

## MAKING 'THE WIRE' PANEL DISCUSSION

The HBO series *The Wire*, a panoramic view of Baltimore through its drug world, schools, government, seaport, and newspaper, has been widely acknowledged as one of the greatest television dramas ever produced. To mark the DVD release of the final season, Museum of the Moving Image presented a panel, *Making 'The Wire'*, with David Simon, the series creator and co-producer; novelist and screenwriter Richard Price, who wrote several episodes; and four of the show's stars: Seth Gilliam (who played Ellis Carver), Clark Johnson (city editor Gus Haynes), Clarke Peters (Lester Freeman), and Wendell Pierce ("Bunk").

### **'Making "The Wire"' Panel Discussion with David Simon, Richard Price, Seth Gilliam, Clark Johnson, Lance Reddick, Wendell Pierce, Clarke Peters, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (July 30, 2008):**

SCHWARTZ: When I talked before about how great the show is, I talked about the panoramic view of the city and how it focused on all these issues. Of course, what's also great about the show is filmmaking—the performances, the writing, the directing, the acting, the whole conception of this show, of this enthralling series. So now you're going to meet some of the people who've made this show, literally. Please welcome first, Clark Peters. (Applause)

CLARK PETERS: Hello.

SCHWARTZ: Here is Ellis Carver, and please welcome Seth Gilliam.

PETERS: Thank you. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Try to keep your applause to under an hour for this man. I think you know, probably, how he got here today from Baltimore: He went past the schools and the newspaper office and the courtyards and the inner city, and then went down to the port, and then walked on water, up to New York to be with us: here is David Simon.

DAVID SIMON: (Laughs) (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: He played Gus Haynes in the last season, but also directed several episodes, including the pilot: actor/director Clark Johnson.

CLARK JOHNSON: This is like the All Star Game. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Everybody's favorite drinking partner is Bunk: Wendell Pierce. (Applause)

A great novelist—and I've certainly read that his book *Clockers* played an influential role in this show. He got to work on this show and write some of the great scripts for it: novelist and screenwriter Richard Price. (Applause)

I thought I would ask you something, just to start with, about audience. This is an audience that loves the show and has certainly seen every episode. But you've made some comments about the average TV audience and how you have to dumb down what you do to an audience. You've said things like, "Fuck the audience, fuck them to hell," (Laughter) and, "The audience doesn't know what's good for them," things like that. I want you to start by saying how you thought about the audience and your conceptions.

GILLIAM: Well first of all, what I... (Laughter)

SIMON: I actually know that *you have* said, "Fuck the audience." (Laughter) But in a completely different context.

**SCHWARTZ:** I think actually what he said was, “Fuck the Emmys,” right?

**PIERCE:** Here, here! Here, here.

**SCHWARTZ:** But you go ahead with the first one.

**SIMON:** Well, there was a little bit of nuance to “Fuck the audience.” (Laughter) Just a little. The idea of writing to the causal viewer or the causal reader—who wants that guy? There’s not much you can do with that. If the person is leaning back from the television set—which is the way most Americans watch TV; it’s a very passive medium—there’s only so much you can do. It’s a lot more fun if you can get them leaning into the set, trying to figure out what’s going on; if you can engage people on that level. Those are the kind of viewers you want, those are the kind of readers you want if you’re writing prose. It just seemed like a more interesting thing to aspire to. But at the same time, it reminds me of that line from *Spinal Tap*, “Our audiences aren’t getting smaller, they’re just getting more selective.” (Laughter) On some level, it is pretty self-defeating. But they gave us the rope, and we hung ourselves.

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you talk a bit about your experience with *Homicide [Life on the Streets]* (1993-1999), which started as your book then became the series...? (Applause) How did the experience of seeing that become a TV show, and how that was handled, lead to what you wanted to do with *The Wire*?

**SIMON:** *Homicide* fans, okay! I spent a year in the homicide unit; I wrote a book about the real detectives. Barry Levinson bought it, engaged Tom Fontana to make it into a television drama; they did it for NBC. I was a police reporter for the first couple years of the show. I didn’t quite believe—it was this weird stepchild who came to town. I didn’t really believe it.

I wrote one script with a friend of mine. He took that screen credit and went to Hollywood; I went back to the metro desk. Then at some point, my newspaper started going downhill, as newspapers seem to be doing, tragically, and I took another script and I learned how to do television for that show. It was very different from the book.

I’ll never forget—I ran into Richard. He was working on *Clockers* about the same time that I was working on *Homicide* and we had the same editor, so I got to read *Clockers* in galleys. As you say, I was completely enamored with that book; still am. But Richard said something after watching the first season of *Homicide* that I’ll never forget. He said, “There was one cop who really reminded me of the cops that you were following in Jersey City” I said, “Which one was it?” It turned out to be the guy who was Gaffney, with the crew cut, the real son of a bitch. I knew exactly what he meant, because I knew fourteen Gaffneys in the Baltimore Police Department. The show was a marvelous entertainment. It was very well written and very well done, and it had a lot of content. I was very proud it and I learned to do television on it. But it didn’t resemble the world I had depicted in the book. The book was a much darker vision.

**SCHWARTZ:** Since you’ve mentioned Richard, I did want to ask about how you started working together? I’d also heard that you two met on the night of the Rodney King riots. Is that true, and can you tell that story?

**RICHARD PRICE:** What happened is that our editor, John Sterling at Houghton Mifflin, brought David over to my house to meet me. It was like your Aunt, “Here’s another nice boy. You can go talk to him.” (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** “You guys go fight crime.” (Laughter)

**PRICE:** Yes, yes. And it was the night of the Rodney King verdict. Apparently, Jersey City was blowing up. We sort of looked at each other and held hands and had our first play date, going over to Jersey City. (Laughter) At some point that night, both of us wind up driving a police car with no cop in it. (Laughter) This detective that was taking us around left us. I remember he said to us, “Listen, just have like a really angry look on your face. But if anybody approaches you, floor it.” (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Nobody approached us.

**PRICE:** It’s been magic ever since. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to talk about the conception of *The Wire*. I have the advantage of having watched it as one entity, watching sixty episodes, five seasons over—

**SIMON:** Three nights? (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Three weeks, three weeks. I know you had to fight season by season to get it renewed?

**SIMON:** No, just the last two.

**SCHWARTZ:** What's amazing about it is how coherent it is, and how much is foreshadowed when you go back and look at episodes, where little things would happen. There's a little scene in Season One with McNulty and Kima, where he makes some remark like "How do you get thrown off the police force?" And she says "Oh, keep up the shit you're doing and you'll find a way." You see all these moments that pay off, sometimes fifty episodes later. Could you talk about how you conceived the series in the beginning, and if you saw then the incredible structure it would have?

**SIMON:** There are a lot of authors, stylistically and thematically. Clark, as the director of the pilot, in conjunction with Bob Colesberry, who is my partner—he was the visual director and a very visual producer. They defined the template visually for what the show would be.

