

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SPREE

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Michelle O'Brien: Hello, I'm Michelle O'Brien

Spree: Hello

O'Brien: Hi. And I will be having a conversation with Spree for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. In collaboration with the New York public library's community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is June 8th 2017 and this is being recorded over the telephone with Michelle in New York and Spree in Tennessee. Hello Spree.

Spree: Hi Michelle.

O'Brien: So, tell me about where you are since we're not in the same place. Could you just describe where you're calling from?

Spree: yeah, I am about an hour and a half outside of Nashville Tennessee. In a little town called Liberty. And around Liberty, there are other towns. Dowelltown being one of them. I'm trying to think, there's a lot of queer communities in this area, is what I'm trying to get at. And either being one of them. That's the one in Dowelltown and short mountain sanctuary is in liberty. I'm in a place called sassafras in Liberty. There's little clusters of gay identified and trans identified communities popping up all around this area which is very intriguing and interesting. Over the last twenty years many more communities have popped up.

O'Brien: I want to hear all about your life but maybe before we dive into your childhood, you could tell us a little bit about the kinds of gay communities and trans communities that are popping up in that area of Tennessee. What are they like?

Spree: Ok, well short mountain, let's start with short mountain because it's been the oldest. It's been around, oh my gosh, 30+ years. It started as a hippie commune and then eventually transmogrified into a radical fairy community. Which it is now, and then about twenty years ago, I could have that wrong. Short mountain could be way older than that. But let's just use that as an example. Then about twenty years ago, a group of people wanted to live at short mountain but short mountain was like, "no. we're full. We're not gonna have anymore people," and so one of the people that had been around the area and had lived in the area for a while took them to see a piece of property and said, "This piece of property is coming available." So they bought that and it was originally all gay men or queer men. And that was the property that became known as IDA (Idol Dandy Arts). Originally it was Idle Dandy Arts and then that got whittled down to just IDA. And over last past twenty years it's kinda shifted into a much more trans identified. Not starting necessarily with Plan Z but Plan Z had a lot to do with that. That was a trans group that came and had an organizing meeting at IDA and I realize we talked about it but they didn't hear us talking about it so I should probably tell what it is. And feel free to join in if I'm not doing it justice but it was a group of people who came together and had this organizing meeting called Plan Z. Then little by little there was a couple of those. Maybe even three of them and then that eventually segwayed into what is now known as IDA Palooza which

is a music festival. A queer music festival. We might of had IDA palooza before that but it might have been different formation and then the two kind of merged together and now it's a big queer music festival. [overlapping voices]

Spree: I'm sorry?

O'Brien: No, no, go right ahead.

Spree: I was gonna say IDA, the community is much more trans identified now.

O'Brien: That's great. Before we started recording, I mentioned attending the first Plan Z, I think in 2004. Oh no, it was early than that. I think

Spree: I think it was earlier than that.

O'Brien: I think maybe around 2002 then. That sounds right to me.

Spree: Ok. Yeah, I think there might have been two or three different plan z's

O'Brien: yeah

Spree: And then eventually it kinda merged together with what we had.. Because we had already had a thing called Idapalooza but it was very different. It was kinda more like, you know, like you would come together for a week or ten days and do crafts and then the combination of them all week was a circus theme and at the end of that when we went into a big gay disco in Nashville and did a thing that we called cirque du serial and it was kind of a faerie version of cirque du soleil and we took over the disco for that night and put that on and then after that it turned into the queer music festival.

O'Brien: Lovely, and you mentioned that these are radical faerie communities. Can you tell us what that is.

Spree: Right, well radical fairy is um, the way I used to explain it is it's a self identified movement of originally queer men that got together and decided that they didn't necessarily like the whole you know club scene or bar scene and wanted to get back to nature and get back to the woods. And it started with a gathering in Colorado in 1978, I think was the first one. Something around then. No maybe even before that because, I, let me think about that for a minute. Ok, well maybe we'll get to that when I get to the order of when I meet [mumbled]

O'Brien: Sure

Spree: How about that?

O'Brien: Yeah, I grew up in Oregon and I met a number of radical fairies that were affiliated with a land out there call wolf creek.

Spree: Wolf creek, yes, that's a beautiful, beautiful place. I've had the pleasure of staying there for an extended summer. I don't know how much you want to go in order but I was part of a fairy theatre company that me and Maxine, who you'd asked previously about before the recording started, started together with a couple of other fairies. Originally we were called the Emma Goldman Gypsy Players.

O'Brien: Oh wow

Spree: And that transferred into the Eggplant Faerie players. I don't know if you've heard of either of those. We performed at Wolf Creek and we got to stay there for a better part of the summer and it was just glorious. Have you been there?

O'Brien: I haven't, no.

Spree: Well, if you ever get the chance, it used to be quite special.

O'Brien: Yeah, I bet. Okay, um so tell me about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

Spree: Okay, I was born in Houston, Texas and I lived there until I was ten years old. And as I like to say, in my dramatic way, went from a bad to a worse situation and was moved to the ducts of southern Georgia. About as far south as you can go in Georgia and not be in Florida in a little town called Brunswick, Georgia. I lived there from the ripe old ages of ten to seventeen which as you can imagine for an "other" identified person, growing up in that kind of environment was a lot of red necks and kind of backward thinking people, it was not the best environment to be in. I finished high school early and I had enough credits to graduate so I went off to the University of Georgia and after I had been there for a semester I went back to high school to graduate with the rest of my class. And I immediately went to go to acting school in California. Now I was supposed to go back to Georgia to go back to the University of Georgia but once I made it to California I was like, "oh no, there is no way I'm going back to Georgia."

O'Brien: Tell us a little bit about Brunswick, Georgia. What was your life like?

Spree: Oh, it was, at the time, although I've heard it's changed quite a bit since the time I was there. But it was, the big thing that it was know for was naval base called Glynco. So Brunswick is in a county called Glynn County. Like I went to Glynn county junior, well first I went to Sidney Lanier Elementary school cuz we moved in the middle of 5th grade. So I went to Sidney Lanier Elementary school, and then after that I went to Glynn county junior high and After that I went to Glynn Academy cuz see it's all in Glynn county which is based off of Sidney Lanier who was a poet who wrote a poem called the marshes of Glynn so everything is name Glynn after that. So Glynn County junior high, Glynn Academy. So Glynco was the naval station. It was the big base there in Brunswick. Other than that, two chemical plants. One was called Hercules chemical and

the other was Georgia pacific paper company. And they just spewed out you know, industrial smog and waste into the atmosphere. I remember especially riding on the school bus and one of our school bus drivers used to say, "I just love that fresh clean pine smell" and we just thought that was so ridiculous because it didn't smell like fresh pine to any of us. It just smelled like industrial waste. But she say, "I love that fresh clean pine smell. [both laughing]

O'Brien: When do you think it first occurred to you that something was wrong with this industrial waste getting spewed out?

Spree: Oh, I would say probably when I was in junior high being bused from my home to pass by these chemical plants and smelling that smell and thinking, that doesn't smell right.

O'Brien: Do you think you had some kind of connection or interest in nature at that point or the environment or the land..

Spree: Oh sure, I'm sure I was thinking, this is not good for the environment and the Georgia Pacific plant was right on a river which was not good for that environment I'm sure with all the pollution they must have pumped out into that river. Which was an inlet off of the coast because Brunswick is right on the coast. So what it is, is Brunswick is actually on the mainland and then off of that are these like little islands. There's like St. Simon's Island, Jekyll Island, and they're kind of more touristy attraction sort of places.

O'Brien: Did you ever, how can I say it, did you ever have, as a child did you connect with nature very much? Did you spend any time by the river...

Spree: Oh yeah, I love the nature there. It's a very beautiful place.

O'Brien: Yeah

Spree: There are a lot of very old oak trees. You know growing all around and lots of oh squirrels, birds and of course if you went to the beach seagulls and turtles and all kinds of beautiful nature. Nature was just exquisite, but it was just sad that it was in this just backwoods mentality. Well, I don't want to give it such a bad name now. Because like I said, it's been, well you know, I graduated high school in 1975 so that gives you an idea of how long it's been since I've been there. [chuckling]

O'Brien: Yeah. And what were your parents like or the people that you lived with?

Spree: They were very religious and as a result did not, condone or appreciate the fact that I was, you know, little budding queer. And, um, I have an older gay brother. And he lives in San Francisco, but he.. Hello..

O'Brien: yes

Spree: Oh, you're still there, ok. I heard a click and got scared. Well, not scared but you know. Um, worried. But I have an older, gay, brother who lives in San Francisco and he was always kind of quiet and went off to his room to read a book and didn't have that much to do with the rest of the family. Where I was the youngest child out of five and I was kind of like, "look at me, look at me, look what I can do." and was always putting on little shows and dressing up. But they were so religious and the thing is there's no getting around the fact that in the Bible it says that it's a sin and it's a sin and there's no getting around that. And in fact, um, well if you wanna keep going on chronologically, I can.. Or do you have more questions about Brunswick and my family or do you want me to tell you...

O'Brien: Who in your family did you maintain any contact with?

Spree: My gay brother. [voices overlap] everybody else kinda dishoned me.

O'Brien: So you didn't speak with anyone else after that?

Spree: Well I did so then, like I said, I moved to California to go to acting school. I went to The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Pasadena, California. Since I knew I didn't want to go back to Georgia, I went to Ventura, California and got enrolled in a school there called Ventura College. And majored in theatre, of course. And was starting to come into my own then and realized, you know, there's something different about me. I mean, i realized it in junior high because they were always calling me a faggot, and you know saying mean things about me but I didn't really understand because number one, there was nobody there that I was really attracted to because most of the males were mean bruiser type people that I was like, "why would I be attracted to any of them?" So it was very confusing to me like they're saying I'm this one thing but I don't get it because I'm not attracted to any of them. So when I made it to California, I started to meet other queer people and come into my own and stuff like that. Two things happened. One, that I wanted to tell you about was I wrote. I spent two years writing in a journal, a letter to come out to my parents, and when I finally wrote it out it was eleven pages long handwritten. I mailed it to my parents and I mailed a copy to my brother. My brother sent me a picture of these people, I don't know if you've ever seen it but, like down in Mexico somewhere they dive off these cliffs into the water. It's very dramatic like there very high cliffs, and they dive off the cliffs. He sent me a picture of one of them literally in mid air diving off the cliff. [voice cut off]

O'Brien: Like that's what you were doing.

