

THE UNRELIABLE BESTIARY

A CONVERSATION WITH DEKE WEAVER



EDGEÆFFECTS



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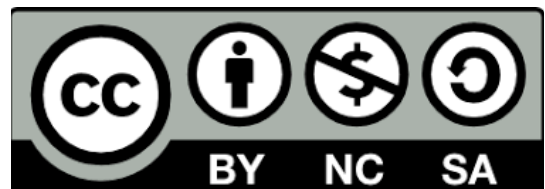
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Cover photo: Elephant puppet propelled by five dancers
Photo by Valerie Oliveiro, 2010.

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Deke Weaver is an interdisciplinary performance artist, video artist, and writer. He is professor of new media at the University of Illinois, with affiliations with the Department of Theater, the Department of Dance, and the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, Memory Studies. Deke has won numerous awards including a Guggenheim fellowship and a Creative Capital grant and he has been a resident at institutions including Yaddo, MacDowell, and Ucross. Deke's lifelong project has been the construction of a multimedia Unreliable Bestiary. [Website](#). [Twitter](#). [Contact](#).

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PREFACE

Deke Weaver is an interdisciplinary performance artist whose lifelong project has been the construction of a multimedia Unreliable Bestiary. I first met Deke in 2007 when we were fellows at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois. Since then, I've followed all of his Unreliable Bestiary productions with great interest.

In 2019, my husband, Philip Phillips, and I hosted a house performance of TIGER. Deke's performance was utterly riveting, turning our home into a multimedia landscape of tiger stories from around the planet. Community members, faculty, students, kids, and teenagers all gathered to watch Deke's transformation into multiple characters whose stories intersected with the lives of tigers in diverse and unexpected ways. By the end of the performance, you could have heard a pin drop as we all silently absorbed the intense experience.

I spoke with Deke Weaver about the thinking behind Unreliable Bestiary in early 2021.

- Brett Ashley Kaplan



Rangers performing BEAR. Photo by Nathan Keay, 2016.

Brett Ashley Kaplan: I want to hear more about how you came up with the idea to develop art projects around 26 different endangered animals. From all of the animals in the world, how did you choose MONKEY, ELEPHANT, WOLF, BEAR, and TIGER?

Deke Weaver: The Bestiary idea is morphing; what's going to come next may be either PRAIRIE or TREE, so it's endangered organisms and habitats. And even then, these titles are broad, almost fairy tale categories—there are lots of monkey species, lots of tree species.

I guess the idea for the Unreliable Bestiary project started by realizing that most of my work would have animals in pivotal roles. In one earlier piece, the main character, Kip Knutzen, is a hockey coach. Early in the story he gets really drunk. His pregnant wife's water breaks and he has to take her to the hospital, but he doesn't want to let on that he's drunk. He helps his wife into their pick-up truck. Then in his hurry to get on the road, Kip backs over their puppy. Later on, a talking pheasant gives Kip advice. So sometimes an animal would show up in the work in a grounded, real way—like a dead puppy. And then other times an animal might be something like a talking pheasant. There were animals in pretty much everything I was writing.

I'm probably just trying to get my dad's attention. My earliest memories are from a time when he was getting his Ph.D. in wildlife and natural resources management. He still seems most at home out in the field. As a little kid, I was able to see animals a long way off. I'd literally get his attention by seeing animals. So, if I'm psychoanalyzing myself, that's probably at the root of it all.

But on a less reductive note, I'm taking this fascination with the natural world and all of its interconnections—taking this fear of it slipping away—and using that to frame a life-long project of making 26 different performances ... events. It is a big, audacious gesture that is minuscule and ridiculous compared to the horrors that we're inflicting on our planet. Most of the people I spend time with are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural world. My students, friends, family, all of us spend waaaaay more time with our screens and the virtual world. It seems that live performance for a communal audience has become far less common than everyone sitting at home on their couch nursing their phone. I've had some of my most transformative experiences by myself in the woods or with an audience either watching a performance or making one. For me, live performances and experiences in the natural world offer similar portals, doorways to worlds that are much, much bigger than our workaday, quotidian lives.

Of course, sometimes a walk in the woods or watching a live show can suck. For some reason, it's no big deal for people to spend two hours watching a terrible movie, but everybody feels like part of their lives have been taken from them if they go to bad theater. Like it's a personal insult. Two hours of bad theater has everyone squirming and thinking, "I could've done so much with those two hours."