In terms of story, a lot of credit goes to Ed Burns. There's a point at which, when you're doing television, the script is the script and now you've got to go concentrate on how to affect it, how to film it. That moment never comes for Ed. He sits in the writer's room turning it this way and that. He really did obsess over it in a way that you'd have to if you were going to make something that was sixty cohesive hours. With every season we brought in more writers, who were offering their own view.

Like George Pelecanos, who signed on not only as a writer but then became a producer. George's role was to keep us from repeating ourselves. George would sit at the end of the table and say "That sucks," or, "You did that already." It sounds like a negative influence, but it's not. It's the guy saying, you know, "Come up with something better." I get a lot of attention because of that

creative credit, which is a WGA function of having written the pilot. But it really does have a lot of parents, and no one person can come up with all the ideas for sixty hours. That doesn't happen. So it really is a room full of people trying to figure out a way to do good work.

Then the stuff goes to set, and sometimes a scene that you didn't have as much regard for as you should have come—you know, the actors will bring something dynamic you weren't even anticipating. And other times, they just kill your best shit. (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** You just had to say it. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** The only debate in my mind was who I was going to look at. (Laughter) No, but the set is its own animal and things happen—and film is collaborative. If you want total control over a story, write it on paper, because film is a bunch of people all trying to figure their way home.

**SCHWARTZ:** Clark, what was your approach in directing the pilot? A lot of the unusual or unique style of the show is there in the beginning.

**JOHNSON:** Something that Barns... I mean David—sorry, I get you mixed up. (Laughter) Something David said early in the process that really resonated with me was the business model that these kids had for running their drug corners, and the personalities that went with those business models, and the work that went into it... I think that's something that set this apart from the get go. It was really not just the guys, the kids holding their guns that way. Also, David touched on the visual style of it. We talked about how to approach the thing [in a way that] was different. Not that we were trying to be different than *Homicide*, but this was different because these cops sit back and watch from a long lens.

So they see the people that we're talking about up very close, but they're not in close proximity. That's how the whole thing, for me, started. How to approach it was from that perspective: from way on top of a church with binoculars, and Bubbles with the hat, and all that kind of stuff; where we're communicating, but from a distance.

**SIMON:** God, you make it sound like you had a plan.

**JOHNSON:** I know. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to open up to the actors to ask you how much you knew at the beginning about what the overall arc of your characters would be, (Pierce laughs) because we...Okay you'll start.

**PETERS:** You know, it's wonderful to hear him talk about this Dickensian piece and this Shakespearian piece, but...

**SIMON:** I didn't use Dickensian, or Shakespearean. (Laughter)

**PETERS:** I know you didn't. (Laughter) But when you're sitting there on Friday, and you know you're supposed to be shooting on Monday, and the script still hasn't come, you're wondering what the hell's going on. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** We wanted to make that shit good.

**PETERS:** Having any idea about how the arc went, it was on the moment. And as an actor, it's good because you're *in* the moment, sometimes on the edge. (Laughs)

**SIMON:** We wouldn't tell people outcomes, purposely. I mean, we knew what we were headed towards, and it's hard enough to be an actor without being told the future. You know, that seems almost an unfair burden. (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** It wasn't even really about in the moment; sometimes it was ahead of the moment. I'm getting sick of you guys blowing smoke up this guy's ass so much, but...

**SIMON:** I'm not! (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** Sometimes it was uncanny, the crystal ball he would have. For instance, stuff that was going on the Mayor's office when we were shooting the final season actually happened after these guys had written about it. We're going, "Well damn, I wish we could air these things tomorrow instead of like six months from now, because that shit just happened."

**SIMON:** The best one of that was after Season Two, the grain pier. That really was the CSX grain pier in Baltimore. It really had been damaged. It really needed to be restored if there were going to be grain ships again in Baltimore. Within six to eight months of us airing that season, it had been purchased, and now it's condos. That hadn't happened when we wrote it, so that was weird.

**PIERCE:** I remember in the third year—they would never tell you the arc. Most of that season I was chasing a gun, and every script it was like, "Yes, good morning, where's the gun? Where's the gun?" (Laughter) These guys had all these great storylines and everything. And you flip through and, "Oh, this fucking gun again." (Laughter) I just got so frustrated, so frustrated and so frustrated. Then I realized that that was exactly what was happening with Bunk. So they kind of anticipated that with me.

**SIMON:** We did that with you and Domenick.

**GILLIAM:** We did that with Domenick, and I remember Domenick was like, "I don't know what the fuck is going on here, Seth, but we're sitting around—I mean, we're not *doing nothing!* We're not doing nothing." (Laughter) "You call your agent? Call your agent." So he's like, "I'm not just happy to be here. It's like Steinbrenner buying up the best players to sit 'em on the edge of the bench. I wanna *play* man, I wanna play!" (Laughter) "Well, but that frustration is good for the..." "Well, fuck your frustration, man." (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** Then they shoot the scene of, "Are we getting the desk *in* the office or *out* of the office?" (Laughter)

**SIMON:** That was Season Two. All of their shots where they were being dumped onto surveillance in the port story. We were headed towards their rebellion, towards them going their separate ways in Season Three. But yes, the calls came in with each successive script.

**JOHNSON:** Can we talk for a second about the vindictive nature of the writing room? (Laughter) I have to go back to where he cut his teeth, on *Homicide*. You'd be going through problems in your personal life—like a messy divorce, in my

case—and they would jump on that shit and it would be in the script. (Laughter) So he honed that. They would use the scripts to punish us. If you weren't hitting your mark or saying the line exactly as scripted, you drop a comma here and there, it would be reflected in...

**SIMON:** The trouble with cannibals is you never know who they're going to bite next. (Laughter) On the sixth season of *Homicide*, I went through a divorce, and I told the story about how everything fucks you up when you're getting divorced. It's like, "Who's going to get the spatula?" I made a joke about the spatula, and all of a sudden, I'm reading the script, and there's Peter Gerety walking around with a spatula in his hand. Like, what the fuck? (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** Who did get that spatula? You still working on it?

**SIMON:** I don't want to talk about it. (Laughter) The only thing I should say is, about *Clockers*, because you mentioned it, is that I read that book and I mean... Richard, I think that, you know, not to take any away—have you all bought *Lush Life*? (Applause) Those of you that haven't, that's not right. But I'm not just trying to sell the current book. I know you've got a bookstore full of them. I'm just saying, when I read that I felt like, fuck! Everything I knew as a police reporter, this guy had gotten to and had turned it into literature. It was like he was doing for the inner city drug epidemic what Steinbeck had done for the Dust Bowl. I mean, the whole diaspora was there in the book.

The one thing that had incredible power to me—there were two things. One of which was the split point of view: sometimes you were with the cops, sometimes you were Strike. The dynamic of that was so powerful. That was in my head when we started working on *The Wire*. Just the idea that if I go back and forth from the street—and ultimately, it became from the street to the city hall to wherever. But if I just keep going back and forth over the same ground from different POV's, something good can happen.