Spree: Right, and he said inside, Congratulations on taking the plunge. And then the other thing he said to me was that he felt more than anything else, that from reading that letter he felt there was a sense of love. That was the reason why I wanted to tell them this information about me. And the letter I got back from my parents was, we got your letter and they thought it was just the most bitter, hateful letter that they had ever gotten and just so that shows you how two people from the same family can have two such opposite opinions about something. It really meant something to me that here, he said, you know that it was a basis of love that I

wrote the letter and then they're saying it's this bitter, hateful letter. Eventually, I mean it was a couple years I think, but eventually they phoned me and then we never talked after that.
[overlapping mumbles]

O'Brien: When you think of them, do you feel angry or sad or what...

Spree: I feel angry mostly at my father because I think my father did a number on my mother. Because when my mother died, my father basically uninvited me to my mother's funeral. And so I feel really angry at him because I feel like in a way maybe he... because I know my mother said she thinks that it's her fault that...Oh that's another very interesting story I should tell you. So one summer I was visiting them on vacation. They waited until I was driving the car on the way to the airport for me to go back to Texas at that point, and said, "We talked to your brother and your brother told us that he is gay. And my father said, And I told him, Don't you use the word gay to me because all of the gay men that I've known have been terribly unhappy, depressed people" Because they're tortured Christians, is the types of men that he knew. The poor things that must have been, you know, that he knew of. And then my mother said, "Everything I've ever read says it's the mother's fault." and then my father kind of said obligatorily, "And everything I've ever read says it's the father's fault". And I at least had enough awareness at that point to say, "well that's interesting because everything I've ever read says that it's nobody's fault." And I had not come out to them yet at that point. But they were worried and wanted to know if maybe I needed to take male hormones and things like that and it was just incredulous to me. They wanted me to see a psychiatrist and thank goodness I refused because you can imagine. They said oh we know of this thing called the H persuasion. The H persuasion was to correct homosexuals to make them heterosexual.

O'Brien: What year did you come out to them?

Spree: That was probably... so I moved to California '78 and I came out to them in probably about '80. Cuz, like I said, I spent two years writing that letter in my journal.

O'Brien: And what was your life like in California? When you were in acting school and then in college?

Spree: Oh it was fabulous, it was so much better than in Georgia. Because, like I said, I started to meet others queers and realize, oh it's ok, I'm not the only one. I mean there were a couple that I suspected back in Brunswick but, you know, nobody would ever admit to it. To be out, gay people was like a wild awakening. So I started going to what they called rap groups at the gay community center in LA. Most of us were too young to go to bars. So what we would do was go to these rap groups because we couldn't get into the bars and then afterwards we would sit at a coffee shop and just gab and you know it was a way to meet people and have fun and stuff like that. And then um, ok it was 1983, now it's coming back to me. I remember it very clearly because in 1983..so from '78 to '83 I was living in Hollywood trying... so ok, after acting school I went to Ventura college for a couple years then I moved down to LA and I was trying to be a movie star. But you have to understand this was still the era of Rock Hudson. Rock Hudson

was still alive. There was no Ellen, there was no Neil Patrick Harris, there was no... there was Paul Lynde and Charles Reilly but they weren't going like, "Oh, I'm an open gay man" they were just these odd entities in show business. But you had to play this like game of cutting off this identity of yourself. To be able to even be able to get into the door to audition. I mean I got a few things under my belt. I did a couple of movies, I was in a Steven Spielberg movie which was a colossal flop. [overlapping voices]

O'Brien: What movie was that?

Spree: What?

O'Brien: What Steven Spielberg movie were you in?

Spree: It's called 1941. Most people haven't even heard of it. It was a, basically a movie about when in LA they thought that the Japanese were coming to bomb them, you know from Pearl Harbor. They thought the Japanese were coming up the coast and gonna bomb them. And it was just this farce about that whole ridiculousness of that. And it didn't do well in the box office. In fact after he made it, he spent more money making that movie within the confines of Hollywood than any other movie that didn't go on location. So let's not compare it to Gone With The Wind because they actually went to Atlanta but he made it all within the confines of Hollywood. What's considered Hollywood like we did it in North Hollywood and studio city and all these other places but he spent 43 million dollars making it and then it was just such a colossal flop that they said, "He'll never work again." "He's ruined his career" and after that he made E.T. and once he made E.T. they didn't even mention that he made 1941 after he made E.T. so you know that's how Hollywood works. Anyway getting onto happier more, I didn't get to finish saying that I was on four episodes of General Hospital. That was my other big claim to fame. In 1983 I went to my first radical faerie gathering. Now my brother, my older gay brother had been schooling me in gay American history by giving me this book by Jonathan Katz The Gay American History, I don't know if you're familiar with..

O'Brien: Yeah, no, I know it

Spree: Okay, and he would tell me about Harry Hay and John Burnside and how they were these important gay figures. All this stuff about how we all owe the gay movement to them and all this kind of stuff and here I am going to my first radical faerie... Oh so, to support my acting career, I worked as a telephone operator. And I was a telephone operator for the telephone company in Hollywood and one day in the bathroom I found this flyer and it was a flier for this radical faerie gathering. I saw who it was addressed to and I went and gave it to him while he was still working so I couldn't really to ask him about it, just gave it to him. Later, when he was on break, he saw me and he said, "Oh do you want one of these? They sent me two." and I was like, yeah, what is this all about? Because it was the kind of thing that where I looked at it and I thought it had pictures of men in drag and pictures of men with their faces painted and it was the kind of thing that I knew about all my life but somehow I didn't know anything about it. I was like what's it all about? But somehow it spoke to me. And they call it a call. It's called The

Call, the paper that they put out. So he gave me one of these calls and miraculously we both got time off from the telephone company at the same time which is just unheard of. So it was all kind of meant to be. But we went to our first faerie gathering. It wasn't his first, but he took me and it was my first radical faerie gathering outside of San Diego in the desert in a place called Madre Grande and at the first faerie gathering that I went to... well when I first got there, I got out of the car, I was walking up to this building where they were having this big lunch and there was this guy sitting there and he said to me, "Well, I'm glad you're here. We've been waitin for ya' and I just looked over my shoulder like, who is he talking to? But he was talking to me. So I go in there and there's all this food laid out on the table and they tell me that it's all vegetarian which is another thing that I've been since 1978 since I moved out from living with my mother because my mother did not think that you could live on the planet and not eat meat. So when I moved out with my mother, I became vegetarian and then all this food they told me was vegetarian and I was like, I've died and gone to heaven. It was just so beautiful and at this first gathering that I went to... so the first one was in '78 in Colorado and then there was other ones in Arizona and lo and behold they just put out a call and 200 men showed up to the first one in Colorado. I think there was probably 75-100 in the one that I went to. Anyway Harry Hay and John Burnside were there and I got to meet them and become friends with them and then I even said to Harry, "So what happens you know back in LA after this?" and he goes, "Oh, well we always try to have circles and we have circles for a little while and then nothing really happens it just kind of peters out." and I was like, "But Harry I've never been a part of it before." So we started having circles when we got back to LA and within two years, actually within a year of that first gathering, we became known as Star Circle in Los Angeles. They named us Star Circle, and we put on our own gathering at that same place, Madre Grande, a year later. Well it was a little more than a year. So the first one I went to was in June or July of '83, and then we put on on over Labor Day of '84.

O'Brien: And what would people do at these gatherings?

Spree: Oh, gosh. Like, uh, dance around a fire, like banshees, kind of, you know? Oh, and dress up in drag was the main thing that I just like, at the very first one that I went to, and I still have it, this little red tutu that I had, which was my piece of drag that I wore all around, watching these other people dress up in like, more elaborate outfits, well I would dress up with them, but I didn't realize they were like, not really little cliques, but little groups of, you know, people. It was my first gathering, so I didn't know I could just walk up to them and say oh, I want to play with you, you know? It's just a lot of play and fun and dressing up and getting to be kids, you know, do all the fun stuff you always wanted to do, you know, and crafty stuff. And I remember one morning I was eating my breakfast, and this gorgeous, gorgeous fairy came up and sat down next to me and started painting his nails. And I was just like, oh my god, this is so dreamy. And I kept thinking like, why is this person sitting there talking to me, and it was the first time that I ever met another gay man. Like, I'd been going to those rap groups and stuff, but it was the first time I ever met another gay man who I realized had the same consciousness as me about animals and the planet and the earth and all that kind of stuff, and I was just like wow, I really have sort of come home in a way. And then I realized it was much more important for me to follow my heart and be true to my inner faerie than it was to play this silly Hollywood game,

you know, of trying to be a movie star. And so I lasted another two years in Hollywood in '85, and then '85, I packed up my life and took off and went traveling around Europe for four months. And I traveled around Europe for four months and then came back and ended up on the east coast, because you know, you fly in and out of New York. Well at least back then you did. And I landed in New York and called my brother in San Francisco and called a friend of mine that I was supposed to go live with in San Francisco and I just thought, what am I doing? You know, here I am in New York, and I always wanted to try living in New York, and I was like, well, now's the time, if you're going to do it. Now's the time to do it. And I kind of hurt my friend's feelings because they thought I was coming to San Francisco and going to live with them, and instead I ended up staying in New York, and I lived in New York from '85 to '90, and that's when we get into the ACT UP years, if you're ready to get into that. I mean, I've tried—

O'Brien: Let me ask you—

Spree: Pardon?

O'Brien: A couple more questions about the Radical Faeries in California before we get into that.

Spree: Sure, sure. And I also went to—

O'Brien: Yeah?

Spree: I'm sorry, you go.

O'Brien: Go ahead.

Spree: No, I was going to say I also went to gatherings at Wolf Creek. I went with Harry and John on a road trip, and we went to—well, we actually went to, I'm sorry, we went to a gathering at Brighton Bush, Oregon, but we stopped at Wolf Creek on the way, and that was my first encounter with Wolf Creek.

O'Brien: So Harry Hay, you know, I mean, you know of course is quite a famous figure in gay organizing in the 1950s.