BAK: I could have watched a crappy movie!

DW: Exactly. But for me, I might see a hundred theater shows. Maybe most of them are bad. Maybe they're all bad. But then one of them will be transcendent, you know, like really truly out-of-my-body amazing. Completely transformative. I'll see one or two of those and, that's it. I will keep coming back, just knowing that's possible.

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BAK: One of the things that's been remarkable to me in seeing all of your shows is that they've all deeply touched a nerve. We waited on our picnic blanket for hours to get into WOLF, and ELEPHANT was completely packed in a huge space. And, BEAR, there were tons of people for many different performances. The whole sense of performativity being endangered—live performance being endangered—is something that people feel and miss and want to engage with.

DW: Jen [Weaver's collaborator and wife, Jennifer Allen] and I talk about this all the time. I feel lucky that people care enough to come see our work here [in Champaign-Urbana, IL]. You know? I've been in plenty of places where that's not the case. Kicking the Bestiary project off with ELEPHANT included the idea of capturing people's imaginations with a piece that's built on a grand scale. I wanted ELEPHANT to reflect the scale of the animal while also reflecting the entire lifelong project. But being able to even imagine building the work on that scale was only possible because of a grant from Creative Capital and having the support, facilities, and resources of the University of Illinois. Before that, I wouldn't even allow myself to think on that scale.

BAK: It always strikes me that there's so many multifaceted parts to these performances—and they're also completely different from each other. So, starting backwards, BEAR not only invites the audience to move through the actual space where bears might have been, the beautiful Meadowbrook park, but it also has a very literary ending. In addition to being a performance artist, you're also a video artist and an actor; your pieces overall incorporate dance and other artistic elements. BEAR is also very literary because you wrote a story, which you tell at the end. And to me it felt like the scale of BEAR was so very different from the scale of ELEPHANT or the scale of WOLF in part because it ends in a narrative that tells the story of a man who loses his partner, his dog, and his cat on the same day. But, so far, there aren't any bears.

And then as the story progresses, he discovers that in fact—and maybe it's prefiguring Tree in a sense—his heart is made of wood. It's a vibrant heart, but it's made of wood.



Deke Weaver in TIGER. Photo by Nathan Keay, 2019.

I can see a lot of resonances with your central ideas in that story, but I'm wondering if you can articulate how that relates specifically to BEAR and to all of your other projects.

DW: The seeds for these performances take all kinds of shapes. Sometimes it's writing. Sometimes it's a drawing. Sometimes it's reading a particular article or book or hearing a particular podcast. Sometimes it's someone telling me some intense personal anecdote. So, the research starts. I try to throw the net out as wide as possible. I read. I'll interview people. I'll travel to where the animals live. Sometimes the piece will end up taking a very defined through-line, but most of the time it feels like I'm weaving a story, or making some sort of quilt, if there's such a thing as an elliptical quilt

BAK: I like that, an elliptical quilt.

DW: I love this book by Keith Johnstone: *Impro*. It's about theater and storytelling. He paints the idea of someone listing a series of actions or events. The listing of actions doesn't make up anything we'd call a story. But if a storyteller introduces an element—a character, a boat, a genie, whatever—at the beginning of a story and then brings back that element towards the end of the story, the audience can sense a kind of satisfying narrative. This reincorporation can have a transformative quality that is like catnip for human brains. Johnstone points out that even three-year-olds recognize this structure. EO Wilson has said that he believes story and narrative are part of our DNA.

So, at the beginning of the fall section of BEAR, the ranger would meet the group and give them an introduction to the world they were stepping into. The rangers told each group that the year was 2020 (remember we did this in the fall of 2016), the ice of Greenland had slipped into the sea, ocean levels had risen 20 feet, 40 percent of the world's human population was fleeing the coast, the North American power grid had collapsed ... and so we're going to try to get everything back in place by bringing back the bears to a habitat where there haven't been bears for 120 years. If we can get a crucial umbrella species like bears back, then we can start getting the climate back on track.

The rangers told everyone to be quiet throughout the walk. We would bring back the bears by walking a path over and over in silent meditation, and, surely, the bears would feel our sincere intent. The ranger would then lead the audience walking through the woods and prairie, leading the group to the four different bear stations where the group would hear recorded information about the different bear species, and then to the station with the bear dancers. Finally, the group winds up at a barn. Each person crawls down through a tunnel of sweaters and blankets into this small den where everyone would be given a bear mask and sit very close to each other and listen to the story that you've described.

