

COVER STORY

A CHROMIUM SWITCH EXCLUSIVE
THE
OSSMAN/WALCUTT
INTERVIEW



*David Ossman and Judith Walcutt at a Valentine's Day winetasting, , Honeymoon Bay Road
Photo courtesy D.O. and J.W.*

David Ossman and his partner-in-crime, Judith Walcutt, have nary a spare moment when they are not writing, performing, directing or organizing *something*. We managed to slow them down long enough to answer our little questionnaire. What follows are the questions we asked and the gracious couple's answers, just as they were originally typed.

Cast:

DO is played by David Ossman

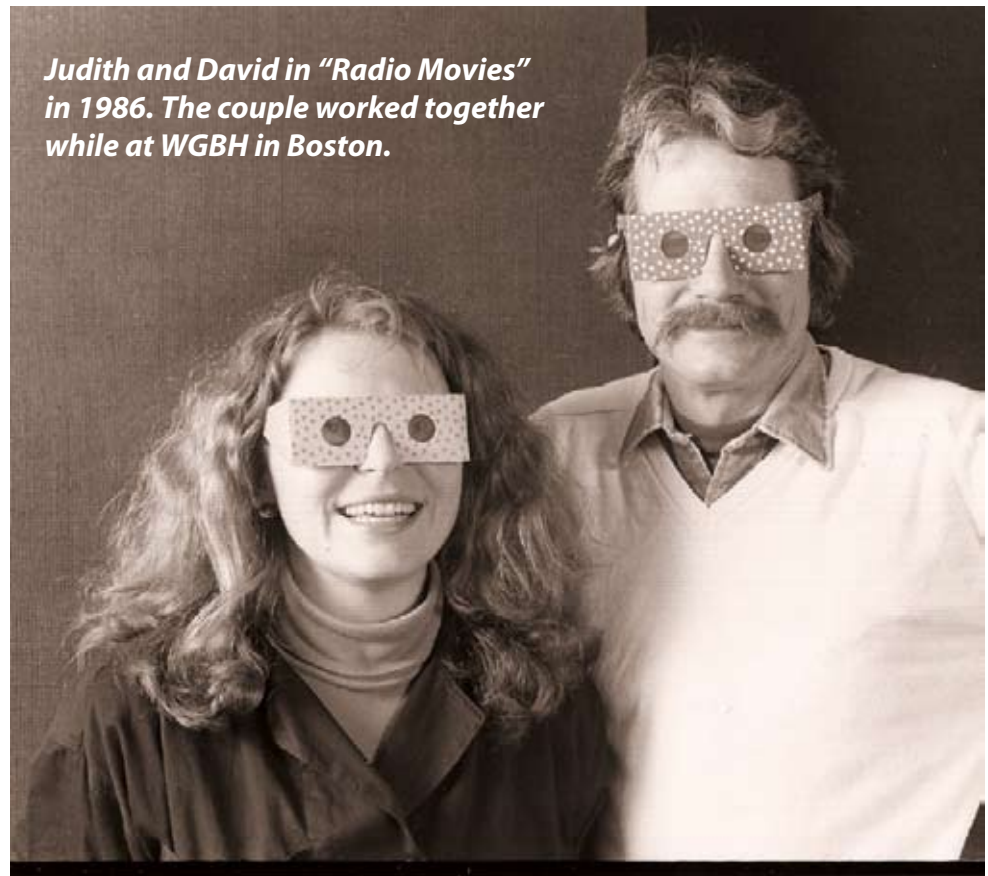
JW is played by Judith Walcutt

CS is the nom de plume of Chromium Switch editors, Tom Gedwillo and Phil Fountain.

CS: Judith, first question is for you, what brought the Ossman/Walcutt team together?

