

# Catching up with one of Chelsea's pre-eminent journalists

## C ON THE RECORD

BY DAVID GIBBONS

Claudia Dreifus was an idealistic college student in the early '60s, a Freedom Rider during the civil rights movement and, since the late '60s, a distinguished journalist, interviewing scores of the world's smartest, wittiest, most famous and most powerful public figures. Her work has been published in a wide array of magazines and newspapers, from *The New York Times Magazine* and *Scientific American* to *TV Guide* and *Playboy*. More recently, Dreifus has focused exclusively on scientists in her "A Conversation With..." column, which appears Tuesdays in *The New York Times* science section.

Dreifus, who's been referred to on more than one occasion as the American Oriana Fallaci, sat down for a chat with Chelsea Now in the sun-dappled kitchen of her comfortable Ninth Avenue apartment, the walls of which are adorned with folk art she's collected during her extensive travels as well as pictures of the luminaries with whom she's conversed, including Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi. The latter interview was a result of Dreifus' persistence but also her good luck, as she arrived during a short period when the great Burmese human rights activist was not completely banned by that country's military regime. For the 100th anniversary issue of its magazine, *The New York Times* chose Dreifus to interview the Dalai Lama; she managed to irritate him by persistently asking her editors' thematic question—How will the world look in 100 years?—which was not answerable within the parameters of his beliefs.

Despite all the fascinating subjects she's covered, inviting myriad avenues of inquiry, Dreifus was most enthusiastic to talk about the spirit of community and care infusing her neighborhood, Chelsea, which she has called home since the Summer of Love, exactly four decades ago.

### How did you come to be a journalist and also to live in Chelsea all these years?

The two were connected. I went to NYU and graduated with a degree in theater. I studied O'Neill and Chekhov, but I lost interest. There was this sense that there was such greater drama in the streets. The civil rights movement was going on, and I was involved. This was my first apartment after I finished college; I moved up here from the Village in June 1967. When I moved to Chelsea, it was the most vibrant neighborhood you could possibly imagine. There was a different community organization on almost every block. In the summer of '67, what young people did at night for their social lives was go to meetings. The degree of participation was one of the most thrilling things about Chelsea. I'd say the neighborhood was on the verge of being poor. Twenty-third Street was kind of a skid row, full of really seedy bars. When one of those bars turned into the Chelsea Square coffee house, it was like a corner had been turned in terms of gentrification. The Empire Diner was one of the first restaurants in the area. You went to the Village to eat. My friends from the Village rarely came up here to visit. This was a "bad neighborhood."

### What got you into journalism?

Conor Cruise O'Brien, who taught me literature and politics at NYU, urged me to be a writer. At first, I thought about being a playwright, but I turned to journalism because the world was happening. For me, it was a way to bridge my artistic visions with politics. I worked at *The East Village Other*, then, starting in 1969, *The Chelsea-Clinton News*. From there, I became a magazine journalist.

### So, what makes a good interviewer?

They are incredibly interested in everything around them. They are good listeners, open. They know how to recede into the background. I think of an interview as a two-person play, like [August] Strindberg's "The Stronger," which has two parts where one of them says almost nothing. That's me in an interview. I don't necessarily take on these qualities in my personal life: I'm sometimes short with people; I don't always listen well; I'm preoccupied, like everybody else. Sometimes, at difficult moments, I'll say to myself, "Think about who you'd be if you were in the field today."



Chelsea Now photo by David Gibbons

### Journalist and author Claudia Dreifus

#### What makes a good interview subject?

Someone who has lived a good life, has an interesting narrative and is willing to talk about it. Someone with insight. I prefer to interview people who've had some therapy [chuckles] or who come from story-telling cultures. They have to have the motive to talk. I don't interview people who don't want to be interviewed.

#### How do you capture the essence of what all these brilliant people have to say in a mere 1,200 words?

The critical aspect is to get enough time for the sit-down. If somebody's offering me a very constrained amount of time, I won't do the interview. For instance, when I asked for an interview with Noam Chomsky, who regards himself as this great critic of the liberal press, he said he'd only give me 45 minutes. So I said, "No thanks." Because, to me, that showed an intent to control the interview and create manipulation. I need two hours to get something that people will want to read. The more material I have, the more likely it is to be a good interview. The more the subject relaxes, the more we get into deep conversation. You lose the "them-you" divide; for a brief moment, it becomes a conversation between friends.