The other thing was that there were small characters in that book. That book had such breadth to it. I still remember the kid Homer on

the bench—barely a handful of pages—but it was evocative of this kid who was growing up in this world. Not a major character, but it's just layers. So the idea that all the characters in this thing, if you brought somebody on to *The Wire*, you needed to service them as a complete person. That was important.

**SCHWARTZ:** How much did you write, Richard—and this leads to a question for you, David—as reporting, going out and observing and listening to real people? Of course, one of the great things about the show is the slang and the authenticity of the dialogue. For you, there's a lot of writing as a novelist. Does it come from reporting, in a way?

**PRICE:** God's a first-rate novelist. Then sometimes He's a second-rate novelist, you know, when everything is too on the money out there. But when I go out there, it's like, if you want to find yourself, lose yourself. Just get out in the world. It's a big world. You don't have to constantly write about how on your Thanksgiving vacation, you were so lonely when you were a freshman in college and stuff like that. (Laughter)

I grew up in a housing project at the golden era of housing projects which were the 1950s. You've never seen anything in this country so racially mixed, so religiously mixed, generationally mixed. That's where I'm from and that's where I find myself going back to.

I went to a housing project. I don't even know if I'm answering your question now, I'm sort of losing track. But I remember in 1985, I went back to a housing project in Jersey City. I hadn't been in a project for twenty years, and it was a tiger cage. I didn't even recognize the bricks. It scared me so badly. But sometimes, the bird moves to the snake. I just had to go back. I had to figure it out. It's like there was something calling me.

That's been *Clockers*, *Freedomland*, whatever. I think *The Wire* has done that; I stayed very much on trench eye-level. I never went into the General's tents. The wonder of *The Wire* is—man! You go from the most down low little midget, sociopath, hard-luck case kid to the state assembly in Maryland in five minutes, and it never loses its sense. When I did the thing with the alternating points of view, I had a thick, dense

book and I thought, “Well, if I keep swinging A-B-A-B, it will be an easier read.” But David just took that to town. I mean, everyone uses the work Dickensian, you know? I don’t know. It’s like... whatever. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** David never said that; Dickens was used a lot in reviews, but the only time...

**SIMON:** We mocked it.

**SCHWARTZ:** You mocked it with turning “Charles Dickens” into slang.

**PRICE:** Well, that was “I’m Dickens, he’s Fenster...” Nobody remembers that one.

**SCHWARTZ:** Everybody remembers that. (Laughter) In terms of authenticity, I want to ask the actors to talk about what you got out of being in Baltimore. The show is set there. It’s so about this specific city, as is made by this great montage at the end of Season Five. But could you talk about your experiences being in Baltimore making this; what you learned about the city, and then what that give to your performances?

**PIERCE:** I fell in love with the people. I’m originally from New Orleans, and it reminded me of home. There was a church on every corner and a bar on every other. (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** Everybody’s missing a finger, a tooth or both.

**PIERCE:** Yes. (Laughter) And a real sense of community, and struggle no matter what. You know, I remember the people of Homes when I first got there. There’s a particular club called Choices that I would love to go to, like at four o’clock in the morning. Everybody’d be like, “What are you doing here?” (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Richard just heard that and went, “That’s a keeper.” (Laughter) “Choices? After hours club?”

**PRICE:** Is that the one where you had to wear black leather and a motorcycle hat?

**PIERCE:** Whoa! (Laughter) No, no, John was at that one, (Laughter) and they had this Baltimore bounce that—ka-tonk, ka-tonk. It’s really good.

But I really enjoyed the people, and we also had a great time. We looked forward to going there every year, and we partied a lot and all.

For my research, I really was influenced by this one sergeant in homicide who was a great interrogator. He was a student of human behavior, and that was the thing that just really got to me. I saw how he would do interrogations and all, and there was a great admiration for that. I’d talk to him every once and a while, and he really prided himself on how to walk into a room, read someone, and come up with all these things. Now I know what to do and not to do if I get in the box, if I get in the box. (Laughter)

So I really appreciated the research and learning from these cops—especially homicide detectives—that they were real students of human behavior. That’s the thing that makes it interesting for me as an actor, you know? That’s what we do. I was really interested in it and I always said to them, “I would love to become an investigator, if I didn’t have to walk the beat; if I could just hop over all of that stuff, all the dangerous stuff.”

I remember this one particular night, they were called to shock trauma, I think it is. It was a classic scene. They had called them, the guys walked in. This kid had been shot a couple of times and all these tubes are in him, and they say, “Wait a minute, he’s not dead. You called Homicide, but the kid’s not dead!” “Well, it looks—he was shot like eleven times...” They had this argument, and I was like “The kid is right there!” (Laughter) That was my first taste of the real wire, you know? (Laughs) They were arguing over the bed, like, “Don’t call us, we’re Homicide. When he dies, then you call us!” (Laughter) That was my introduction into the world, and I’ve loved it ever since.

**PRICE:** Can I just add something about something he just said? The other thing about running with people like that is that you pick up language like crazy. You’re not Margaret Mead with a pith helmet. (Laughter) But that very scene, I had an experience with this cop where, you know, there’s a kid who’s got this much life left in him. And all they said is four lines: “Likely. Wobbling. Ag/Assault. Call me.” (Laughter)

SIMON: That's great.

JOHNSON: Sad way to break it down.

SCHWARTZ: I read this story where you were down visiting David in Baltimore and picked up this one little piece, this line. And you knew...

SIMON: I knew he picked it up. Oh, yes, that story. Richard came down to research a case as part of research he was doing for *Freedomland*. And because he's Richard Price, I had to show him my shit. So I was working on *The Corner* then, and we drove around the neighborhood where we were doing *The Corner* and Gary McCullough got in the car. I was talking to Gary, and Gary was real high. He used a phrase that's a very common Baltimore phrase, when you're saying somebody is a little bit special or is amusing you: he called me an apple scrapple. I saw Richard just perk up a little bit in the front seat. (Laughter) After Gary got out of the car about five minutes later, what I'm thinking is, "Fuck, now Price has apple scrapple. He might publish before me." (Laughter)

PRICE: I was just going to write a song called *Do the Apple Scrapple*. (Laughter)

SIMON: But Gary got out of the car after about five minutes, and first thing, he turned to me and went, "Apple scrapple, that's a keeper." You know? (Laughter) You just become greedy for these moments that are idiosyncratic, that you couldn't make up if you sat there, a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters. You need to actually go out on the street and hear some of it.

JOHNSON: I think what made it interesting in that sense is that in shows that shoot in Los Angeles, for instance, people get in their cars and they drive to and from. But in Baltimore, you can't help but be around everybody. You can't help but just hear everything that's happening. It informs how you play people, it informs how these guys write, and it makes a big difference between some of those L.A. based shows, because they're not rooted on the street.