JW: We "coalesced" producing "Radio Movies" at WGBH in Boston. We had been working on the last major drama series to come out of Boston, *The Web--Young People's Radio Theatre*--and we both had the same esthetic for what we were trying to do in the audio medium--When we made *The Red Badge of Courage* together, we broke it out of the studio, captured things live and on locations, (we recorded the reenactment of the Battle of Lexington, so we could get authentic musket fire) and put it into the mix of what was finally a fully-loaded 24 track mix. It felt like a real breakthrough in the medium. Up to that point, there had been a lot of what we called "ring a bell, slam door, radio drama"--all of it was really a lot of fun--unbelievable amounts of work--we did 26 two-hour blocks in under six months. We worked round the clock--which is probably another reason we got married--it made working together easier. And then of course there were the kids--we've folded them into the act. Orson was the screaming baby in the background of our *War of the Worlds* production. That truly WAS a Radio Movie--Jason Robards on location at Sky Walker Ranch, Steve Allen dying for us as the last reporter, on a roof top in New York--Hector Elizondo in a supporting role! And Randy Thom driving the sound design--we had such a blast doing that and over the years--I would have to say that listening to those albums my brother brought home from college, late at night, laying on the floor, between the speakers, just a lava light on maybe--has certainly had a lasting effect on my work--and life.

CS: Judith, Much of your work is aimed at young people, yet you often use an art form, audio theater, that many of your audience may be completely unfamiliar with. How does the High-Tech generation respond to the relatively Low-Tech medium?



Judith and David in "Radio Movies" in 1986. The couple worked together while at WGBH in Boston.

JW: I don't believe that audio isn't high-tech. I do believe that young people, young children, even, are bombarded by media from all directions and that a rather large shift is taking place in which choice and self-programming--by download onto i-pods and the media devices that are evolving now--is going to allow expanded access to materials out there that parents AND children would enjoy but have had limited access to because of the formal gatekeepers of the broadcast and publishing media. All that's out there--including highly produced radio/audio experiences--can now be available to its audience. That audience--child or otherwise--is not unfamiliar with listening and listening to stories being told and the sophistication of language, plot, story, sound settings, psychological acoustics, etc.--this really is part of their media consciousness, practically from birth. Some people are even playing their children music PRE-birth. So no, radio plays are not necessarily low tech and young people--all that I have seen, worked with, and known, over the years of producing and raising two boys of our own, seem to LIKE to listen to stuff--all kinds of stuff: music, stories highly produced or simply read out loud. It's a very natural, instinctual, human sort of thing to do--to curl up and listen to a story.

CS: (For both) As authors, can you tell us how your approach differs when writing for "audio theater" as opposed to writing for print? Or is there a difference?

JW: While producing/writing for radio/audio, I think VERY visually, hyper-visually, really, and then I reflect on how to turn that vision into a real place, in sound. Our production of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is the most visual audio experience you can imagine! As a writer--of poems or stories, I am also hyper aware of the sound of it, the language as it lays out on the page and then stirs in the mind, with assonances and, of course, dissonances and the hosts of words within words which stir up memory, image, emotion. It's all there--in the psycho-acoustics of the thing.

DO: Audio theatre -- radio -- Firesign records -- all same thing. What is reality? Sound! Sure, sight is equally useful but more easily bored and distracted, if not asleep. I approach script-writing and adaptation to audio from other media -- fiction, stage, historical-biographical -- as a craft, like screenwriting, that has certain disciplines, narrative devices and the like. In "Empire of the Air" I deliberately constructed each scene with a specific "old radio" form in mind, just to have that in the subtext. Almost any kind of story can be told this way. (People hear a "mix." "Ambience" is the audio theatre word for the reproduction of it.) Other rules govern storytelling in "print" forms like the short-story or novel. All rules can and should be broken. But remember, reading a book is still making up the sound effects and dialogue in your head or as you read aloud. And that's reality for sure.

Read to your kids! Early and often.

CS: David, as a practitioner of the “sullen art” (like how I worked that in? Huh?) your work seems deeply rooted in the lineage of American poetry with a particular nod to The Beats, yet there’s the element of early 20th Century European avant-garde (Dadaism) very evident. Can you tell us a little about your connection to the Beat era and your early influences?