Spree: Oh, yes, yes, I didn't say that in like, in the 1940s, he started an organization called the Mattachine Society, and the Mattachine Society was one of the first gay groups in—you know, openly gay groups—in this country, and the Mattachine Society was Harry kind of helped start organize that in L.A., and then he met John Burnside and he and John Burnside were a couple. And so once I moved back to L.A., we started having these circles. Every holiday we would spend at Harry and John's house because it was kind of like our home away from home. They were like, you know, our Faerie home, so we would spend all the holidays at their house, and they were just so warm and inviting, and I actually became very dear friends with both of them and, um, you know, they were just such sweet, sweet men, and beautiful people and full of

amazing stories. I just can't tell you the nights that I stayed up until one or two in the morning listening to Harry go on about, you know, all this history and stuff and, you know, after hearing my brother all these years telling me about what an important figure Harry Hay was, and then I actually dropped them on that road trip that I was just telling you about, to spend the night in San Francisco at my brother's house, just to sort of, you know, not rub it in his face but to say ha-ha, look what I did, I made friends with Harry Hay and John Burnside, and, [Laughter], he was kind of blown away by, like, you know, having you know kind of schooled me in the gay American history with them, and then—oh, and then, well, I know you wanted—do you have more questions you want to specifically ask me?

O'Brien: Yeah, yeah, I do. So I think—I'm only 38, so I was a child—

Spree: Oh, okay.

O'Brien: in the early 80s.

Spree: You were just a baby.

O'Brien: But I think—yeah, yeah, that's right. But I think of the early 80s as a time that a lot of urban gay male communities were very macho, and that trans feminine people like drag queens weren't necessarily given a lot of respect.

Spree: Oh.

O'Brien: But the Radical Faerie community from what I've heard has a lot of femininity, of uh drag queens and uh, uh, exploring and celebrating gay male femininity, even at that time.

Spree: Absolutely. Absolutely.

O'Brien: Can you tell me some about how gender was different in the Radical Faeries than it was in other gay male communities?

Spree: Well let me give you an example. Like, so when I grew up, I was like, from before I really like took off and hit puberty, I was a fat little kid. And um, then suddenly one summer I just shot up and I wasn't so fat anymore, but I still had breasts. Like, you know, and I was made fun of a lot, of course, I like hated gym class, hated going in the locker room because I was going to be made fun of, so I would go to the guidance councilor's office and just start crying and going, I can't deal with this, I can't deal with this, and she'd take pity on me and let me be like a teacher's aide or work in the library or something to get out of having to go to P.E., physical education, that's what they used to call it, and um, so all my life I was made fun of, and because I had you know these breasts, and then when I met the Radical Faeries they were like, oh no, we like your breasts, and it just made me feel like, oh my God, these people actually like me the way I am, you know, they're not making fun of me, they're not teasing me, you know, they're embracing who I am. And then that like gave me a chance to embrace my body and you know,

take it on, and love it for what it was and not be ashamed of the fact that oh, I have breasts, you know, and um, uh, so that was yes, very much so. The Radical Faeries were very embracing and um of drag and getting in touch with your inner femininity and like I said, this guy was painting his nails and you know, that's '83. It wasn't like the hip thing to do back then, to paint your nails. It was kind of like real radical, um, so uh, yes, that is exactly what you said is that in my recollection of it all.

O'Brien: Were there particular words or identities or labels that people would use to talk about femininity or trans femininity in the Radical Faeries?

Spree: Yeah, like sissy and um, you know, we called each other "girl," and um, I mean, I think that was—in drag queen parlance, too, they would call each other "girl" and stuff, but I don't know about sissy. Like, you know, you big sissy, or you know, um, and of course we took on, you know, all of the slurs that they threw against us and just put them, you know, what is that, like reclaim them, like you know, fag and queer and all that kind of stuff. We just, you know, like we'd say "you big homo," and um, a lot of people had trouble with the word homosexual because that was still very clinical and considered, but I remember people saying "you big homo," and "Mary" was another one. We called each other Mary and girl and um sissy and um called each other sisters, like we said we were each other's sisters and girlfriends and stuff like that.

O'Brien: Wow. So you moved to New York in 1995 you said?

Spree: '85, exactly. I moved to New York and I tried to do the acting thing there. And to support my acting career, as I had done in California, I did telephone jobs, including being the switchboard operator at 30 Rockefeller Center for NBC. I was a switchboard operator at NBC for a number of years, and I worked nights. I would work the night shift, you know, midnight through 8:00am and then during the day I could do my Faerie stuff and then I heard about this group, you know, that was already formed, but it was you know getting off the ground, and it was called ACT UP. And um being the Faerie spirit that I am, you know, I started going to meetings and then they would you know talk about demonstrations and stuff like that and they would say like okay now we want people to wear you know bright colors and um big signs and bandanas. Anything you can do to draw attention to the movement. So when I would come in my bright drag and stuff like that, they totally embraced me, and made me feel so good about the fact that I was being out there enough that I would come in drag and draw attention to myself and you know, they didn't do that thing that he macho gay men that you were talking about did and frowned down on me and say you're ruining the parade or you're ruining our demonstration or whatever. They were like, yeah, come on, get to the front of the line, and you know, they just totally embraced me and made me feel really good about myself again. So I kind of became—

O'Brien: So ACT UP was a lot more embracing of gender diversity and gay femininity than other gay spaces at the time?

Spree: Yes. And I think that was because we needed to do anything we could to call attention to this movement because you know people were dying and so what if I was a man in a dress, you know? Then people would look at me and they would maybe read the sign, and maybe you know stop and talk to me and find out some information about what was going on, and the protests that we were at or whatever. And so I kind of became a cause celebre in ACT UP. Oh, and then I went from working at NBC to working at the National AIDS hotline.

O'Brien: Oh wow.

Spree: And I did a little ski, a routine. I wrote down some of the funny calls of people calling up, asking you know, again, I worked on the midnight shift, so I was there from midnight to 8:00am and we would get lots of calls, ridiculous calls of people asking how they can get AIDS, and you know, just really ridiculous, whacked out questions. I can give you a couple of examples of them. But anyway, I started doing it as a routine, and I would do it at the ACT UP anniversary parties, and people loved it. They just thought it was the best thing, that it was so hilarious, so I kind of became a celebrity in ACT UP for doing that at the anniversary parties.

O'Brien: So it incorporated humor and performance and—

Spree: Totally.

O'Brien: Telephone work, all these different parts of your life.

Spree: Totally. Totally. Acting, humor, and a lot of people, well now I'm going off on a little bit of a tangent, but I'll try—well, I imagine you have more questions about ACT UP before I go on to—

O'Brien: I have many, many questions. Before asking a lot about ACT UP, can I ask, uh, about your telephone operating work in Los Angeles and New York?

Spree: Of course! I love to talk about that.

O'Brien: Yeah, were you in, uh, Communications Workers of America? CWA, [inaudible] union?

Spree: I was. I was the picket captain of CWA 1222, and we did—we were part of what was considered the last great strike in America, because it was the last time, like I worked through the break-up of AT&T, and it was the last time that all the contracts across the country were going up at the same time, and we went out on strike, and I was the picket captain and um I got to be interviewed on the news. And it had my name in one color print, and underneath, in quotes, it said "operator," and I just loved that when I saw it on the news, it was so fun.

O'Brien: What year was that strike?

Spree: That strike was—okay, so I had quit working there in '85, I'm going to say that strike was in '83 or '84.

O'Brien: Wow.

Spree: Probably '83, because they busted it up. I worked through the break-up, the divestiture as it was properly called, not the break-up, but the divestiture, and I ended up at the very end working for AT&T Communications. But when it was still—it was originally Pacific Telesys, which was a part of Pacific Bell, which you know, it was so weird the way they had all these Baby Bells and you know, all across the country like, each, just about every state had its own you know Bell operating company. Like Pacific Bell was the operating company, and it was more than just California, but it was like Nevada and other states surrounding California. But yes, I was in CWA Workers of America, I sure was.

O'Brien: I think of telephone operators as being a traditionally women's profession.

Spree: Yes, again. Again, when I started. When I started there, um, they likened it to flight attendants. And that like, 99.999999% of the men that worked there were gay. But by the time I finished working there, there were straight men that were doing the job as well. But yes, it was, interestingly enough though, if you do your history, the original, original operators were young boys. But they were too rude to the customers, so they—but they could run, and they had to do a lot of running back and forth from the position to write messages and stuff like that. And so eventually it segued over to women, because women had a more pleasing you know tone and were more you know, accessible to businessmen let's say. And I used to say, give me a drunk at a payphone any day over an irate businessman, because I can deal with a drunk at a payphone, but an irate businessman? Ugh, they think you are like, you know, scum on earth, and you know, just treat you like you're beneath them. And I didn't like that. so again, I would usually work, you know, the night shift or the afternoon/evening shift so it was not—I wasn't dealing with irate businessmen, I was dealing with, you know, less, because it was like you know not business hours that I worked, so. But yeah, no it was great. It was great fun, and it's great to know that there's somebody that knows what an operator is, because not so many of these kids growing up, they lived their whole life not ever knowing what an operator is.

O'Brien: Yeah. I have [inaudible]—

Spree: [inaudible] today—I'm sorry?

O'Brien: I have great love for CWA and its history.

Spree: Oh, how do you have that connection?

O'Brien: Oh, just through the labor movement, knowing a lot of CWA members and staff around the country, yeah.

Spree: Oh, okay. I was also a member of the Telephone Pioneers. I don't know if you know about them, but they're not—it's not, I think it's an offshoot of the union, but it's not in the union necessarily, it's just the Telephone Pioneers of America are you know like people that like you know uh old telephones and you know, the whole history of it and all that kind of stuff. I actually started out, funny enough that we're on this uh topic as a directory assistance operator, and I did that for two years, and then I got to be the O operator, and that was just like oh my God, because I, in my skit that I used to do, I was like, because the O operator has all the power, because you can cuss at directory assistance and hang up and then get a dial tone, but with the operator, you don't get a dial tone until we say you get a dial tone, [Laughter].

O'Brien: Wow.

Spree: So if you cussed us out and then hung up, picked up the phone again, I'd be ki yes, I'm still here. You were saying?

O'Brien: Yeah. Among the CWA people I know are some friends who organized with the campus workers in the Tennessee Public Colleges right now.

Spree: Oh really?

O'Brien: And they're CWA members. The secretaries and janitorial staff, maintenance workers, in Tennessee colleges are members of a non-majority union. You know, it's tough having a public sector union in Tennessee—

Spree: Sure.