SIMON: You know what I want to know about? I want to know why whatever an actor is doing, and no matter how well they're doing it, they want to

do the other thing. Talk to me about that. This is fascinating. (Laughter)

JOHNSON: Why you want to jump out of bag on me, man?

SIMON: I just want to know about it. No, it's really fascinating. If they're playing heartbreak...

JOHNSON: Is this going back to that the...

SIMON: I'm not going anywhere. It's an open-ended question. Don't be so defensive.

JOHNSON: Alright...

SIMON: No, I mean, if their playing heartbreak every episode, if they're having—because, you know, *The Wire* was a show where actors would be fallow for a little bit, and then the story would come around to them, and then they would have... There would be moments where a guy's playing dead on comedy, and it's just killing. Comedy is ineffable. You know, timing is... How comedy happens, I'm never quite sure. Even if you write the line and you think it might be funny, maybe, maybe not. But the guy's killing the turn and he's like, "My character's not going anywhere, he's not growing, there's no angst, he should have a woman, he should have a very attractive woman..." (Laughter) And then if it's all angst and high theater and high drama it's, "Where's the lighter side of me?" (Laughter) It's really fascinating.

JOHNSON: It's like a marriage.

PIERCE: I think it happened in *The Wire* because we were so separated, the stories, that you became fans of the other storyline. I didn't have a scene with most people on the show.

SIMON: That's true.

JOHNSON: No, you'd see other people doing shit and you'd go, "Damn! Those guys are—"

PIERCE: You'd sit there be like, "Wow man, I want to work with Snoop!" (Laughter) You're like, "How's *my* hair?" You know? (Laughter) But we became fans of the other stories, at least for me. I remember watching the kids in school in the

fourth season; I was just amazed. Especially with me; I had the added thing of, “Wow, I don’t even get to be in a detail room. I’m going to be stuck here in a cubicle!”

**JOHNSON:** So you were talking about him, weren’t you?

**PIERCE:** Yes, he was. I’ll say it. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** I just wanted to see who got the most bitter quickest. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Seth, you got to do a little bit of everything. You were a great comedy team with Herc, when you guys were paired up. Then you had anger scenes... What’s great about the characters over the whole arc, the five seasons, is that there are so many different sides. There are no totally virtuous characters. Everybody’s at least a bit an asshole at some point or another.

**GILLIAM:** That was a fantastic part of playing the role. It would have been nice to have been clued in to that kind of thing. (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** Wow, we’re getting bitter here! (Laughter)

**GILLIAM:** In the whole interest of collaboration; if you trust the talent that you’ve hired...

**JOHNSON:** (To audience) Can you guys leave? Can you guys get out of here? (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** It’s group therapy.

**SIMON:** We’ve got to work some shit out. (Laughter)

**GILLIAM:** I think Wendell definitely hit it on the head when you were saying, “Why does the actor always want to do the other thing?” It’s because you’re seeing what’s going on the other side of the street that you’re not on the set for. It looks like so much fun that you want to be a part of it.

I’m very grateful to the show that, like you say, Carver was able to touch a little bit of each thing. There was such a great arc to the character and there was such great growth with it that right at the time when I was feeling like, “I’m the fucking

comedic relief again? That’s it?”—the guy had some more depth revealed. Right at the time it was like, “I’m tired of screaming at people!”—the guy had quiet moments. I thought, “This is kind of brilliant.” I wondered whether, as you were asking before, do you see the whole outlay of a five-year journey of every character, of all these hundreds? Or are you getting it from seeing what the actors are bringing on the set, and other writers who come into the room with things that they bring to the table that you didn’t necessarily have?

**SIMON:** There is some bio-feedback. We’re watching the dailies and saying, “We should play with that,” or “This guy’s showing us something here.” There is bio-feedback.

**JOHNSON:** The puppeteers up there above the set. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** But nothing was funnier than the Dom Lombardozi/Seth Gilliam rebellion of 2006: “We want to be something other than comic relief!” (Laughter) Dom: “I have other sides to my character!” (Laughter) Credit comedy for what it is, because comedy is hard. You plan the drama; you plan the tragedy; you think about the tragedy; you argue about the tragedy; the tragedy has everybody worrying about it from ten sides.

Comedy, how it happens, I still don’t know. Yet everything we would give to Herc and Carver, it was poetry, and the timing was just dead on. It was like being told by Bugs Bunny that he didn’t want to work with Elmer Fudd anymore. (Laughter) “I’m tired of this guy with the fucking lisp and the shotgun; I’m ready to do Shakespeare!” (Laughter)

**PRICE:** I got to know Domenick Lombardozi a little bit outside of *The Wire*, and I always wanted to say, “Well, you guys are like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.” But I was afraid he was going to say, “I don’t even look Jewish.” (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Come on, he’s not here to defend himself.

**JOHNSON:** And even if he were, he’d be still upset.

**SIMON:** Actually, it would be worse if he were here. We’d all gang up on him.



**GILLIAM:** I thought it was interesting, in the [clips] that you played, that one of his favorite moments is with the grandmother. He was so precious about that because he kept feeling “Ah, I’m just fucking doing same thing. I’m the butt of the joke. Now I get to show that I have some heart.” He says that and I’m wondering: Do you look over all the other moments that you’ve had in the course of the show where you’ve actually been able to do that, or was that the first time that you saw, “Okay, they trust me enough to show that I’m not just this one kind of guy.” I think that happens a lot with actors, especially on a TV show, where you’re not really sure where the character is going to go. You wonder, “Am I going to have the opportunity to show the three-dimensional sides of [my character]?”

**SIMON:** Well, from the writing point of view, you’re terrified of stereotype. So at a certain point, we were playing him as someone who was totally committed to the mediocrity of the drug war. That was where Herc was at the beginning of the show. At some point, you start watching the scenes and you start to realize that there’s got to be something more to him, because we are constructing a stereotype. You want to round the character out because A: the character deserves it, and B: If people start showing themselves as two-dimensional, the whole world falls apart.

So you’re watching all the characters and saying, “Are we...?” One of the things with you early in the first season on was that you got a note I think from Ed, that I didn’t agree with. I kept writing profanity in for your character, because there was something so professorial about Lester that I wanted him to still be a cop. Yes, he spent thirteen years and four months in the pawn shop unit... (Laughter) But when you went out on the raids—the first raids in the projects, the ones that don’t go anywhere—I wanted you to behave like a cop.

I actually had to pull Ed up because Ed was, I think, leaning too hard towards the things he admired about the character. I wanted him to still be in the realm of Baltimore cop. So you would come to me and say, “Well, Ed said I really shouldn’t curse this much.” I’m like, “Curse. Throw it out there. Throw the mother fucker out.” (Laughter)

**PETERS:** I liked that he wasn’t so stuck in the profanity. I think that over time, that’s what made him different from all of the other detectives: the way he used language. Those first couple of seasons, I had all that exposition, trying to explain exactly how to set up the wire. How this works, how that works... So it seemed to make sense that if he’s going to be the instructor, that’s what he [would say].