DO: “The Sullen Art” was a title lifted from Dylan Thomas’ “in my craft and sullen art.” To me, in 1960, it presented the image of the poet, alone with his/her craft. Good title for a radio series. In my poetry, before the Beat era, obviously Dylan Thomas (a supreme writer for radio) and, for breaking the rules, e. e. cummings. My poetry teacher at Columbia, Leonie Adams, turned me on to the Beats, shortly after “On The Road” was published – she thought I would feel at home with them – and the Evergreen Review “San Francisco Scene” issue shortly appeared. All these poets (and their influences – William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson) made for a real change in my work. It was all about “the breath.” In the early Sixties in New York my mentor was Paul Blackburn, but the “scene” – readings and the like were a great mix and something I needed to convey to the listening world via WBAI. Poetry was all about reading aloud to an audience. My first model and lifelong friend, Ray Bradbury, showed me the way to become a writer and how to behave as a “celebrity.” DADA appealed to me with its anarchic anti-war anti-art spirit and I particularly liked Tristan Tzara. Surrealism – dream-state – was obviously an influence (think of Next World), but the great artist/nonartist for me was Marcel Duchamp and the most versatile of artists in all media was Jean Cocteau. I’ve translated and worked with the texts of all three. I learned to write plays from Gilbert & Sullivan, riff from Lord Buckley and Wolfman Jack, radio from Norman Corwin and Fibber McGee & Molly, a loose groove from Steve Allen, Kerouac, Chandler and William Powell. Did I mention Mickey Rooney and Henry Aldrich? Brecht? Godot? Jarry?

JW: Though you didn’t ask, I’ll tell you anyway, that my greatest influences were not dissimilar to David’s. Though mine in the writing area are more heavily weighted towards James Joyce, e.e.cummings, Virginia Woolf and even Edith Wharton, over the Beats – though I sure read and loved Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg and Levertov and pretty much everyone else on the above list of his. You see, we had read the same people and the first conversation we ever had was about poetry and a poet named Robert Kelley—whom

David had known from his radio show and I knew, as a student, at Bard College. I would say one good reason we got married was because we read and loved a lot of the same books—and poetry. In fact, when he saw my books—one shelf is one of everything Black Sparrow Press had published up to a certain moment, he swooned. He probably married me for my books.

On another note, while David was doing his thing in poetry with the beats—in an earlier lifetime from Firesign life, I, in another time/space continuum--was in fact doing poetry AS a performance medium--writing and working with dancers to create a three movement ballet of a piece called “The Shadow’s Garden” based on a fairy tale collected by W.B. Yeats. I was in grad school at the time, 1975-1976, and hanging out at the Woman’s building, and doing a piece with a dance company--which performed the work both at Cal Arts and the Woman’s Building and then at USC. Prior to that-- prior to moving to California to go to graduate school in Rhetoric, Linguistics and Literature, I had a play debut off-broadway at the LaMamma Etc. No one has heard of this play and probably it will never be seen again. It went under the title, created by the ensemble theatre group I was “writing” for at the time, “Bah! Let there be Light, Cow”. It was quite mad.

CS: As a voice actor and poet, how large a part does the sound of the words play in your writing? It seems to me that your poems beg to be read aloud. Do you write “in audio”?

DO: See above. I read everything aloud.

JW: In school, they considered I had some kind of reading problem—I sub-vocalized everything like it was a play and imagined everything like it was a movie. It took longer to do, but I certainly enjoyed the experience as over and above the “speed reading for the facts” approach, for the sake of test-taking, for gosh sakes!

CS: You’ve mentioned your admiration for Bob Dylan’s work. Are his songs still on rotation on your iPod? As a poet, he is definitely concerned with the sound of words, even though his voice is “like a dead man’s last pistol shot.” As you’re writing, do you think of your poems as performance pieces? (This may be a redundant question, pretty much the same as the last one... answer the one you like best!)