O'Brien: And they're CWA members.

Spree: Oh really, I didn't know that. That's amazing.

O'Brien: Yeah, a couple of very good friends are in Nashville and Knoxville and um, doing uh union organizing with the CWA.

Spree: But do you know, is there such a job as an operator these days?

O'Brien: No, certainly telephone workers, um, but they're not, it's nothing like the switchboard operators before. Like here in New York, Verizon, well, CWA has had a couple of strikes over the last few years. Just a short strike with AT&T and then a Verizon workers strike a couple of years ago. And we tried to support them and help them out whenever we can.

Spree: Uh-huh. Wow, that's great. Go! Go Michelle.

O'Brien: So um, ACT UP. So that's really lovely about them being welcoming of your gender.

Spree: Oh, and I don't think I would have you know even lasted or stuck around if they had been you know, looking down their nose at me like the way, you know, a lot of—even like you know the gay pride movement. Like I said, there were still people that would be like, you need to go to the back of the parade because you're holding us back, or you need to get your own parade, you know? Because with being in drag. Whereas ACT UP was like, get to the front, go up to the front, you know? And it was just so refreshing and so embracing and again you know made me feel so good about myself. And right now I'm even looking at a picture of a demonstration that we had around city hall, where the joke was that we were going to levitate city hall. And people had made these posters, I don't know if you remember this or not—well probably you don't because you're 38, you said?

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: Okay, well, there was a time when Ed Koch was the mayor of New York, and he came out as heterosexual, like on the cover of New York Newsday, there's a picture of him, and then it says, "I'm Heterosexual." And so they got these covers, and they put them on posterboard so it has Koch saying "I'm heterosexual," and then they would put "...," and "I'm," and then it would be like "Marlena Dietrich," "Judy Garland," you know, all these different people, and I have flowers in my hair and this bright, silly top on, and somebody handed me one that said, "and I'm Carey Grant." And the photographers just went wild, and I actually ended up on page three of the next edition of New York Newsday, holding that poster. And I have a framed picture of it in my room that is one of my fondest memories of ACT UP.

O'Brien: Do you remember other drag queens or trans feminine people in ACT UP at the time?

Spree: Oh, sure. Not, um, you know, not to the degree that I could just tell you oh yeah, I was friends with this person or that person, but surely the Faeries, the more Faeries started getting involved, the more then that they started you know dressing up with me, and then we started having our own, you know, little—not affinity group because we were never an affinity group, but I was in different affinity groups. I was in a couple of affinity groups, and um, ACT UP—in fact, one, uh, the original one was called MHA. Which when we first made the appointment was for Metropolitan Health Association. It stood for Metropolitan Health Association, and um, this guy, uh, oh God now his name is going to fly out of my brain right when I was going to tell you a story, but he was the secretary of health under Koch, and—Joseph, oh what's his name? Joseph—I'll find out for you. But he basically with the stroke of a pen uh cut in half the number of people suspected in the New York City area to be infected with HIV. So as a purely budgetary measure, he just cut the number in half and um, I want to say Joseph Smith, but I don't think that's right. I will find out—

O'Brien: There was a Dr. Steven Joseph who was—

Spree: That was it. That was it. Steven Joseph. And so we made an appointment with him under the Metropolitan Health Association, and uh, refused to leave. We just did a sit-in in his office, and then we made his life a living hell. I mean, we found out, so when we were in there,

somebody lifted a copy of his schedule, and we went like—so he was having lunch in Chinatown with someone, we would just show up at the restaurant and surround his table and start saying “shame, shame, shame,” because I mean, what a ridiculous thing to do. Like, if anything he should have doubled the number instead of cutting it in half, you know, to get more money for HIV and AIDS, but he just cut it in half. Yeah, it was Stephen Joseph, you’re exactly right. And so we literally drove that man to the breaking point almost by going to his townhouse, his home in the upper 90s and going outside and having demos in the middle of the night and just, you know, raising all kinds of ruckus with him. And um, there’s a very funny picture of me in a polkadot sundress and sunglasses, and I’m sitting at the head of his table and he got mad that I took his seat, because they all got up and left, and I sat down in his chair. Well he pulled up a chair right beside me, and there’s a picture of me and him side by side taken together by this photographer who, I won’t remember his name, but he was friends with Susan Sarandon, so he was quite a well-known photographer and it’s a beautiful picture of me and Steven Joseph, sitting at the head of his table, [Laughter].

O'Brien: Wow. What were the other affinity groups you were in?

Spree: Oh, so the other affinity group I was in was, so Metropolitan Health Association kind of segued into an affinity group with its other affinity group, and we were the first group of—so everybody that got arrested, mostly the cases would be dismissed because they would throw out the charges, throw out the charges, throw out the charges until then it got down to like two people, and they would say really your honor, do you think that two people were able to shut down the traffic on Wall Street for a significant amount of time? And then they would just throw out those charges too. So almost every case was dismissed, except there was this one case where, with Steven Joseph, we didn’t want to have it dismissed, and they took us to trial for criminal trespass in the third degree for sitting in his office. And this was a different time, a subsequent time to that first time I was telling you about, but we went to trial, and we had a three week trial, and as a result of that we got nicknamed Surrender Dorothy, so our ACT UP affinity group was called Surrender Dorothy. And we literally—so I got to be a supervisor at the National AIDS Hotline, and I immediately hired all of my friends from ACT UP to work the midnight shift with me. So we could really tell them, you know, like what was going on, you know, like the drugs in the pipeline. Because they basically, it was a government funded hotline, and they basically wanted you to just tout AZT, because that was the only FDA approved drug at the time, and they just wanted you to tell them about AZT but of course we’d tell them about you know black market drugs and all this kind of stuff because we were, you know, going to ACT UP meetings and then coming there afterwards and working the phones and so we would work all night, get off in the morning, go downtown, go outside the courtroom, and I literally changed and wore a different drag outfit every single day of the trial. And then when we found out we were going to have this thing called a sentencing hearing where she basically said we have a three week trial, and at the end of the trial this—Laura Drager was the judge’s name—and she said well, what y’all have done is break the law, and you’ve shown me—like we showed her a video of us, you know, breaking into his office and she said you’ve proved to me that you did it, so I have to find you guilty, and because of that you need to be punished. And so what I’m doing is I’m sentencing you to 10 days with the

Department of Sanitation. Well, if you know anything about people with HIV and AIDS is collecting garbage is not a healthy thing for them to be doing. So we got three weeks to go away and come back and make these sentencing statements. And we're talking people who were in treatment and [inaudible] and these groups that were some of the most eloquently spoken people in ACT UP that knew more about how the virus worked than any doctor in the CDC, I can imagine, and we came back and I actually got a—Joan Crawford from *Dynasty* was on at the time, and I did an outfit similar to her when she went into the courtroom the first time. I had a big hat on, and I went in and something in, because there was so many of us, there was 13 of us, so we sat in the jury box, and the bailiff came over to me and said, I'll have to ask you to take off your hat. And I said, well let me just ask you this, if I was a woman would you ask me to take off my hat? And he said yes, I actually—he had to think about it for a minute, but he goes yes, actually I would. And I said well, alright, than I shall take off my hat. And I did, but I was like, kind of pushing the point, like you're not getting away with this if, you know, a woman could sit here in the jury box with a hat on, and so um but the speeches that the people gave were so eloquent, and I mean, people were in tears over these speeches because they were so beautiful and eloquent, that they were basically trying to get through to her, because I thought there's no way, you know, there's no way we're going to be getting through to this woman. Like, she was a young, liberal, you know, Koch-appointed judge, so we thought, you know, we might stand a chance. But when she sentenced us to the Department of Sanitation I thought, that's it, you know? But she changed her mind. After hearing the speeches she said okay, you've convinced me. Because people were telling her how dangerous it would be for people with compromised immune systems to be collecting garbage. And so she said you've convinced me, I'm going to change it, and I'm going to sentence you to 10 days With God's Love We Deliver. So we won that victory, but essentially what happened was it switched from the Koch administration to the Dinkins administration, and the papers got pushed to the bottom of the pile. So like, nothing really ever happened with it. It's just like Dinkins—it didn't behoove Dinkins to go ahead and prosecute us with something that happened under the previous administration. So we never did the 10 days With God's Love We Deliver, but we at least one the judge over in the end.

O'Brien: What were people's backgrounds before coming into ACT UP. You told us about your background but do you have a sense of the kind of lives that people came from?

Spree: Oh, yes, like they were like these brilliant minds, like uh, Jim Igo, Mark Harrington, uh, some of the mucky-mucks of ACT UP that like, I said were in the treatment and data support group, which was like, you know, they were the ones that knew all about the drugs that were out there, and what drugs worked and what drugs didn't and like, you know, basically like how AZT was killing people and stuff like that, and oh, I'm getting ahead of myself with this play that I keep wanting to tell you about, but I'm trying to go chronologically so—um, but no, they were like—they had very scientific minds, like you know, and I don't know exactly what their backgrounds are but I imagine they came from Ivy League schools and were, you know, they were li, very, very brilliant people.

O'Brien: So highly educated, you think?

Spree: Yes, yes. Yeah.

O'Brien: And uh, how—do you remember anything about how money worked in ACT UP? Like, uh, whether there were costs for these posters and demonstration, like were there—

Spree: Oh, no, what they did was, it was so genius because like, I mean we're talking like you know, hundreds and hundreds of people at the meeting and there was people that were graphic design artists, and there was artists, like you know, Keith Herring would do a poster, or and then the graphic design artists would get it and just like, print off whole batches of them. So the money—I don't ever remember like, I'm sure they did talk about money and how it was, um, uh, handled and stuff like that but I don't remember them ever saying we need, you know, money for pens or posterboard or anything like that because these graphic design artists that were in ACT UP would supply them. So that's why some of those, I don't know if you've ever seen some of those—um, our exhibits, where it's the ACT UP art.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: You know, from the posters that were like, you know, exquisite pieces of work. Because artists would design them and then the graphic artists would print them up, and you know, they'd do it all, you know, under the table or like, you know, I guess like I did like at night, you know, working at night when the office was closed and printing them up and stuff like that.

O'Brien: Yeah. And um—

Spree: I mean, I'm sure there was costs that had to be, because they would like also charter busses to take us down to like March on Washingtons like, for, you know, abortion rights and stuff like that. um, so they chartered buses and I don't know where that money came from. So yeah, I don't really remember.

