CBC was putting a lot of stress on developing new narrative comedy. Instead of sketch, which they thought they'd had enough of, they wanted to do narrative (comedy). So what we were told is that they weren't renewing our contract because they wanted to do

a narrative comedy with a younger cast that would appeal to female viewers. So they put Ron James in. *(laughter)* You figure it out. (He was) older than we were, and doing sketch and monologue, and definitely not appealing to female viewers, as far as I can tell from reading the ratings.

But I think they wanted primarily to save money. It's a very difficult thing to do that for *22 Minutes*, because *22 Minutes* is shot in Halifax, and uses the Halifax plant, and uses CBC employees, cameramen, etc., and there's a staff there. If you take out *22 Minutes*, nothing would be in that plant. So the people are sitting around idle. So that was mitigated in their favor, and I think it still (is), to be honest with you. It's a good show, too, I'm not knocking it, but the fact that it's done in the regions helps their survival. We had put in place what we thought was a terrific new cast. We had four new people in it. We had Alan Park, Craig Lauzon, Penelope Corrin and Jessica Holmes. Our plan was to step back, and when I say "our plan" I mean Roger's and my plan, was to step back from performing. If the network really wanted us to perform, we would, but our preference was to get the new cast in front, and then maybe hire one other person to make the cast five people. We were happy with four.

One of the things that we found with *Air Farce* that worked, we thought, for audiences, is that with four people, they feel they can get to know (them). Part of the fun of doing a sketch show with just four cast (members) is that when something happens, the audience thinks, "How are they going to cover this, how are they going to deal with it, and who's going to play the roles?" We never did the kind of very, very thorough *SNL* makeup, where you had prostheses and this kind of thing. Part of

the reason was time, and part of the reason was money. We didn't have enough of either. Our director Perry Rosemond said at the beginning, "It's important that the audience is always able to see you through the character. They know it's a character, but they know it's *you* doing it, and they actually see you." And he was absolutely right. I think audiences identify with this person, or that cast member, when they do something. Roger Abbott for years did Jean Chretien. If anybody couldn't look less like Jean Chretien, it was Roger Abbott. But somehow the audience bought it. They said, "OK, it's just Roger, and this is his version of it. It's not gonna win a prize, but it's funny." I don't know I got here from your question, but there you go. That's been the story today.

AC: It's almost the idea of, in television, it's always about a franchise, creating something that can run and run and run.

DF: Well, I still get stopped by people who say, "I can't believe you're off the air, I can't believe the CBC didn't keep you on, why didn't they keep you on?" Generally I don't go into this lengthy explanation. I just say…

AC: You don't stop them and (say), "Sit down…"

DF: Yeah, "Sit down!" *(laughter)* "Where's my microphone?" I would've been very happy to keep it going, but I wanted my role to change, to be producing exclusively and not performing. But anyway, CBC in its infinite wisdom *(laughter)* decided not to continue with it. I think they made a mistake, to be honest with you.

AC: Well, the thing about the CBC as compared to other models is that pressure to keep regional plants going. That might change if they can keep restricting its budget and shave it off, if the Harper government gets its way…

DF: I know right now that CBC management is wrestling with budget cuts. They have a plan A and a plan B. I believe the plan A is a five percent budget cut, and the plan B is a ten percent budget cut. Five or ten percent doesn't sound like a lot. They'll find out in March what the scenario's going to be. But think of this: CBC's budget from the government, its allocation from the federal government, is about a billion dollars a year. So if it's even a five percent cut, that's fifty million dollars. With the way the funding works, a broadcaster goes in with some cash, and then there are tax credits to fund a production, and then there's also money from the Canadian Media Fund, grants. CBC can leverage that fifty million into a hundred and twenty-five million dollars fairly easily.

When *Air Farce* was on the air, our show, I don't think, ever cost more than three hundred thousand dollars a week, which is cheap by (TV) standards. So if we did, I don't know, twenty shows, that would be, what, six million bucks a year? So a hundred and twenty-five million, and you could do an *Air Farce* with six million. A drama would cost more money. A drama would cost three or four times that amount of money. But that's a huge amount of money, and it comes out of programming at the moment. Because CBC has something like seventy-five or eighty percent fixed costs. It's got staff who are accountants and managers, and it has some crew people on staff who do the news, who work with journalists as camera men or as sound

recorders. It has editors on staff who service the news. There's a huge number of fixed costs. The plant, the physical facilities they have across the country, the gasoline they've got to put in their fleet of vehicles, all these are costs they can't get rid of easily. The easiest place to cut is programming, entertainment programming and sports programming, because everybody in the entertainment business is pre-fired, because you all work on contract. And when your contract is finished, if it's only a one or two-year contract, they say, "Well, we're just not going to renew it." They don't even have to fire you. You're pre-fired. They just don't pick (your contract) up. So I think the CBC is facing a huge, huge challenge this year, coming in April, when they have to start making their new budgets. It'll be entirely a reaction to what's happening with the federal government cuts. It's not gonna be pretty. But they are going to be looking. They're going to be desperate for good, cheap programming.

AC: *Cash Cab*. (*laughter)* Yeah, I mean, they've cut lots of staff. I remember in the nineties, when you'd freelance, they'd give you a desk, and they'd always give you the desk of someone who'd recently left. And you could tell when they were fired by the stuff that was still on the wall. It'd be stuff from 1991, and it was like 1997, and (they'd say), "Take Judy's desk." There's not a lot to cut there anymore.

DF: No.

AC: It's pretty scary. *(to audience)* Any more quick questions? I have to ask you, as someone who watches a lot of sketches, you are well known for being able to end them.

DF: Yes.

AC: You are a good ender of sketches.

DF: I certainly was. That was one of the things I could bring to *Air Farce*, yeah.

AC: So, you've got a bunch of people who are writing sketches right now. What can you tell them about how to end that sketch the right way? Are there tricks?

DF: Not really, but there are some rules, I think, or some guidelines you can follow. I mentioned earlier that what makes good comedy is a happy surprise. It's like great music. Every development in a great symphony is, at the same time, a logical development of everything that's gone before and a complete surprise when you hear it. You're listening to this thing, and then *this* happens, and you go, "Wow, I never saw that coming, but it's all kind of logical." I think writing a sketch is the same way. It certainly helps to have an ending in mind before you start writing a sketch, so that you're actually writing to it. Instead of starting out with, "A man and a woman walk into a Gap or something and start trying to buy something," you've got to think, "Well, where in the hell is this gonna go?" That's certainly helpful when you're starting to write something.

When you get stuck, a rule is, don't end a sketch with something that depends on information that you haven't already given the audience in the body of the work. A deus ex machina doesn't work. You won't get a laugh. You might get the audience saying, "Aw, fuck, if I'd known that, I would've seen it coming." You've got to create your parameters, and everything has to happen in those parameters, and the

audience has to have enough information so they don't feel like they've been tricked. If you can't end a sketch with a laugh, end it logically, because if the sketch is good, if it's funny and the audience has been enjoying it, they're not going to hate the fact that the biggest laugh didn't come at the end. They're going to be happy. (They'll think), "I've had a great time, and now it's over. Fine. (Let's) move on to something else." I think trying to do too much with an ending is a mistake. Trying to make your ending better than it logically can be, and better than it ought to be, is a mistake. We all try to end a sketch with the biggest laugh of the entire piece, but it's not always possible.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* Any other questions? All right, well Don, thank you very much.

DF: My pleasure.

AC: It was a pleasure as always to have you here.

DF: Thank you.

AC: Thanks to Don Ferguson.

DF: Thanks. *(applause)*