**SIMON:** There was a rigor to how he used profanity, because there would be whole tracks where it would be the King’s English, and then it would be the line that you gave Daniels about you know, “If I can’t suck...”

**PETERS:** Oh, yes: “I don’t want to go to a dance and not be able to rub no titty.”

**SIMON:** Yes, that’s it. (Laughter)

**PETERS:** Well, that’s not profanity. That’s just titties. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Talk to George Carlin; that’s one of the seven words [that you can’t say on television].

**PETERS:** There were no “mother fuckers”; did I say “mother fucker” once?

**SIMON:** You delivered that to your commanding officer. So while you were talking to subordinates, you’re explaining things declaratively and then, you know, choose your moments... whereas for a lot of the characters, every moment was the moment for profanity. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Clark, I wanted to ask you about Season Five, because it’s really interesting what happens to your character when you get thrown into...

**PETERS:** Well, I was upset about that, to begin with.

**SCHWARTZ:** What? The steadiness?

**PETERS:** No, that he was going to go—I viewed him as becoming corrupt, you know?

**SCHWARTZ:** You were upset about being drawn into McNulty’s scheme?

PETERS: Yes, yes. But then, you know, that's what rounded the character out; you've got to do the right thing. Rather than it being looked at as being taken on McNulty's trip, I think that we worked that out right. You know, back in the seventies or sixties, people would get up in the street and would demonstrate and their voices would be heard and something would be done. In the year 2000, I find Americans being really apathetic.

JOHNSON: Speak for yourself! (Applause)

PETERS: No, I don't think I'm speaking for myself, I think there's a lot of stuff out there that people should be talking about, but for some reason, we're not. That gave me a chance to allow Freamon to say, "The law's not working, but we've got to get this job done, so—by any means necessary." So somewhere around there, I enjoyed—against my protest—I enjoyed what Freamon was going.

JOHNSON: And you got the girl!

PETERS: And I got the girl. (Laughter) We wanted the girl in [Season] Four, but we got her in Five. (Laughter)

SIMON: There was a moment where the writers were all bouncing around the room looking at dailies: when Bunk calls you into the interrogation room to set McNulty straight, and instead, you go the other way. That was delightful for us. We felt like we had seeded that in your back-story. You had the perfect opportunity to make the case and not call in the pawn shop—not use the fence in the case—and you ended up burning your whole career on some principle. So although it was an outrageous conceit, we did feel as if there's something in the back of Lester Freamon that...

PETERS: Yes, yes. I think that you did set that up in that first one, with the murder/theft, but we never got back to that. It took me a long time to understand it was going to be Season Five before we see the integrity of this man and how far he would go. He's the guy I want to be when I grow up... (Laughter) He's definitely the cat I want to be when I grow up.

SIMON: Sometimes we don't get back to it at all. We just have to talk about it on the DVD.

(Laughter) It's not even in the movie. We just make it up afterwards.

PETERS: When *are* we doing that movie?

PIERCE: Yes... when *are* we doing the movie? (Applause)

SIMON: All you guys have to do is to think of a great idea and then write it up. (Laughter) I'll put my name on it and I'll send it in to WGA.

PRICE: I can't think of a worse idea than doing *Wire: The Movie*. (Laughter)

JOHNSON: Except for *Homicide: The Movie*, maybe. (Laughter)

PRICE: Yes, that'd be worse.

PETERS: You have *Clockers*, the movie.

PIERCE: We were talking about characters, three-dimensional characters. The thing I love about the show is that almost with every character, there's a moment that you remember, out of all the seasons. That's really a collaboration between the writers developing the characters, the actors developing the characters, and then the synergy and that magic that happens on the set.

One of my favorite moments is between Carver and Randy in the hospital. When he walks away. "What are you going to now?" (Applause) It's brilliant. It's a brilliant moment. All those little things like that that you always remember. Seeing you at the end, get the girl... I'm still trying to figure out yours. (Laughter)

JOHNSON: Yes, I know. As actors, we spend most of our careers getting the script and trying to elevate it, trying to make sense of it somehow, trying to figure out how we're going to perform this shit. It's rare that you get a chance...

PIERCE: *Elevate it*. Did you hear that?

JOHNSON: Yes, I know—I just wanted to use the word "elevate." But it's rare that we get a chance to have the warm embrace of such brilliant prose as was offered up on this.

SIMON: Wow; he backed into that one.

JOHNSON: So my point is that usually we spend a lot of time trying to make a sow's ear out of *Gilligan's Island* or some version of that.

SIMON: We've come a long way, because Clark and I go back to the dawn of time of television. In the second script that I wrote, the first one where you were a major character, "Scene of the Crime," there was a line that Clark didn't want to say.

JOHNSON: With good reason, probably. I can't remember, but probably.

SIMON: I'm sure you were right. (Laughter) This mother fucker, he waited—it was the last scene of the day, and he kept saying the line wrong until the sun went down. (Laughter) Then when we had no light left, he said the line perfect.

JOHNSON: I learned that from Dennis Hopper. (Laughter)

SIMON: We've come a long way, haven't we?

JOHNSON: A long way. Now I'm beaten in submission. Don't hurt me, David; I'll say whatever you want me to say.

SIMON: This far.

SCHWARTZ: You guys don't forget a thing, do you?

JOHNSON: Not a thing, no.

SIMON: I forget nothing.

JOHNSON: Forgive less.

SCHWARTZ: I want to ask you, Clark, about playing Gus Haynes. The performance is great. It reminded me a little bit of how comfortable Jason Robards was as the editor in *All the President's Men*, where it didn't seem like acting at all. It just felt like you'd been in that newsroom forever. Can you talk about what it was like playing that? You seem like a city editor.

JOHNSON: Well, David called me—were you drunk when you called me? I can't remember. (Laughter)

SIMON: No, I was sober.

JOHNSON: You were sober? Aw, that takes the fun out of it. But you started talking to me about the possibility of that. I said, "Man, of course I want to do that." He said, "Now, I've kind of modeled this character after myself." (Laughter)

SIMON: I did not.

JOHNSON: You did so. Maybe you were drunk.

SIMON: I did not. You're just making shit up now. (Laughter)

JOHNSON: Then when I came to Baltimore to start the fifth season—because I hadn't been with the show for the middle three seasons—Bill came up to me and said, "Now, just come to me any time you want, because I kind of modeled this character after myself." (Laughter) So I felt I was in pretty good hands; I had the bookends of those two, and it was a character that it was comfortable to play. I like to refer—did I come up with this phrase, or was it you?—the patron saint of journalism. I think it was me.

SIMON: Yes; the character was made to represent that which was going away: the ethos of newspapering.

JOHNSON: I had read and seen the thing about the *Tribune* buying stuff up, a little before this all came about. There was something in the *LA Times* about it, I think. It was really important and really interesting to me, so I was grateful for the role. But again, like these guys, I thought, "Oh, I'm going to come back and mix it up with my boys and have some fun!" I was in the newsroom all the time; I never saw these guys once. But I had my own world.