For some people the day was very hot. For one group, they walked through a

thunderstorm. We did six shows a night. The first group left at 4pm so their whole trip would be in daylight. The last group left at 8:30pm—everything in darkness. Each group had a different experience on their walk. Each group had an experience that prepared them for how they were going to receive the final story in the den. Some people would take it in contemplatively. And, you know, for some people, it was just a stupid walk and a stupid story. So now everyone's sitting in the den listening to the last story. For 20 minutes there's no bears in the story. Where's the bear? Where's the bear? And then—finally—there's a bear at the very end. Big transformation moment. The story includes someone's wife leaving, depression, death of a dog, cat suicide, cancer, a huge operation. And this whole story is juxtaposed with the silence of walking in the woods. It's all a little absurd and funny and scary. And I'm hoping that the juxtaposition of this live story with the walk in the woods might, for some people, serve as an imaginative portal to different ways of understanding ourselves. Which sounds really self-important, but why not hope?

BAK: It was almost like the story at the end was a kind of counter to the opening. The whole walking and looking for the bears and thinking about listening about the bears and inviting the bears back. That was all opening up. Right? And then the ending in the tight little den and you had grown your beard for, what, a year? So, you were looking pretty ursine. That felt like a closure and maybe part of the resonance between the story and the project of the bears is about things being open and trying to open up. But then recognizing that the way we live our lives is actually pretty closed off to those experiences a lot of the time.

DW: Sure, I mean some of this stuff is not always going to be clearly spelled out. The last story from the fall section of BEAR felt like a standalone story, but it ended up connecting with the stories that got told in the spring section of BEAR. Splitting the stories up between the fall section and the spring section was sort of like giving BEAR a four-month intermission. I did it because of something that happened in WOLF. For WOLF we put people on a bus, you know, a 45-minute ride. Rangers gave wolf talks on the bus. There were videos on the bus showing interviews and illustrating wolf information. We had a howling lesson. The assistant rangers sang wolf lullabies.

The bus ride was timed so we'd arrive at Allerton Park to walk people through the woods at sunset. By the time the walk in the woods was done it was dark, and we're walking people into the barn. The idea was that people could look at the dioramas, the paintings and drawings, the altars, on the first floor, then we'd get them all upstairs for all the dance/storytelling stuff. Like 5-10 minutes downstairs ... tops ... then up we go. What we didn't take into account was that on a couple of nights, it literally took 30 minutes for everyone to pee. Right?

BAK: How could you predict.

DW: Exactly. But it was a very real thing. We had this tension building in the woods. *Are we going to actually see wolves? What the hell is going on?* You know? People were genuinely getting nervous, walking as the sun was setting and being told to do this thing that they don't really do that often—pay attention,

be quiet, watch the color get sucked out of the trees—and all of a sudden, you're walking in the dark. Then every once in a while you see these things that might—oh shit, are those really wolves? And then you're walking up to

There are no native elephants here in Central Illinois, and there are no native tigers, either. But there are certainly elephants in zoos and in people's imaginations and in kids' stories

the barn and there's a weird sound, and you finally got in the barn and . . . everybody has to pee. The air went out of the balloon. So really the idea was to like have five minutes looking at the stuff on the first floor of the barn and then go right into the narrative that was happening on the second floor. But with everyone in line waiting to pee . . . it was gone.

So, with BEAR I started thinking, "I'm going to take that 30 minutes and I'm going to make it four months." Literally split the story. Whether people were going to be able to follow it or not, I wasn't sure. But I figured I'd separate them and go with the idea of the bear's hibernation cycle—death in the fall, resurrection in the spring. A lot of anthropologists think the Christian myth is based on very, very, very old human stories about bears. They think that bear stories are some of the oldest stories on the planet. And so, it was working with this idea of cycles that led to doing the three sections: the fall section, the winter section, and the spring section. Sadly, it felt like I tried to bite off too much. The spring section felt less resolved and less satisfying.

BAK: It was too many things?

DW: Too much.

BAK: Interesting. But I liked the idea of the seasonal, the cyclical, and connecting with stories. I was also thinking about how all of your projects are simultaneously local and global. And BEAR is particularly local in that you were inviting the bears back. That's just so fabulous.