O'Brien: Do you remember—

Spree: But I'm sure they talked about it in the meetings, I just probably would not be interested.

O'Brien: Yeah. You remember uh disagreements at the meetings? Like what people disagreed on?

Spree: Oh yeah.

O'Brien: What sorts of stuff?

Spree: Oh just about like, you know, how to move forward and uh, and then uh, getting ahead of myself again, uh, with ACT UP San Francisco and how they splintered off into two groups.

There was ACT UP Golden Gate and ACT UP San Francisco like old school and new school, and I all had to do with basically a group of people who didn't even believe that HIV caused AIDS, so there was arguments about those kind of things.

O'Brien: Right, the AIDS denialists. Yeah. Uh, and the New York, during the years that you were active, do you remember what some of the big debates were abased on?

Spree: Oh, more like about um you know how did we want to proceed with, you know, uh, a certain demo or a certain, like you know, some people thinking we needed to do, you know, one thing, other people thinking we needed to highlight, like what we needed to highlight as a goal of the—like what the goal was. You know. Say some people thought it should be about treatment and data, and other people thought it should be more about you know hands-on caring for people that had HIV and AIDS. And you know, funny enough, it was very staggering to me how in meetings or just within the group itself, people were willing to put their butts down in the middle of Wall Street or whatever street you know, 6th Avenue, 7th Avenue, whatever street in New York City, sit their butts down in the pavement, get hauled off by the police, go to jail, you know, get processed, the whole nine yards, but then when it came to asking for people to like you know sit with people or help you know a person that had gotten sick, it was much harder for people to put their hands in the air and go yes, I'll do it. And I found that so interesting that you know, there were people—don't get me wrong, there were people that that was their gig, that they would, you know, go and sit with people and help them and you know get them their pills and whatever they needed and stuff like that. but it was much harder for people to put their hands in the air to do it on a personal one on one basis than it was for this, you know, giant that we've got to slay sort of thing.

O'Brien: Why do you think that was?

Spree: I think it's just—because it made it so personal.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: Of course every week it was like, we would hear a litany of like, people who were—tested positive or sick or dying and all that kind of stuff. And you just kind of get numb to it, you know? Like, I myself personally got numb to it, and I remember this dear friend of mine who used to live at Short Mountain and was one of the first people I knew who had KS lesions all over her body. And um, her name was Pearly. And she died. And I was in San Francisco at the time, and I walked into the kitchen of the house we were staying at, and somebody said Pearly just died. And I said oh really? And they might as well had told me she had gone back to Australia. She was from Australia. And they might as well have told me she went back to Australia, because you know, it was just another piece of information, and I remember my friend asking me like, what do you think that was about, your reaction? You know? Like, you might want to check yourself on that one. and so I did, and I thought yeah, you know, I've just become numb because it was at the point like, if I heard of one more person testing positive or heard of one more person dying, I was just going to break, you know? I wasn't going to be able

to handle it anymore. And so I never really processed the thing with my friend Pearly until one day I was with the same friend and we were visiting his parents in Sarasota, Florida, and the Names Project had brought pieces of the quilt there. And we came around a corner and there was a panel for Pearly and I just lost it. I broke down in tears. I was just sobbing and sobbing and sobbing and you know, people were running up to me, giving me Kleenex and like oh, are you okay, are you okay? And it was just like, it was like the dam broke or something, you know, it was just built up inside of me, and same thing with my mother dying and me telling you my father wouldn't invite me to the funeral? Or disinvited me to the funeral? For two years I was in therapy at the Gay Center in New York and I didn't cry for two years. And I cry at movies, I cry at dog food commercials, literally. Um, I'm a crier. So I didn't cry for two years, and there was a point in the gay pride parade where they ask you to have a moment of silence. And the Faeries, typical as it is with the Faeries, made a circle, held hands, and all sat down in the middle of the street, and the dam just broke and I just started bawling and bawling and bawling. So I think it's like, we handle grief when we're able to. But I think that to get back to the question you asked, it's just too personal. You know, when it's like, can you come help somebody, you know, sit with them, help them take their pills, it's like, you know, putting a face to this ogre that we're trying to slay, and it just makes it too personal. That's what I think.

O'Brien: Yeah. And you said there was a point at which Radical Faeries started getting more involved with ACT UP?

Spree: Yeah, in fact, in the picture I was telling you about where it says "And I'm Carry Grant," I'm just kind of surrounded by Faeries because that city hall one in particular a lot of Faeries came to. Now some of them looked like they stepped out of the Village Peo, but they're still there. [Laughter]. There's one guy with a really big mustache, like the motorcycle guy.

O'Brien: Yeah, how did that shift, then, your experience of ACT UP, or the environment of ACT UP, to have more Faeries?

Spree: It made me happy, the two worlds kind of collided and that, you know, now my friends were getting involved in, you know, political activism.

O'Brien: Yeah. Uh, and what—

Spree: Because we always had been with Harry and them, like they started this group in LA called the Purple People, and we would dress up in purple and go to demos and we would be part of the Rainbow Coalition for um—

O'Brien: Jesse Jackson?

Spree: Yes, Jesse Jackson, thank you. I think my mind is working so fast that I'm losing names. But um, anyway, um, we would dress up in purple, and we were called the Purple People. So we were still doing activism, but it just wasn't on a really big scale. And like, again the Faeries

would come and do a demo and stuff like that, but not a whole bunch of them would go to meetings. I mean, there was a handful of us that would. But—

O'Brien: Right. So it's more centered around the actions than the planning.

Spree: Yeah. Yeah.

O'Brien: Um, and what I asked earlier about the kind of language within the Faeries in California. Um, was there a way that you thought about your gender during this time in ACT UP? Uh, were there words that you—that the Faeries would use or other people would use to kind of identify your relationship to gender?

Spree: Again, you know, like girl, Mary, um, yeah, Oh, Mary was a big one.

O'Brien: Like would somebody say like, is she a Mary? Or would someone say like—

Spree: Oh no, it would be like, Oh Mary, get over it, you know? Like Oh, Mary.

O'Brien: Yeah, yeah. Right.

Spree: Like they would just Oh, Mary you, or—and in fact, living in LA, when I left LA, by the time I left I had a household full of Faeries living in my one-bedroom apartment, and we had a whole long list of Marys, like you know, like you would say Mary Hellen or Mary Hellen Girl, and then it got to be like, you know, you would just string it all together and it would be like Mary Hellen Elaine Louise, Mary Hellen Elaine Louise Girl, and um, you know, just—you just add on to whatever name you were calling them at the time. So I remember Mary Hellen Elaine Louise Girl being a big one.

O'Brien: Yeah. Um, tell me about some of the other actions with ACT UP that stand out for you.

Spree: Okay, um, let's see. Well, I told you about City Hall and the Steven Joseph fiascoes where we like, sent him to the breaking point. Um, I remember sitting down, you know, like the one that I kind of told you about sitting our butts down in the middle of Wall Street, that was the second anniversary. I missed the first one. So that kind of shows you like, when my involvement started. Like after the first anniversary I wasn't there at the first anniversary but I was there for the second anniversary, and I remember, I was in jail at that time with Marsha P. Johnson. Do you know Marsha P. Johnson?

O'Brien: Wow! Yeah.

Spree: Yeah. And I remember—

O'Brien: Tell me about that?

Spree: Oh, it was so fun and so funny because I remember—so they put us all in cells and we were in separate cells and they, you know, sit there and they ask you your name, your race, your, you know, all this kind of stuff. So they're there, and we can hear them asking everybody the same questions. And so they get to Marsha P. Johnson, and they're like, you know, asking her all the questions and then they're like, hair color and she's like, blonde, and the whole cell block just busted up laughing. Like, and even the cop thought that was hilarious because, you know, Marsha P. Johnson was like, I'm blonde. [Laughter].

O'Brien: And would she—had she participated in the ACT UP action?

Spree: Yeah, she would come around. She would do like, she would do the what I would call the high-end ones, like the anniversary ones and the ones that were going to get a lot of publicity and stuff.

O'Brien: What was she like?

Spree: She was a sweetie, she was a real sweetie. She, you know, she was a diva for sure. Um, we also got to know her—so, I know you want to keep talking about ACT UP and the people in ACT UP, but I knew her later when we were performing together when she was in a group called Hot Peaches, and I was in the Eggplant Faerie Players. We performed together over in England. So I got to know her a little bit more. But she was—

O'Brien: What years was that?

Spree: Oh Gosh, that's jumping ahead. So I don't know if you're ready to move out of New York yet, but um—well, I can—I was still in New York and still involved in New York and still going top demos and stuff like that, and I'm trying to think of other demos that stand out. I'm wracking my brain like, well, some of the abortion marches in D.C., and the March on Washington of course. The abortion rights marches, those were really—we came up with some brilliant chants for those. Um—

O'Brien: Do you remember one?

Spree: Um, Act up, fight back, uh, no I was just going to say it and now, uh, something is pro-choice. Act up, fight back, gay and lesbians are pro-choice. Act up, fight back, gay and lesbians are pro-choice. That was a good one.

O'Brien: Right. Do you remember a time that you got really mad at other people in ACT UP?

Spree: Mmm, good question. Um, I'm sure there were times when I was you know differing and had differing points of view when it came to the thing that I was just telling you about with the hands-on caring for people versus the demos and things like that because I thought, you know, we've got to take care of each other. Like this is all well and good that we're out there screaming and carrying on in the streets, but if we can't take care of each other, what's the

point, you know? So I think I got mad about that. Um, but I don't remember—I think maybe I got up at a meeting or two and went off a little bit about this or that or the other thing but I couldn't tell you what.

O'Brien: Yeah. And—

Spree: But it usually had to do with something like that.

O'Brien: Yeah. And do you remember the relationship to other movements? Like, would—you talked about going to the pro choice marches.

Spree: Uh-huh.

O'Brien: Um, were there other kind of struggles happening at the same time that [inaudible]—

Spree: Well yeah, Queer Nation was kind of creeping in there around the same time. I remember—

O'Brien: Yeah. So do you remember anything about that?

Spree: Do I know anything about it?

O'Brien: Do you remember anything about that?