DO: Uh, he’s on the boombox. Better yet, Bob is on Preston’s iPod along with the Beatles (and 100’s of others). I started playing Dylan on the radio after the first LP came

out. And of course, we listened to every word and image – “the pump don’t work ‘cause the vandals stole the handle” – for their endless subtexts. “The Moonsign Book” of mine from 1968 is full of a Dylanish feel.

JW: Did you know that THE pump that the vandal’s stole the handle from is located in the little town square of Annandale-on-Hudson, where Bard College is located? I had people tell me, my freshman year, that they actually KNEW the vandals who stole the handle—but probably it was more or less a non-urban legend by that time.

CS: You both produce and direct for the International Mystery Writers Festival, how did that association come about?

DO: I’ll let Judith tell the story.

JW: Well, it was a matter of reading the junk mail. David has been encouraging me for some time to just throw the damn stuff out. And I tried to. I really did. But this one day, these two letters came in, one to him and one to me, a sort of mass mailing envelope-style with mailing labels, from a place called RiverPark Center. I thought, “Here’s some junk mail—there’s two of them.” I tossed them. Then I thought, well, I look at the damn coupons in my Texaco bill, why don’t I open it anyway. It turned out to be a job description for producing the live radio theatre unit for a new theatre festival they would be holding in Kentucky. The subject was mysteries. I ran up stairs, this thing clutched in my hand and said—David the answer has FINALLY come in the mail! Junk mail/NOT!!!! We telephoned immediately. We were the first people they called back. I was supposed to send them a resume—but before I actually got to it, they called back and told us they had Googled us and decided we were they ones for the job. It is a VERY challenging project. The first year, we produced three different performances of six different scripts, in under 7 days from start to finish. The next year, we did a total of something like 45 performances (9 shows, five times each?) (Is that even possible?) in ten days. The third year we did just the four different Agatha Christie radio plays, a total of six shows, culminating in a live broadcast. Working hard but having fun, is our modus operandi.

CS: Obviously, radio captured your imagination early on. Your first job was as “Young Tom Edison” on the 1938 serial, or do I have you confused with someone else?

DO: Actually, GLT’s first job was at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair (see page 136 of “The Ronald Reagan Murder Case”) as Young Tom

Edison. See the forthcoming “Anythynge You Want To” for GLT’s work with the Firesign Radio Theatre 1939-1942 (in the Appendix titled “The Curious History of “The Firesign Theatre”). I remember radio as early as 1941 and seeing “Mr. First Nighter” done live in Hollywood a decade later gave me my career goal.

CS: The George L. Tirebiter persona has been entwined into your career and seems to be a real touchstone for you. George is very real to us, your fans. What does the character mean to you?

DO: George is entirely real. He is sufficiently older than I to have had a great career in the Golden Ages of both radio and Hollywood. He has faced blacklisting, divorce, business struggles, betrayal and angst. George’s return as Veep candidate in 1976 was a great personal high, and his reappearance as my co-host on WGBH’s “Radio Movies” a few years later was a treat. He’s pretty old now, but that hasn’t curbed his appetite!

CS: It must have been a gas using the vintage equipment you found at the CBS studios during the “Nick Danger” sessions. Did those old RCA mics add to the ambience of the recordings?

DO: Oh, yes! When Jim Guercio put condenser mics on us for the “single” it was painfully obvious they couldn’t be worked like the RCA’s, they exaggerated the highs (air conditioning!), were unflattering to our voices and were clearly not for us. Back to the vintage mics. Nick Danger was done on the RCA’s. But all mics are useful and we’ve used shotguns and lavs and at NPR I had my own Neuman with my own special eq so I would sound extra cool.

CS: What does being a member of the Firesign Theatre mean to you? Are you pleased with your legacy, or is there anything you wish you had done differently?