There are no native elephants here in Central Illinois, and there are no native tigers, either. But there are certainly elephants in zoos and in people's imaginations and in kids' stories, and there was the elephant in South Dakota [the ELEPHANT show included the story of Hero, a circus elephant enraged by a 1915 blizzard in Elkton, South Dakota. He was shot down by the townspeople], so all of the animals are global and local all at once, which does connect with the planetary dimension of everything that you're doing.

DW: That's always the thing. Does it matter? How can I make these extinctions happening on the other side of the world matter to people here? How can I connect these creatures that aren't native to this place to me or a suburban soccer mom? How can I tell a story about a slow-moving process that feels urgent, immediate...you know, like an emergency? One of the first stats I ran up against in my tiger research is that there are more tigers kept as pets in the state of Texas than there are tigers left in the wild.

BAK: Oh my God. Really?

DW: Yeah. We're in a really, really strange time. Completely weird. A lot of the stories that I end up putting together operate in cities or suburbs, or agricultural deserts like East Central Illinois. So, it works here, but if I told the same stories in some parts of Montana, well, some of those folks might have to deal with grizzly bears every day, and not in any sort of sort of abstract, cute way. They've got grizzly bears in their backyards. Literally. When they go outside at dusk, they've gotta be really careful. You have to change the way you live, otherwise, you know, you're going to be in trouble. Or maybe you won't be in trouble, but the bear will be in trouble, because if a bear does something weird, they're gonna put the bear down. We haven't had bears living in East Central Illinois for 120 years. It's really a different experience. So, here, we can all laugh. There aren't any bears or wolves. But go to other parts of the world, and it's totally different. There's no irony there. I've started thinking of the strategies for these events as speculative ecologies.

In 2016's BEAR, the rangers tell people that we're in a world that's four years in the future where there's no electricity, sea levels have risen drastically because of the break-up of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets—who knew that 2020 would be different kind of climate-driven nightmare. In the WOLF world we took people into a small park, a kind of tiny biological island. Inspired by the success of reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone, we told everyone that we'd reintroduced wolves to this Illinois park, but here there's also a slow slip into a mythic understanding of wolves that is on equal ground with the science. So, by the time the audience is in the barn, a transformation has happened, where we're all in the underworld together— where a new way of being is possible.

BAK: Yes. It makes a lot of sense that it would be very different depending on where you are and on what's happening.

I'm wondering about your process. I'm thinking specifically of ELEPHANT; there were so many different stories being told in ELEPHANT. As you were researching, there must have been a zillion million more stories that you didn't get to tell. And since your work is very collaborative, you're working with your wife Jen, and you're working with David Hays, and lots of other people. (Those names just came to me because I know them, but I know there's a whole bunch of people who work with you.) How do you decide what to include and what gets left on the cutting room floor?

DW: Well I haven't been rushing. I mean, the only one that kind of got rushed was MONKEY. MONKEY had a lot less research put into it. But the others had a lot of reading, site visits, interviews, talking with people in the field. Not like Anna Deavere Smith interviewing 300 people. I cast the net widely for as long as I can. I find myself waiting for a story to become a spine or skeleton that will support muscle, some foundation to build from and connect to.

There's also a slow slip into a mythic understanding of wolves that is on equal ground with the science.

So, I write really fat, you know. I collect a lot of stories, enough to make a five-hour show. And then I'll start to find a through-line. Slowly the cutting gets easier. I've worked with my friend and dramaturg Jayne Wenger for a very long time. I'll send her drafts and we'll bounce ideas back and forth. Jen will look at drafts and listen to sections too. But even now, looking back on all of them, I see things that should have been cut.

BAK: None of them to me felt like too long or too baggy.

DW: That's great.

BAK: There must be so many stories behind the stories. You already included so many and yet, one can think of them percolating out in all kinds of other directions that you didn't have time to take.

DW: Absolutely. One of the wolf biologists said, "Where do you stop?" Right? We've been with these creatures since the dawn of time. The stories are bottomless. So, I'm trying to create performances that resonate on lots of different levels. This often includes finding or writing a very local story that connects with broader global issues.