Spree: Just that they were having meetings and I remember at some point there was quite a crossover with—and I think this was after I had left, there was quite a bit of crossover with Queer Nation and ACT UP. with the meetings. And I think maybe even Queer Nation maybe taking over.

O'Brien: Woah.

Spree: But don't quote me on that necessarily. Well, I know you're quoting me on everything, so. Um, but yeah, like, it sort of segued into Queer Nation or something.

O'Brien: Interesting. Yeah. And so your life at this time, you're working the AIDS Hotline like the graveyard shift. You're doing ACT UP all the time.

Spree: Right.

O'Brien: Your friends are still Radical Faeries mostly.

Spree: Right.

O'Brien: Yeah, and uh—

Spree: And then—

O'Brien: Yeah?

Spree: Oh, I was just going to tell you what happened with [inaudible].

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: So, the CDC decided that they were going to close down the office in New York City because they were going to save the government \$1M, like maybe the government had spent too much money on AIDS at that point. And they were going to close down the office and move the entire operation to Research Triangle Park, New York, which, ding ding ding, just happens to be the headquarters for, uh, well at the time, what were they called at the time? Well, GlaxoSmithWellcome—Burroughs Wellcome, which were the manufacturers of, you guessed it, AZT.

O'Brien: AZT, yeah.

Spree: So, they couldn't get these people in North Carolina, which at the time they were going to do this was, they had 600—less than 600 cases of HIV in the entire state of North Carolina, and we had probably 600 cases within a five block radius of our office. And you could hear the people when they called up and they'd say, where are you, and you'd say, in New York. They'd say, oh, well you really know what's going on, don't you? Like, they knew that was the epicenter of the disease.

O'Brien: Right.

Spree: And um, so, but they wanted to save the government \$1M so they were going to close down our office because in order to keep it open they were going to have to put in new carpet, and we were like, rip the carpet up, we will work on concrete floors, we don't care. We just want to keep this office open. And we pitched a fight like you would not believe to try to keep that office open. And we uh, what do you call that? Uh, implored the board of directors, we sent them letters, we went to their meetings, we tried and tried everything we could to keep that office open, and in the end they closed it down because of that thing I told you where me and my friends were telling people stuff that they didn't want us to tell them. And they could tell people in North Carolina, just tell them about AZT and then they'd only tell them about AZT. It was so political and such a nightmare of a story, but we did get a couple of articles in the newspaper, and Susan Sarandon, the friend of that photographer, was going to help us, but she was too busy at the time working on who knows what, so she couldn't do it—

O'Brien: So the hotline did end up moving?

Spree: Yeah, they closed down—our office which started the whole thing on a volunteer basis. Like we started it with volunteers, and they shut us down and moved it all to North Carolina.

O'Brien: I know Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York has had a hotline for sometime, but maybe that came later. I don't know. Yeah.

Spree: Uh-huh. Yeah, I think that came later. This was that number that you would see it on TV, but they'd say "If you have a question about AIDS call 1-800-342-AIDS," and now if you call it, and you get Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, they won't even tell you where they are. They just tell you they're on the East Coast somewhere.

O'Brien: Wow.

Spree: Yeah.

O'Brien: Uh, how do you think ACT UP changed you?

Spree: Oh my God. You have no idea, it empowered me to be like, like not take any guff from big corporations, like I will get on the phone with customer service and go all the way up the line until I get the manager on the line over a dispute I have with something. And it drives my friends crazy, because I'm so like, I mean, I'm not as determined as I used to be, but I used to be quite you know, um, an advocate for myself. It really, really changed me a lot, and then I don't just roll over and let corporations get away with nickel and diming you to death, you know?

O'Brien: So that fire is still with you.

Spree: Yes, exactly. Exactly. And so I was going to tell you what happened when I left New York, well I hadn't actually left New York yet, but they closed the hotline and I got an internship at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, and I thought oh, I'm hot shit now, I'm in the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival. Well, they had us cleaning toilets to learn discipline, and I was like—you know what?

O'Brien: What?

Spree: I think I've learned enough discipline about my art that I don't need to be paying them to clean toilets. So I was like, I'm over this, and I went to Ann Arbor, Michigan to visit my friend Maxine, who is the one you asked about, and it was his birthday. We bought a van together, a 19blahblahblah Ford Econoline van, I'm going to say 80something, and this was in '85. No, this wasn't '85, this was like '88, '89. And we—together with that van, started the Emma Goldman Gypsy Players, and what we did was we got this book called the Gay Yellow Pages, which was out at the time, and we made up a letter, just like a little flyer that said you should have us come perform for your group. And we sent it out to all these gay college groups that were listed, and social groups, you know? And lo and behold, we started getting answers from places like Missoula, Montana, uh, Clements Falls—is it Clements Falls, Oregon?

O'Brien: Yes.

Spree: Clements Falls. All these people that were desperate for some kind of entertainment, just for their group to you know have—and to have this like you know Radical Faerie theater company come and perform for them, and I would do my telephone skits, both the telephone company and the AIDS hotline. It was two different pieces. I'd sort of tell my history about how I started out at the phone company and then moved on to the AIDS hotline, and I had a character called Barbara Broadcast that one of the Faeries in LA had named me, Barbara Broadcast, and so I did that, and we did puppets and Doctor Seuss, so The Lorax, Winnie the Pooh, all different kinds of little fun stuff, and we would go and perform for these community organizations and college groups, and they loved it. They just loved it. They were starved for, you know, any outside attention. And so, we did two US tours and two European tours, and the first US tour, any place that asked us, we said yes. So we traveled back and forth across the country like two or three times, not knowing what we were doing. And then the second time, we wrote a two act play, an original two act play called Queens Are Wild, and we said now we're going to do this, and we started out in Boston and we premiered in Boston and then we worked our way across the country and then flew out of Boston when we got back, and flew to Europe. So we did two US tours and two European tours, and after the second European tour I said to Maxine, I don't want to go back to America, I just want to stay in Europe. And I actually thought my friend, a Danish friend of mine was going to marry me because when they got the law for gay people to marry, he said come on over, I'll marry you. And so when I got there to take him up on it, he said he had cold feet because he was in journalism school and he would have to sign a paper saying that he would be fiscally responsible for me, and he just didn't feel like he could do that. So I ended up marrying a Dutch lesbian instead, and I lived in the Netherlands, and I lived there for two years. I, uh, came to visit Maxine who had since moved to Ida, from Ann Arbor, he was living at Ida, and I came to visit him one summer, and I've been here ever since. I mean, I've been back of course, to the Netherlands, and Denmark, and whatever. But I've lived here ever since.

O'Brien: Wow.

Spree: And what I wanted to tell you about, the main thing that I kept referencing when I go oh, I want to tell you about this, I want to tell you about this is, so a friend of mine named Michael Smith, who was a Toronto Faerie and very involved in ACT UP and you know, political uh stuff up there, did a play called Person Livid with AIDS, and it was a story about his uh life, you know, of uh coming out HIV positive and having to take all these pills and all this kind of stuff. And I really wanted to get my hands on a copy of the script or I thought there was a DVD of it, and I have since gotten the DVD, and I'll tell you about this project in a minute, but un, so, by the time I was ready to do this, Maxine said to me, I had already tested HIV positive back when I was in San Francisco—oh, we ended up in San Francisco for about six months in-between tours, and that's when that happened, when I found out my friend Pearly had died and I had no reaction. And um, so—

O'Brien: What year was that?

Spree: 1987.

O'Brien: Mmhmm.

Spree: And um, so I tested positive, I got KS lesions like Pearly had, and in fact Pearly talked to me about like what I may or may not want to do about that and stuff. And uh, so you know, went on to have full blown AIDS and uh, then Maxine said to me, well why do you want to tell Michael's story? You've lived through this yourself now, why don't you tell your own story? So I made my own version of Person Livid with AIDS which is now, both mine and Michael Smith's are on the Internet, and I'll tell you, or send you the information about how if you want to look into them you can look into them and cross-reference and compare and contrast and stuff like that. But in my Person Livid with AIDS, I had a skit about a condom recycling factory, which obviously is kind of a gross uh little skit, but it was very funny and very, you know, raucous humor, and at one point, the person called Nettles, who is now known as Dashboard, stormed out of the theater. He was in our theater troop. Stormed out of the theater and came up on the stage and goes, what is this humor that you're dealing with? This is supposed to be called Person Livid with AIDS. And I said, um, have you looked up livid in the dictionary? And this is really true. If you look it up in like, Merriam Webster, the first definition is, a purple-brownish discoloration.

O'Brien: Oh wow.

Spree: And I lifted up my shirt and showed him all my lesions, which are purple and, when they get older they look a little brown. And I said, this is me, this is my body covered with AIDS, and if I choose to deal with it through humor, than so be it. And he just got, you know, stomped off in a huff or whatever, but that was what made me think of that so many times when we've been talking is that, you know, if I want to deal with it through humor, then that's how I'm going to deal with it.

O'Brien: Yeah. So, you're living at—you uh, toured uh, after New York with Maxine for how long were you all on tour?

Spree: Two years, and in those two years, we did the two US tours and two European tours.

O'Brien: And you talked about going into these small towns and school groups and community groups.

Spree: Yeah, yeah.

O'Brien: Uh what was that dynamic like. I mean, you all were quite visibly queer, right? And what—

Spree: Oh yeah, and that was problematic for some people, and I would at some times get uh, upset with people and because of my ACT UP years I think I wasn't afraid to let my anger show. And so for instance, in Winache, Washington, which is the Apple Capital of the World if you should ever need to know that in a trivia game, they had us perform in the Courtroom, an actual Courtroom because the deal was that they took the community center and turned it into a courtroom. And so it was great, because there was one scene where we reenacted an ACT UP trial and um, so—but there was an American flag at the front of the courtroom, and the first year we just took the flag, without asking, and put it in the back room because the other scenes are supposed to be Barbara Broadcast's living room. In the second year, the play actually does happen in Barbara Broadcast's living room, and so I took the flag and moved it back, and the guy asked me, and we kind of got into it about this American flag and how dare you move the American flag, and I was like, well, it's not appropriate for her to have an American flag in her living room because that's not the type of drag queen that she is. She just doesn't have an American flag in her living room.

O'Brien: [Laughter]. Wow.

Spree: So yeah, there's stuff like that and yeah, they would ask us like, you know, please don't you know, wear too much drag in town and you know, stuff like that.