SCHWARTZ: David, that H. L. Mencken quote that you show us, up on the wall of the *Baltimore Sun*.

SIMON: It's actually in the lobby, in the real place.

SCHWARTZ: In the lobby, where he says, "As I look back over a misspent life, I find myself more and more convinced that I had more fun doing news reporting than in any other enterprise." What did that mean to you, and what did that whole season

mean to you? You talked about the fun of doing reporting, but you really showed very clearly the problems with newspapers.

**SIMON:** Well, listen; we didn't do ten episodes so that I could go down memory lane. It wasn't about that. There was the opportunity to revisit some of the things that Bill Zorzi and I loved about being newspapermen, but what it really was about was the coda to *The Wire*. If we got anything right about the first four seasons—where we discussed the fraud of the drug war, the death of the working class, the political infrastructure's inability to reform itself, the lie behind equality of opportunity, all those things—there's very wonderfully meta about it. All those things got very little attention from the mainstream press. We never made it off the entertainment pages for those four seasons.

The fifth season, we asked the question, "If we got any of that right, what is it that we're paying attention to as a society, and what are we not? What are we indulging ourselves by paying attention to, and what are we ignoring? And what are we simplifying?" The problems are complex, and if you can't shape them into something that's a three-part series that's going to convince some prize committee somewhere to hand you a trinket, why are we doing it? Journalism, in my time, went from being a very open-ended and ambitious sort of post-Watergate moment of guys who supposed to go get business degrees and engineering degrees going to journalism school and thinking, "This is the way to be relevant."

It was becoming a very practiced art of self-absorption. It really was—and this is before the internet started kicking the shit out of newspapers. So all the things we depicted happening in Baltimore in the first four seasons really happened. I mean, not some of the dramatics of the show, but the mayor *really did* cook the stats to become governor. No Child Left Behind *really did* cheat the test scores so that the school system could look good and get funding. Politically sensitive prosecutions *really were* undercut by back channel maneuvering. All this stuff happened. But you wouldn't know it, to read the *Baltimore Sun*. It really was a critique of what was not being addressed. So when we do the last critique, which is, "What are we paying attention to?" and we critique *journalism*... It's all

fun and games when you're making fun of police officials and mayors and drug dealers; but God forbid you should say that journalism has abdicated, and it really has. Now you're seeing the tale end of it. Now the internet has come and it met a paper tiger, which was these newspapers that had been reduced and eviscerated for decades. I took the third buyout from the *Baltimore Sun*. That was '95. That was before the internet. They're now in the eighth buyout. When I was there, there were 500 reporters and editors; there's now 220. Baltimore is not any smaller, the problems aren't any smaller, but we now have a newspaper that doesn't matter.

**JOHNSON:** At the risk of having the term Dickenson—how do you say that? Dickensonian? Dickensian?—hurled at me: in the initial season, there were those cops way up there looking from a distance and detached. In the fifth season, there was the media, just looking and being detached; trying to get the great story, but not having an emotional tie to it.

In the meantime, these guys are drenched in blood, and these guys are sucked into it on the street. So that, to me, was an interesting thing. The last, the tail end, the fifth season, is us in the newsroom just looking out there going, "Some shameful shit." You know, like the fire; just up there, watching from way up there. To me, it came full circle, in that sense.

**SCHWARTZ:** One thing that you think when you're watching that last season is that you've been able to address things in the show that newspapers weren't addressing.

**SIMON:** I'm not saying this stuff about newspapers with any sense of schadenfreude, "Hey, I got out; fuck 'em." It's not that. I have friends who still work in newspaper. Some of them are taking a buyout this Friday, two or three of them who are still at the *Sun*. It's heartbreaking, because I don't know how you manage to be anything other than a moneyed oligarchy without an aggressive and surly press. It's not the time to be losing it. (Applause)

Anyone who thinks the internet's going to replace it—I don't really run into a lot of internet reporters at council meetings or in courthouses; they're not

out in Fallujah telling you what the Marines are doing. The internet is good for commentary. It's the parasite, and it's killing the host. The incredible thing—no, listen. I use the internet. It's a wonderful tool.

**JOHNSON:** There's porn, don't forget.

**SIMON:** I forgot. (Laughter) You can trade stocks online and there's porn, that's right; and you can illegally download *The Wire* and avoid the DVD purchase. (Laughter) That's right; it's good for something. But you know, I don't know where we're going, but it ain't a good place.

**JOHNSON:** But while I was busy channeling Bill Zorzi and David Simon, he also had a great respect and a reverence for that craft, and there were always reporters that had taken the buyout or had moved on to other papers—like *The Post* or *The Times*—they had moved on. They would come and do cameos on the show, and they were like rock stars. These guys would deify them. They'd come there and they'd be going, "Oh, my God, there's..." And we'd look and, "Who? What?" But every week, there was a little pocket of bad acting. (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Except for Zorzi. Admit that Zorzi pulled his weight. (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** There was a reason they were writing, right? (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Who had to envelope a novice from the streets of Baltimore? Somebody who had no business being on TV? How many here? Tell the story, you all have stories. You're working with somebody who's never acted before, and you have to envelop them with your craft. You have to put your arms around them and make the scene work. Who was yours?

**GILLIAM:** It was the entire Season Three (Laughter) for me and Domenick. It was like, "Hm, these guys are so authentic." "Yes, we just got them from around the corner! He's great, right?" (Laughter) "No, he's not great; he should go back around the fucking corner! I'm glad you didn't have to costume 'em, but shit!" (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Clark, who'd we make you go up against?

**PETERS:** Who *didn't* you make us go up against sometimes? Coming out of the court, the court stuff in Season Five; the stenographers or the secretaries or...

**SIMON:** So all the real people at the court?

**PETERS:** Oh, you know—who was the cop?

**JOHNSON:** Gary D'Addario. (Laughter)

**PETERS:** Oh, I love him, I love him. This is the cop that put me on the street the first time, the first year, with all of the sergeants that were doing the roll-arounds and everything. I have a lot of respect for this guy, right? But now he's sitting opposite me, and he's the bad cop.

**SIMON:** He's the bad prosecutor, yes.

**PETERS:** He's the bad prosecutor. just watching his face act... (Laughter) He's a lovely cat, but like, he should really be a cop, you know? Do you remember? He had this hangdog face when he did something wrong. "Yes, I did." (Laughter)

**SIMON:** I'm sorry I asked the question.] (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** I was directing that one, and I was trying to get him to eat a ham and cheese sandwich on the scene and maybe diffuse things... (Laughter)

**SIMON:** Yes, where were you? Who did you have?

**PIERCE:** Actually, I got my mentor, Detective Massey, on the port season.

**SIMON:** Oh, that's right.

**PIERCE:** But all he had to do was get out of the car with Bob.

**JOHNSON:** They're taping this, you know... (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** Massey's cool, because he's like this in the office, too. He would get out of the car—and he had seen every bad cop show. So you'd get out of the car, and he'd come out and (Stands, swaggers; laughter) He would say, "Cut," like that. "Yes, Detective, just get out of the car and just hit your mark." "Oh, yes. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm

sorry. Oh yes, yes; okay.” They’d say, “Action.” (Stands, swaggers; laughter) Eventually, I think they just cut him. You saw this on screen. (Leans, as if to begin standing) That was it. (Laughter) He rocked out of his seat and... (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** I think mine was one of your patron saints. I had to walk by him. I had a pound and a half of dialog, and he was eating some cottage cheese. Who was that guy?