#### Here's the perennial pop-culture question: Of all the people you haven't yet interviewed, dead or alive, who would be among your top choices?

There are interviews I haven't gotten—[Fidel] Castro, Yasir Arafat, others. In the long run, it was just as well. Those guys were famously awful interviews. My interest is in social change, in how people transform the world they live in. I'd love to interview Angela Merkel, the current German chancellor. As far as I know, she's the only Ph.D. physicist to head a major country. I'd also be interested in Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, of Liberia, and Michelle Bachelet, the Chilean president. These new female heads of state are fascinating people, and their lives are real stories. For a long time, Bono would have interested me, particularly when I was doing the *Playboy* interviews, where you had 10,000 or 15,000 words. Bono is a person of incredible substance. There's someone at home there. I'd love to interview Bruce Springsteen. The album he did about 9/11 was one of the best artistic pieces to come out of that awful moment.

#### I understand you also teach journalism.

I teach magazine writing to future foreign correspondents in an international media program at SIPA [Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs]. I'm also writing a book with the political scientist Andrew Hacker on American higher education. We're going to ask what it is at this moment in history. Andrew has been a departmental chairman, and I've taught as an adjunct. So, we've seen both sides of the academic picture.

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*In the summer of '67, 23rd St. was kind of a skid row, full of really seedy bars. When one of those turned into the Chelsea Square coffee house, a corner had been turned in terms of gentrification.*

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[Pause] Can I throw something at you—and I really don't want to be directing your interview—but I was thinking, "What do I really want to talk about?" and it's Chelsea. I've lived here more than two-thirds of my life. This is my hometown. It's a special place. I take it with me wherever I go in the world. Sometimes, I wear a "Hooray for Chelsea" T-shirt, in airports from Africa to Asia. When I come home, it's to a block where I really know my neighbors. The guy who runs the deli across the street, Frank Lobelle, is one of the greatest human beings I've ever met. When Bishop Tutu came back to Chelsea, the seminary gave him a procession, and he asked to march with Frank; he knew how special Frank is. He's the mayor of Chelsea, really. He makes everybody's day; he makes you feel cared about; he keeps an eye on you. When my first Cairn terrier died in 1974, people who I thought were total strangers came up to me on the street and asked, "Where's your dog?" We have this urban village here, and that's part of what gives me the strength to go stand in front of Aung San Suu Kyi's door in Burma and beg till I get my interview.

#### Frank's Deli is one of our institutions, and so is the General Theological Seminary.

The GTS is a community organization, but from the moment I moved here in 1967, it never had an organic or a cohesive relationship with the neighborhood. Now, that's not true of the two Episcopal churches [St. Peter's and Holy Apostles], which are really involved. This latest situation, with the proposed [high-rise luxury condo] building, was just one in a series of [instances wherein] the seminary had a tin-ear to the neighborhood. I haven't seen [the revised plan], but I'm glad the GTS backed off. It was quite unconscionable what they were suggesting, even if their need was very great. Let's say a really nice, politically progressive organization had inherited mineral rights to Yellowstone Park. If they said, "We're going to drill oil wells in Yellowstone Park; we really need to do this to survive," people would say, "Hey, it's Yellowstone Park. You can't do that here." And that's what the Chelsea Historic District is to a lot of us.

#### Do you feel our society is doing a good job of educating its future scientists?

I think we are not doing well except in educating very elite scientists, where we're doing fabulously. If you go to MIT or Cal Tech or Columbia, you're going to wind up doing brilliant work. But there are real problems at the undergraduate level. A lot of the people teaching basic science to incoming students do it in an eliminative way—not to get them to love science, but to get rid of those who aren't really going to be scientists. I remember at NYU, I had a professor for an earth sciences course who said, "None of you are going to be scientists, but by the time you leave this course, none of you will ever look at a rock in the same way." It was absolutely true!