O'Brien: Was anyone else doing that sort of thing?

Spree: Where they have to live there—say what?

O'Brien: Like so I'm imagining you two as drag queens or trans feminine queer people traveling around in the rural United States doing performances.

Spree: Right.

O'Brien: Was anyone else doing anything like that, or have you ever heard of anyone doing that?

Spree: No, not—well like I said, there was this group that I've heard of that was more like, I think New York based, called Hot Peaches, and then they went to England and they teamed up with another group that also performed a lot in New York that you might have heard of called Blue Lips, and Blue Lips was doing kind of taking let's say Sleeping Beauty and turning it into a political satire kind of drag show. That's the kind of thing. Or also—maybe Sleeping Beauty isn't a good example, but that's in our play that we do, and I can't think of—they would do funny skits in drag and stuff, and Betty Born—oh they would do biblical tales too. Biblical tales and uh, they were hysterical. They're from England, the Blue Lips are from England. And Hot Peaches—

O'Brien: And Hot Peaches?

Spree: Not Peaches. Hot Peaches, yeah. And that's the one that Marsha Johnson was in, yeah. She was just a, like you know like an honorary guest member.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: Because she was a little bit, you know, like I said, she was a diva, and she was a little bit scattered, so she couldn't necessarily be a full-time member of a group I don't think.

O'Brien: Yeah. What was Hot Peaches like?

Spree: Hot Peaches was kind of like a cross between us and uh Blue Lips. Do you know them? Have you heard of them? Blue Lips?

O'Brien: I haven't, no. I don't know a lot about the history of performance. I haven't learned very much about it.

Spree: Do you know of a drag queen that used to perform in New York named Yolanda?

O'Brien: I've heard the name.

Spree: Okay. She used to come and performance at Idapalooza, and I've heard she's maybe getting a little bit more away from that now, so I don't know—I was going to ask you if you knew anything about her scene.

O'Brien: No I don't. So, you were touring for a couple of years and then you were in Amsterdam for a couple of years?

Spree: Yeah, I sure was.

O'Brien: And your life in Amsterdam, what was that like?

Spree: Well, that was kind of funny. I tried to, you know, fit in. I got a *verblijfsvergunning*, which means an actual permit to stay. I didn't ever try to become a full-blown citizen, but I had a stamp in my passport that said you have the right to live here, because I was married to this Dutch lesbian, and we've since divorced so she could marry another lesbian, and um, uh, anyway, I went to Dutch class to learn Dutch and then I went to—they have a lot of government subsidized programs, and one of the programs was like a vocational guidance kind of thing where they like, offer you different kind of jobs, and the one job that I was really interested in and wanted to try to do was housepainting, you know, like literally painting walls and houses and stuff like that, and unfortunately he said my Dutch wasn't good enough. Which I just didn't get. I was like, how hard can it be to just say take a paintbrush and go over here and paint this wall. And I mean, my Dutch was okay, but it wasn't great. But I just thought is surely should have been sufficient enough to paint houses. But anyway, I didn't get the job. I mostly was a nanny to babies.

O'Brien: Oh, interesting.

Spree: Yeah, my friend had babies, and I was a nanny in San Francisco for those six months to Maxine's nephew for the first six months of his life, and he's getting married next year, can you believe that? I was his nanny. Anyway, so these kids that were babies, well one was a little boy and then he had a baby sister, and I mostly took care of the baby sister.

O'Brien: Um, that's great. And so then you ended up at Ida.

Spree: I ended up at Ida, lo and behold, who knew? I came one summer in August, I landed at the airport, jumped out onto the sidewalk with all my bags after, you know, God knows how many trains, how many busses, how many planes, and I'm standing there at the Nashville airport in the August heat, and there's nobody there to greet me and I'm just like, what have I gotten myself into? Like you know I had this cushy life—well, not cushy, but you know I had this life going on in Amsterdam and now here I am standing at the airport. And then this cute, adorable boy walks up to me and goes, hi, my name is Tristin and I met you at an ACT UP demonstration in Chicago. Oh I could tell you about that one. that was a pretty memorable one. That's when we went to the insurance companies that are all based in Chicago, and we went to Prudential and our chant there was "You can't get a piece of the rock if you've had a piece of cock."

O'Brien: That's great.

Spree: [Laughter].

O'Brien: What was your memory of Ida when you first arrived? What was it like?

Spree: Oh, it was like, you know, arriving in another Faerie land, kind of like a Wolf Creek, you know, in Tennessee. Yeah.

O'Brien: Describe it.

Spree: Oh, it's like, okay, so it's down in a hollow, or as they call them here, hollars, so it's in-between two mountain ridges, but it's just lush and green and beautiful, and there's a creek that runs by it. So when I moved there there was two main houses that were each built in the 30s and 40s, and then by each house, one was in the front and one was in the back, so obviously they were called the front house and the back house, and then by each of those houses was an old barn. And the barn became a performance space of course, each barn in its own right. Like the Eggplant Faerie Players, when we started it up again at Ida, we would perform and rehearse in the back barn. In fact I have some beautiful black and white photos of me performing with my friends. The one that I was telling you about, the condom recycling factory, my friend Ha, who I have to mention just on tape, and the other friend I have to mention is Ortes Alderson. I don't know if you've heard of him or not, but he was probably—he

was in the MHA affinity group with me and also in Surrender Dorothy. We were in it together. We were probably—we worked at the AIDS hotline together—we were probably the most politically aligned of any two people, you know, and he used to be a Black Panther.

O'Brien: Woah.

Spree: And then from that got involved in ACT UP. And you know, he was a real firecracker. But I have to mention him without letting his name pass. And he moved back, when he came out HIV positive or tested HIV positive, he moved back to Chicago and I have to say ACT UP Chicago really had it going on with a group of people that would go and help take care of him and support him and you know, bring him food, hot meals, and care for him and you know, all that kind of stuff.

O'Brien: We didn't really talk about race in ACT UP. Like, how many people of color were there, what were some of the racial dynamics in the group?

Spree: Well, there was [telephone break-up] a handful, I don't know, I want to say a handful of—a minority I guess, of uh black people, and I don't even know if that's the right word to use. There were black people but I couldn't tell you what the makeup was of you know, percentages or something like that if that's what you're looking for. But I know with Ortes it was a point of frustration that there wasn't more you know black people involved, and um—

O'Brien: Do you remember any conversations about that?

Spree: Oh yeah, like all the time. Like, uh, in fact, we had conversations about how he didn't like people calling each other fags because he said it was like, he would refuse to use the N word, and he kind of instilled in me like never to use that word, because he said that's just self-oppression and self-hate, and um, uh, but he did have a white partner, which was kind of interesting, and one of the reasons why he and I became so close was because he took me home to meet his partner, and I got along swimmingly with his partner, but a lot of people in ACT UP thought, you know, he was a little not right for Ortes and you know, were like what is Ortes doing with him and—or what's he doing, you know, like, why are they together, and I was just like well, why is that anyone's business, you know? They're a couple, like—

O'Brien: What was that [inaudible] about? Why did people say that?

Spree: Uh, he was a little quirky, like I don't know if I should actually get into this on recording.

O'Brien: That's fine. Yeah.

Spree: If you want to take the recording off I'll tell you personally.

O'Brien: No, it's okay.

Spree: But yeah, it was just, he was quirky, and let's say due to some circumstances in his past for being gay he was you know, institutionalized and uh, treated very badly, and um, as a result, you know, would be a little bit quirky. And I thought, you know, I was just like whatever, because I was used to quirky Faeries, you know? Faeries tend to be very quirky, and um, so when people would be like, what's he doing with him, I'd just be like, why is that any of your business? They love each other, you know, that's the important thing. And he was with him until he died. So you know—and he saved—so the night that we opened in Copenhagen on our first US tour, we got a telegram, um, and it was the first telegram Maxine had ever gotten in his life, and we got up to perform and people were wondering, it was the European ILGA Conference—I don't know if you know ILGA, it's the International Lesbian Gay Association, and they were having a European conference, and they were all wondering like, what are these two Americans doing at this European conference, because it was supposed to be for Europeans. But we were the entertainment, and they didn't know that. So we got up to perform, and we performed the first night, and after the first night, Maxine said, I want to read you this telegram, it's the first telegram I've ever gotten in my life, and it was from Ortes' partner telling us that Ortes had died, and there was not a dry eye in the house after that. and my friend, who is the Dutch lesbian that I ended up marrying, came up to our table and said you must come to the Netherlands and perform for us after watching us perform and hearing that telegram, and um, so that's how we got our first European tour was because all these people from Dresden, Germany and Cologne, Germany or [inaudible] as it's called over there, and you know, smaller little places wanted us to come perform, and this was shortly after the wall had just come down, and when we went to Dresden we actually had a translator translate our show. The first year it was the uh review that I was telling you where I did the phone skits and we did Winnie the Pooh and the Lorax and all that kind of stuff, and that one was called Fairy Tales Faerie Tails, with the fairy and tales spelled differently each time, and uh, the second year was the original play called Queens Are Wild. And we brought back some of the characters that were in the skits and turned them into this canasta game that they played at Barbara Broadcast's house and um, it was an original two act play.

O'Brien: So you've been at Ida for awhile now.

Spree: Well, I no longer live in Ida. I live in a place called Sassafras.

O'Brien: Sassafras. Okay, when did you move from Ida to Sassafras?

Spree: Two years ago.

O'Brien: Okay. So broadly, what are some of the major things that have happened for you during your time in Tennessee and in that area?

Spree: Well, I definitely um, have uh, you know, transitioned in my identity with my gender.

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Spree: Okay well, that came down to one night at a meeting where we were going around, and we usually would go around and people would be like, I prefer to be called he, I prefer to be called she, other people would say he or she, it doesn't matter. And that would usually be the one I would say. And then finally somebody called me out on it and said no, I heard that you said you wanted to be called she. And I said well, it is a preference. If we're saying it's a preference here, then I would prefer to be called she and be her, and so from then on, I was she and her, and so that was the shift in my gender identity.

O'Brien: When did they start doing those go-rounds to check in about pronouns?

Spree: Oh, it was quite some time after Plan Z, but I remember Plan Z. I don't know if you remember people doing that there, going what's your preferred pronoun.

O'Brien: yes, I do remember that.