**SIMON:** Oh, Carl Shotwell?

**JOHNSON:** Yes; beautiful old guy.

**SIMON:** One of the great old boys at *The Sun*. He was fantastic.

**JOHNSON:** Fantastic... with pen and ink! (Laughter)

**SIMON:** He was saying a line that he had said—it was one of his most famous moments at *The Baltimore Sun*, which was—Carl was always on a diet, and he was eating a cottage cheese lunch. Somebody walked past him, and he was looking at the cottage cheese, and he just went, “Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.” (Laughter) It was so Carl that it’s on the wall as a wall quote. So we tried to re-enact the moment. (Laughter)

But in defense of Gary Diadarrio, I will say this. I worked on his shift when I was writing *Homicide*, when I was writing the book. He was the shift commander in charge. And he was playing the actual Gary D’Addario. That’s who he was. So all he was doing was being the cat he is.

**JOHNSON:** And he sings. He does a Frank Sinatra thing. We should’ve had him sing.

**SIMON:** He actually can sing. It’s unbelievable. The two of you...

**PETERS:** Are you suggesting we should start a musical career together? (Laughter)

**SIMON:** A missed opportunity that we didn’t go musical at that moment. We needed the two of you to break into song.

**PIERCE:** There were wonderful moments where real life came into the fictional. One of my favorite moments was when we had finished the scene in the McCulloh Homes, on the sofa, on the couch. We were going to lunch, and Dominic West and I were walking across the courtyard. The kids were sitting on the couch. He said, “I thought we just did this scene.” (Laughs) I said, “No, those are the real kids.” (Laughter) And they were! They were. We would go to lunch, and they would come back to the couch and start slinging.

**SIMON:** Well, yes. The actors didn’t know a lot of what happened with the locations department, of going up to the corner and saying, “We’re going to be shooting here until one, and then we’re going to be moving three blocks over there. So if you could move your thing over there—and then you can come back after one o’clock.” The level of cooperation that we got was...

**JOHNSON:** Initially. They’d get tired of it after a while, those slingers.

**SIMON:** They’d get a little cranky, but then we’d change neighborhoods.

**JOHNSON:** How about the one in the pilot or the first or second one. We scouted this house, this row house, and then we came back two weeks later to shoot, and the row house was gone. (Laughter) It was just a hole between two buildings. We said, “Well, good thing these houses all look the same. Knock on that door.” (Laughter)

You talked about actors that we had to work with that we had problems with. We had one that involved furniture. They tore all the towers down; they blew them all up; they imploded most of them when we were doing the pilot. We actually shot the towers at an old folks’ home, and the guys were hurling stuff down at you guys, TVs and shit. They’re hurling all this stuff down, and it’s going pretty good, we’re getting most of the scene. After a while I’m starting to notice—now, mind you, this is an old folks’ home; remember that—I’m starting to notice that some of the stuff that was raining down wasn’t the same in *Take One*.

**SIMON:** Continuity problem?

JOHNSON: There were real people throwing real shit down! (Laughter) It's an old folks' home! A fridge, a little fridge came down!

SIMON: It's a tough town. My town is a tough town.

PETERS: On that same set, I'm standing there waiting for someone to come out. And this man comes on up and he says, "I'm looking for David Simon." I said, "He's over there." "I understand ya'll using my name." "Using your name? I don't know what you're talking about." He says, "My name is Bodie Barksdale." I said, (Laughter) "You got *my* attention. And David's *over there!*"

SIMON: He was doing this thing where he walks, the real Bodie walks like this, because he's on two wooden legs.

PETERS: Oh; I thought he was coming at me! (Laughter)

SIMON: No, so he's always moving, which is really unnerving.

PETERS: Yes, really—and He had just gotten out of the slam that morning!

SIMON: Yes, just had, yes. I didn't know he was out when I used the name. (Laughter)

JOHNSON: Otherwise, you would've used some other name. Stanley.

SIMON: Let me tell you something. Producers 101: I'll give you a little hint here, for when you reach *my* level in this business.

JOHNSON: Oh, thank you. Wow! (Laughter)

SIMON: There's a solution to this problem. What do you think it is?

JOHNSON: I have no idea, but I'll know when I reach your level. (Laughter)

SIMON: You put him in the movie.

JOHNSON: Ah, there you go.

SIMON: He had a few lines. He was the guy—

PRICE: You learn that in labor history: If something's a threat, offer it a job. I have to say, *The Wire* is like the only set where—Is it real? Is it live, or is it Memorex?—It's the only movie set where we're on a street in East Baltimore, and from around the corner, we hear gunshots. Now, your normal reaction is to go like that. (Ducks) But everybody's turning [script] pages. (Laughter)

SIMON: There was the guy that staggered into the set, who had been shot, in Season Three.

GILLIAM: You know, David, there's something I've wanted to ask you for a while about the writing. There's a scene that you had where—

JOHNSON: Is it too late to reshoot? (Laughter)

GILLIAM: No. Remember McNulty's dream jazz club. What was that about? It was like a scene where McNulty was dreaming, and he was in a jazz club, and various characters—

SIMON: It was no jazz club, it was a theater.

PETERS: It was pretty wild.

SIMON: To begin the last episode, we had a drunken dream by McNulty. We didn't realize that *The Sopranos* were going to go there and do it so much better, so thank God we were told, "Maybe this isn't working," by HBO. It was one of the great notes they gave us, and we killed the sequence. But in that sequence, you almost saw everybody from the whole first season, even people who were dead, like Stinkum; his kids; his ex-wife. They were all in the dream at certain points. We constructed that as a dream, and then had him wake up in a cold sweat, and then we were going to begin the last episode. It was really arty.

GILLIAM: Ah.

PETERS: But it was a musical.

GILLIAM: Bunk was on the clarinet or something, Freamon was on a standup bass, and the...

SIMON: I don't remember that.

GILLIAM: Yes, yes.

PIERCE: Yes, Lansman was a saxophone player. We were all in white ties and tails.

SIMON: It was a burlesque house, because his ex-wife is doing a striptease, remember?

PIERCE: No, I don't remember that part. (Laughter)

SIMON: You read right past that?

SIMON: Are you one of those guys, "Oh, I'm not in this scene...?"

PIERCE: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. (Laughter)

PETERS: No, he was at Choices.