DO: It’s a remarkable legacy and I’m very pleased with it. Having so much of our work enter the language is a great honor and still being in print after 40 years is a great, if not greatly profitable, career. On a personal level, I have never been so close to my companions in this work as I am now, and feel profoundly fortunate to have joined with them when I did.

CS: You took a sabbatical from the Firesign Theatre back in the 80’s. Did the time away

alter your perception of the group?

DO: Rather, the time away completely changed my life. By the time we reunited for the 25th Anniversary Show, I had moved to New Mexico, Boston and Whidbey Island. I’d remarried and Orson was a four-year-old and Preston a baby. Judith and I had produced hours of great radio theatre with star talent. Frankly, I was wary of a renewal of the collaboration if it proved to be a dead end. As it turned out, of course, we were writing together better than ever in 1998 and performing better than ever in 2010. Plus, as time passed, rather than fading, we have become “legendary.” Who knew?



CS: We’re always curious, what are you reading? What is on your nightstands right now?

DO: I just finished reading Michael Sheldon’s “Mark Twain: Man In White.” Wonderful biography. Very moving. I’m now just into Tommy Chong’s “Cheech & Chong – The Unauthorized Autobiography” and I see what he means. The Sunday New York Times. I’ve recently read and enjoyed Pynchon’s “Inherent Vice” and Bazell’s “Beat The Reaper,” which, in spite of its ripoff title is a good read.

JW: On my bed stand: “Fools and Death” by David Ossman, “The Dhammapada” translated by Irving Babbitt, “Ngondro Commentary” by Chagdud Tulku translated by Jane Tromge, “Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead” by Francesca Fremantle, a collection of Agatha Christie Novels including “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Philomel Cottage”, and “Witness for the Prosecution”, a biography of Agatha Christie, “A Woman and Her Mysteries”, and, finally, “Freddy the Detective Pig” by Walter Brooks.

CS: Are we correct in feeling that there is a bit of a Firesign Theatre Renaissance happening? Is this resurgence due to your presence on the Internet? What do you attribute it to?

DO: I think we are at least partly responsible, by performing in a media environment that allows news and pictures and opinion to circulate immediately and freely. Certainly *Chromium Switch* and *Facebook* as organizing tools and dispensers of information have been vitally important during the past year. Also, we’ve proven to be unique in what we do together and the work we have done remains funny and useful and, I hope, profound. Unique is good.

CS: If you had your druthers, what would your next Big Project be?

DO: Taking Agatha Christie’s BBC Murders to Broadway would be fun for us. For me, getting my Archive preserved in a Special Collection would be an accomplishment.

JW: Of course Agatha on the Great White Way would be surreal; Currently, I am working on advancing a web site for young people—which will be both edutaining, a lot of fun, and useful for teachers, parents, and students in an educational environment starved for funding for basics and lacking anything at all for “enrichment.”

And of course, if I won the lottery or something, I would be writing fiction, for children and adults, full time.

CS: We know a new book of poetry is coming out soon. What else is lurking in the wings?

DO: “Fools & Death” from Ion Drive is really two books – “Poems For Fools,” written during the Firesign’s XM radio days and featuring Beat St. Jack – and “The Day of the Dead,” which continues to track the Endless War and chronicle Death as it enters our lives. An earlier, three-book-book called “Round Trips with Putnam’s, Refuges & The Infrathin” covers the millennial years 1999-

2001, but that ain't published yet, like a lot of my work since the gorgeous books from Turkey Press in the early '80s. They continue to lurk, along with most of the found, sound, collaged and manipulated work – poems in various forms, some of which were beautifully produced for NPR by Ev Grimes.

JW: See above—but add to that, I am developing media for, don't laugh, the touch-phone. Writing and illustrating stories that can be sent as texts for the child audience: Anyone out there want to be a beta tester?.

CS: We've noticed Orson and Preston manning video equipment and the like at recent shows, there is quite an Ossman Family presence around the FT these days. Are the boys interested in performing? Writing? Production?

DO: Judith?