Spree: That was sort of our awakening to that consciousness of preferred pronouns, and then—

O'Brien: Describe for me the shift for you from being in Faerie community in the 80s and 90s when you know, everyone would be referred to as girl but there's some way, but you—and then this. Like, you beginning to really have a preference around she. Like what was that like?

Spree: Well what was fun about it, um, in New York, say, and being in ACT UP and being in a dress is when you're in a dress on the subway and you're done up, there was one, oh that's another funny one I'll have to tell you, but I'm also being asked to maybe start wrapping it up, so—

O'Brien: Oh, okay.

Spree: So it will be to be continued.

O'Brien: Sure.

Spree: But I'll tell you two funny stories real quick. One was where I did try to pass, and I shaved, I even shaved my chest hair, I wore a Jackie O a-frame black dress, and long black opera gloves, and I went with Ortes to this Republican Ladies Tea Party. This was when Bush, Bush number one, was in office, and they were having a Republican Ladies Tea Party, which actually was a cocktail party, but again, the graphic artist got ahold of one of the invitations and made a bunch of knockoffs, so we could show up with our invitations and present them there. And I showed up with Ortes, and Ortes is quite a bit shorter than me, and as you figured out, black, and I'm six feet tall and white, and so we're standing there and he's introducing me as his wife, and I'm like, biting the insides of my cheek trying just not to bust out laughing because he's an actor, too. And he would go up to the black people there and go like, you vote republican, right? You vote Republican in Manhattan? And Ortes would be like oh, yes, yes, of course. We

have a place on the upper west side, then we also have a house in Connecticut, but we vote in Manhattan. [Laughter]. It was just so funny. And then he would go to introduce me to people and I'd hold out my long, gloved, opera gloved hand, and the man would just look at me like he didn't know whether to take it, like I'd hold it out for him to kiss it, and he didn't know whether to take it or like,—but anyway, when they found out there was going to be some disruption, this kid that was in the Young American Republicans, the YAR, came up to us and said to Ortes, listen, we heard there's going to be some trouble, can you help us out? And Ortes was like yeah man, tell us, anything you need, we're there, we're going to help you. And so in my pocketbook I had our buttons that said Lesbians For Bush, and we took out our buttons and put them on that said Lesbians For Bush. And the kid walked up to Ortes and saw the button and said oh, you're for Bush right? And Ortes was like yes, absolutely. And so he said, you know, there was going to be this disruption. But when he saw that we were with them, the disruptors, you should have seen his face just fall. It was so priceless.

O'Brien: Wow.

Spree: And um, when we did finally disrupt it, we got brutally shoved out of there very quickly, like, down some stairs. Like, shoved down some stairs. But mostly, the difference I was going to say—and that time I took a cab, I didn't even take the subway. But the thing I loved about being in a dress with a full beard on the subway is there is no denying that that is a man in a dress on the subway, whereas if I shave and direct instruction the whole, you know, nine yards, then they can kind of pretend like, well maybe that's not really a man, you know, maybe that's just a tall woman or you know, what I mean—but if I have a full-on beard, then it's like total genderfuck and they're like no, that man is wearing a dress, there's no getting around it, you know. No matter how much people try to ignore and look away, it's like, still you know, breaking through a barrier that you know, something that is in their mind wrong with this picture, you know what I'm saying.

O'Brien: How do you, um, define your gender now, Spree?

Spree: Well I still go by she and her, and I—so if you ask me, I would say, you know, I'm a girl. Like I've been saying, I wrote she, her, girl, because I wanted, you know, to be identified that way. Um, I don't know what it actually means, if you ask me about further transitioning, I don't know. I just know that's as far as I've come in my journey.

O'Brien: You've come a long way.

Spree: [Laughter]. Yes, from bearded drag queen, Radical Faerie drag queen in ACT UP to Tennessee girl fairy.

O'Brien: That's lovely. So you were saying that there's people there anxious for you to get off the phone?

Spree: Oh no, just we have a pick-up rehearsal tonight, and they want to make sure I leave a little time to rest before my rehearsal.

O'Brien: Okay. Well then I'll let you get going—it's so nice talking with—

Spree: Oh no, if you want to ask me, if you have something else you want to ask me, I just looked at my watch and realized we've been at it awhile, so I don't know if you need to go or have other questions or—

O'Brien: Well, I'm really interested in hearing more about the shift in how you understand your gender. I mean, I came out as a trans woman in 2000, so 15 years ago, and I um, I was never really integrated into a, the kind of gay male world of drag queens and where this sort of widespread transfemininity on some level.

Spree: Oh, uh-huh.

O'Brien: And I'm interested in just what felt different for you in when you started saying that you wanted to go by she? Did you think you were discovering something else in yourself or that you were evolving or the community was evolving?

Spree: I think all of those. I think you've put your finger right on it is a shift in the community because of the go-rounds that I was telling you, and then a shift in myself, and then also just the thing that like, think about—I mean, I think about what fun it would have been to go to Woolworth's with a dollar and get nail polish and stuff to do my hair, or you know, I was not allowed to play with dolls obviously when I was growing up. So eventually I bought myself one with my own money. Um, you know, but I was a little bit older also at that point. Um, but I just you know, it was the principal of it, I wanted to have one. so but you know, I just think about what fun it would have been to—oh, and buy earrings, oh my God, like earrings, the things I could have bought at Woolworth's. I don't know if you know what a Woolworth's is, but it's like a five and dime.

O'Brien: I do, yeah.

Spree: But that doesn't really exist that much anymore. Except I think it still does exist in England. But I could have bought lipstick, could have bought nail color, earrings, so many fun girly things that I just wasn't allowed to, you know, explore that part of my childhood, and then yeah, so when I got that chance, like, met the Faeries and got that chance, it was like woah, this is like getting to revert to childhood a little bit, you know? Like, wear big earrings and lipstick and paint my nails. I go and get pedicures now, that's fun. And bring my own color. Lets say I would have a pedicure and I'd like you put on this color. And they kind of look at me and they're like, okay. [Laughter].

O'Brien: So the Faerie community that you lived in has changed a lot over the years that you've been there.

Spree: Yes.

O'Brien: What are—besides the pronoun go-rounds, what are some of the ways that its changed?

Spree: Well, with Ida, I would say it's mostly trans-identified now.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Spree: So the trans people kind of came in and uh, now are in charge of the place.

O'Brien: And what makes somebody trans, uh, in an environment where there's always been a lot of drag? Like what's the difference about being trans?

Spree: I think with that it's people that uh do hormones, uh, and then also pursue various and sundry, and you probably know much more about it than I do, the different forms of surgery that one can have, whether it's, you know, having testicle removed or um, uh, you know, top surgeries, uh, you know, all the various gamuts along the way, you know. It was two completely different things.

O'Brien: So it shifted from femininity being mostly about dressing up to including changes in the body.

Spree: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Yeah, and I remember at that Plan Z being in my first ever T party, where people were doing T and I got to be in the party, um, it was the kind that you rub on, not the injecting kind, but the rub-on testosterone, and that was really fun. I remember getting to be in on that, like oh, this is really exciting. But some people—

O'Brien: Yeah?

Spree: Some people that are really hardcore about, you know, doing injections several times a day, and then the opposite doing the female hormones, you know, and I know it's really—I lived with one person who was doing that and it was really hardcore at certain times of the month where that hormone would be wearing off and they'd be going through this, you know, frustrating time where they needed the shot but weren't able to get it and stuff like that.

O'Brien: Yeah. And then, the one other thing that occurred to me, it seems like moving back to Tennessee is also moving back to the south for you.

Spree: Yeah, isn't that wild, that I ended up back here? But you know, when I think about it, I never really thought, two things. I never really thought of Tennessee of being not much in the south, because—what I say to people is, when you spend the years 10 to 17 in southern Georgia, then I'll talk to you, week? Because it is the south, you're right, it is the south, but it's

not that south. That is like, really, really deep, deep south when you're talking southern Georgia. Like you know, 370 miles south of Atlanta, um, and um, uh, but I never thought it was that far south and I never thought it would get as cold as it gets [inaudible] somebody in the southern region.

O'Brien: You're kind of in the mountains, right?

Spree: Huh?

O'Brien: You're a little bit in the mountains there, yeah?

Spree: Yeah, yeah, in the mountains, and it gets cold. Especially Ida, where we're living with wood stoves. That's mostly, winter is like gathering around the wood stove trying to huddle and stay warm.

O'Brien: And as a last question, what do you think is different for you between living in the country and the nature compared to living in New York? Like what is something sort of special?

Spree: Oh my gosh, sanity. Sanity for one thing. I think living in New York, it got to be too much of a people crunch for me. Like I just thought, I'm so tired of fighting for pieces of the sidewalk, you know what I mean? Just to be able to walk down the street, and there were times when I remember I would have like two days off in a row, and I literally would not leave my apartment. I would be like, I'm staying in, I'm not going out there, you know? Just um, it was like, too much, too much, too too much. And here, it's so peaceful and so beautiful and just like looking out my window now I'm in the tops of trees, you know? And it's a beautiful sunny day and there's mountains right over there and the blue sky with the big, puffy clouds and stars at night. Oh my God the stars that you can see at night. That's what this play is all about is seeing all the stars. And I feel so bad for you in New York when you can see like maybe a handful of stars. And that's exciting. And there's so many. There's so, so many that you don't get to see.

O'Brien: That's great. Well, thank you so much Spree, I really appreciate this conversation.

Spree: Oh, that's a great note to end on. I can't believe we ended on that note. Wow. Oh, thank you, no, that was wonderful. And if you want, I'm serious about if you want to continue or you think of more questions or whatever, let's keep in touch. Like, you've got my e-mail now. I sent you those other guys' e-mail, and use the same number to get in touch with Maxine as you did to get in touch with me.

O'Brien: Okay.

Spree: And then I'll send you my cell phone.

O'Brien: And I—this really inspires me to want to come to Idapalooza next year. So I'll make a real effort to do that.

Spree: Oh, okay. Okay. And I will also send you, if you're interested, information on how to look up the Person Livid with AIDS. Because that was a project somebody just worked on in Toronto and got Michael's version together and my version together and now they're both online.

O'Brien: Wow. Yeah, I'd love to check that out.

Spree: Okay.

O'Brien: Okay, take care, Spree.

Spree: Okay, thank you so much, Michelle. You too.

O'Brien: Good bye.

Spree: Okay, bye, bye.