PIERCE: There were some actors who did that. You would always tell because those times when we'd see an episode together and they'd go, "Oh, wow!" (Laughter) "Did you read the script?" "Uh, yes, I read it all." (Laughter) But you know, that was the most amazing thing. I just think of all those times I looked at episodes, I would read the scripts, and then you would see the actors. I really became a fan of all the other portions of the show that I wasn't a part of, the other storylines. The scene between Avon and Stringer on the balcony is just classic, you know? (Applause) You know, Brother Mouzone and Omar; Clay on the stand. (Laughter) You just remember all of those scenes. That was the great thing about coming to set and seeing those guys. You'd be like, "Wow, man, just as a fan of the show, I really enjoyed watching you." I always felt fortunate that I got a chance to be a part of it, this great television show that I could also watch as a fan.

SCHWARTZ: One thing I want to ask you about that: as you go through these great scenes—and you were joking about the bad acting you dealt with—of course, one thing about this show is all the great acting by so many African American actors. I know the show's not sanctimonious about race; it doesn't deal with race as a big issue in the usual way. I think it's much more about capitalism, much more about money than about race. But there's probably no dramatic show—I can't think of one—that has so many great roles for black actors.

SIMON: I agree with you, but that's not what it was about. It really wasn't about race. It was about how money and power route themselves, or fail to properly route themselves. It was about the end of an empire. It was about a lot of things. But the one thing we were not interested in was doing a show that was primarily about race, because by and large in most of America, it's not lived that way. Race is there, it's present; but it's not much discussed openly.

JOHNSON: We'll see in the next few months, when Obama starts... (Laughs)

SIMON: He may win, he may lose; race will be a profound part of that, but it won't be discussed. There'll be a million other reasons why it doesn't come up.

PIERCE: "Why is he so... *arrogant*?" (Laughter) He's not... *confident*.

SIMON: Or even better, "He's not a scary negro, but they're standing him next to a scary negro. That guy he's standing next to, who's yelling, that's..."

JOHNSON: Has McCain used the term "you people" yet? I can't remember. (Laughter) So we digress, right?

SIMON: We digress. But you know, I feel like that ground had been covered, like a generation earlier, with *Homicide* and with *NYPD Blue*. I felt like people writing directly at race...

JOHNSON: What about *Good Times*? Don't forget *Good Times*; that addressed race... (Laughter)

SIMON: Thank you; how could I? But there's something to be said for just letting people be. Baltimore is a city that is 65% African American now, so the show is 65% African American.

To defend one thing, which was we used a lot of people from Baltimore who were not actors: everybody from Snoop to Bill Zorzi to Melvin, little Melvin, Melvin Williams, to Gary DiAddaro. What they brought, what the dynamic was that we would often see, was that the actor who was struggling. The guy was struggling to hit a mark or to say the line right. We knew that there are



ways of editing performance. But what you were getting were these faces, this reality of Baltimore, mixed in with really strong acting that would carry the scene. You were getting professional acting that was driving the scene, and yet it was driving it through the real Baltimore. I wouldn't change it for the world. I wouldn't change any of those roles. Some of the times it was hell getting the line out of them, but you would then look at it later and say, "I've never seen a face like that on TV delivering a line like that." The fact that it wasn't polished said that it was something else, that it was dealing in another realm. I love that. I actually love that.

**JOHNSON:** It can still bite you on the ass. I have to go in another direction for a second. For this movie I did a few years ago, I wanted an authentic Central American actor. Of course I kept getting, from central casting, these beautiful Spaniards. We were in a neighborhood in Los Angeles, and they found this short, squat, really interesting little primarily native-looking Guatemalan woman. She was fantastic; she had a great laugh and she was wonderful. And then we said, "Action," She went, "... ." (Laughter) So I said, "Well, what can people who can't act play the best? Anger." So I ran out to the truck and got a police uniform and came out and said, "You're mad at me. You scream in me in Spanish and throw a frying pan at my head." That's how I ended up working around it.

**SIMON:** So you went for stereotype. Go for stereotype.

**JOHNSON:** I went for stereotype! (Laughter) Thank you for my lesson.

**PIERCE:** About race, in the first season, I'll never forget—I really like the way we dealt with it there. Bunk and McNulty, you would see them in bars. One time it would be predominantly African American, another time it would be predominantly white, you know? He was taking me to his bar; I was taking him to mine. That said so much about the way it really happens.

**SIMON:** But never spoken. To speak about it would've ruined it.

**PIERCE:** We never said anything about race, but the scene, just the setting itself, said how we interacted.

**JOHNSON:** And speaking of those bars, were there some characters in some of those bars?

**PIERCE:** Oh, were there ever! *Whoo*, man!

**SIMON:** The B&O Tavern (Laughter)

**PIERCE:** My Goodness! The B&O; this is the first season.

**JOHNSON:** That guy, man.

**JOHNSON:** Cigarette smoke. Yellow beard from it.

**PIERCE:** That guy, he had a beard, and this beard kind of looked like Willie Nelson. He was smoking and smoking, and he didn't understand that you have to do scenes over and over; a take this way, a take this way; the master; different shots. They kept him because he looked great. He was a barfly who wasn't going to move anyway; he was like, "This is my spot." (Laughter) They kept him in the scene.

**JOHNSON:** And he didn't move. Nine hours.

**PIERCE:** And he didn't move. And then one time they said, "Cut," and he said, "Man, when are you going to get this shit right?" (Laughter) And then—I guess I shouldn't do this, if you have a queasy stomach—he lifted his beard.

**JOHNSON:** Oh, God.

**PIERCE:** And he had a trach. And he spat from his trach.

**JOHNSON:** And he walked away from there. He wobbled away.

**PIERCE:** Oh, I was... (Groans; laughter). This guy. Oh, man.

**JOHNSON:** But you can't get that in central casting. (Laughter)

**PETERS:** And unfortunately, we didn't get it on film, either.

**SIMON:** Well, you know what? A guy showed up with a trach to read for a part in *The Corner*. I'll never forget this. Do you remember? We put him right in the shooting gallery. You were probably in the scene with him. He showed up with a trach; it was like from heaven, it was manna. It was something you would never think of. But all of a sudden I thought back to when we were researching that book. There were four guys on trachs who were coming up to. You would never think to ask for that, you know? You would never ask your casting director, "Do you have some guys who have tracheotomies?" (Laughter)

**JOHNSON:** You'd see a lot of upper and lower plates coming out, but never...

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, we could listen to you for sixty hours, but I'm getting the sign over here, so we'll have to end on that... lovely note. (Laughter) Maybe I'll end by adding that the Orioles came to New York and beat the Yankees in a series. (Applause and boos)

**PETERS:** Wow.

**SIMON:** Who's hissing? Who's that? You can't be a fan of *The Wire* anymore. You have to root for Orioles if you're a fan of *The Wire*.

**SCHWARTZ:** Thank you so much for being here tonight. (Applause)

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