JW: Both have been on stage and behind a microphone, camera, and generally "on" practically since birth. It's in their genes. They can't help themselves. Orson had a wonderful bit on the CBS remake of The Fugitive which was being shot in the area, at the time. It was an odd moment on the set when the director called "Orson—we're ready for your close-up!" Now, ten years later, Orson is at the Dodge School of Film and TV at Chapman College in So. Cal. He is a directing major. (Though at this EXACT moment, he is in London at Middlesex University, taking

a theatre and stand-up comedy classes—for a semester abroad). He is a really good actor and we use him whenever we can. While Preston has done quite a bit of acting (he did a GREAT "Nick" in Herb Gardner's play "A Thousand Clowns," when he was 12), he is leaning more towards music and producing. He plays a few instruments and writes songs. He produces concerts on Whidbey. He goes to a high school called Lakeside in Seattle where he manages their internet radio station. Like I said, the boys can't help themselves. It's just in the genes! The show must go on!

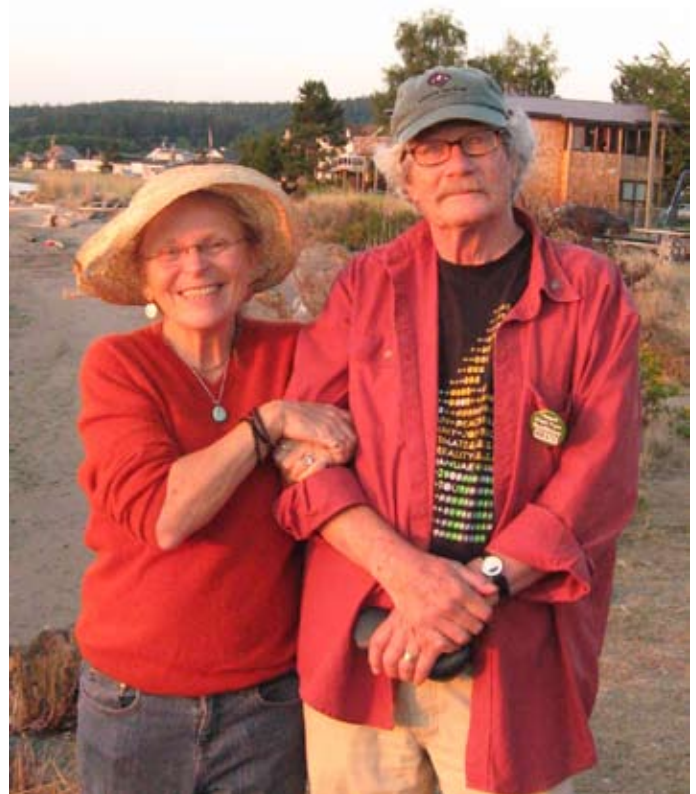
CS: Is there anything you'd like to say directly to all the Fireheads out there? Anything you'd like to mention that we haven't brought up?

DO: Bless you and thank you. Namaste.

JW: Thanks for your support all these years! I thank you, our children thank you—carry on!

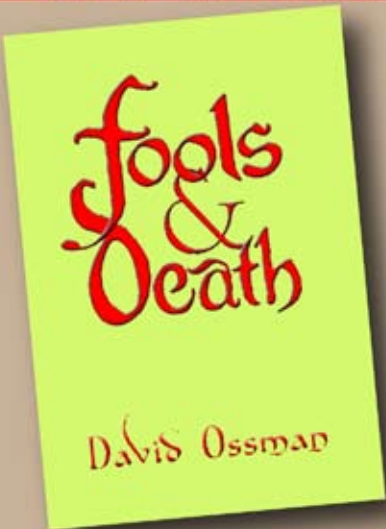
CS: Thank you both so much for indulging us, you're very kind.

Photographs courtesy of Judith Walcutt and David Ossman as well as the Chromium Switch Archives & The Communist Martyr High School People's Lending Library.




On Maxwelton Beach, the couple's 22nd Anniversary, August 29, 2009.


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