TIGER is very strongly about climate change. Most of the other shows have been set in sites specific to the human-animal story. ELEPHANT was in a cavernous stock pavilion. WOLF took audiences over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house. TIGER takes the idea of "site" and maps it down the belly of the country. I set up a tour that started in Bemidji, Minnesota—the source of the Mississippi—and made its way down the Mississippi and some of its tributaries, all the way down to New Orleans. Part of the idea with the show was to carve out moments for people to talk to each other about the changing world. Kind of like a salon or Chautauqua event. The show was presented in all kinds of different places:



WOLF performers. Photo by Valerie Oliveiro, 2013.

living rooms, garages, barns, museums, galleries, theaters, and universities. The tour mirrored progress down the Ganges in India. At the mouth of the Ganges is the largest tidal delta in the world. And at the mouth of the delta is the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world. And it's right in there that there's this population of tigers. Basically, they're Aqua cats. They swim, they hunt, they fish. And they've been eating people for hundreds of years.

BAK: Wow.

DW: They'll stalk a canoe for hours, swimming along, like an alligator. There's this whole culture that's evolved around surviving while living with tigers. I'm not sure if this still exists, but in the '90s, the Indian forestry department required anybody going into the Sundarbans to include a shaman, as a way to make sure everybody was walking properly, moving properly, doing all the rituals properly to make sure that people wouldn't be eaten. From my position in middle America, how can I even begin to imagine what it's like to live that way? I mean, I have no idea what it's like living in a place where real predators are a constant, daily threat to my life. Where, to make a living, you have to do all these things to literally appease the gods. And, here we are sitting with our cups of coffee, having a nice chat in these comfy chairs. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, all this tiger business is happening. Right now, you know?

BAK: Even while they're in danger. It's interesting that of course they're predators, but they're also endangered predators. And that changes it a little bit?

DW: Right. But, see, it's not just the tigers that are endangered. The land itself is endangered. In 1998, 75% of Bangladesh flooded. The Sundarbans and most of Bangladesh are less than 2.5 meters above sea level, so sea level rise is a huge, huge thing. Right now, it's predicted that there won't be any tiger habitat there at all by 2070. And if there's no tiger habitat, there's no human habitat. The land will be gone. At that point, it's ocean. So, coming back to the idea of local stories reflecting global stories. The Sundarbans and Bangladesh landscape are very similar to the Mississippi Delta. Louisiana loses a football field's worth of land to rising seas every 90 minutes.

BAK: Global connections with very, very local personal stories. Do you incorporate the stories in *Life of Pi*? Of a boy in a boat with a tiger?

DW: No, but there's a bit of Kipling's *Jungle Book* and Disney's *Jungle Book*; Kipling feeding us colonial India, Disney eating it up and feeding it back to India, India eating it and feeding it back to us. Cartoon and cultural creatures resting in our imagination as opposed to the real thing—and how enormous a difference there is between the two.

BAK: So, as you're finding these stories and you're finding the through-lines, things are being dropped, things are being incorporated. As you go through the process of creating each piece, do you feel like you have a sense of where it's going? Before you started, did you feel like each piece emerges as you go? When I look at something really complex like

ELEPHANT, I can't imagine that you could have seen the end point before you started.

DW: Well, it depends on what you think of as the end point. Like if we say the end point is the image of a full scale, life-sized elephant puppet walking through an enormous, dark, hushed, stock pavilion—well, that's the first image I had.

BAK: Right. As I look at it as an artistic piece, I wonder, how you even come up with something so big, much less all 26 animals? I guess I'm asking how much do you plan ahead of time and how much emerges as you go?

It's a little of both. A lot emerges as I go. The scale of ELEPHANT would simply not have been possible without the Creative Capital grant. Even giving myself permission to imagine on that scale wouldn't have been possible without the grant. So, some of building the work is raising the money, slowly learning what's possible with different budgets, and working with your collaborators to find the parameters to the world you're building. Is it going to be a used cardboard and dumpster-diving aesthetic or is it going to be 20 yards of elaborate fake fur that costs \$75 an inch? Some grants come in. Some don't.

Then some of it's also what's possible with personnel (which is also tied to the budget,



Elephant puppet propelled by five dancers. Photo by Valerie Oliveira, 2010.

relationships, availability, proximity). Environmental designer Andy Warfel worked on MONKEY, ELEPHANT, and the spring section of BEAR. Commercially he works on that scale all the time. That's his job. So, having his experience and confidence went a long way. Or Val Oliveira and Chris Peck. Both of them are hugely talented, smart people who are brilliant collaborators. Val worked with us on MONKEY, ELEPHANT, WOLF, and the fall section of BEAR. She's trained as a stage manager but there's soooo much she can do—photographer, choreographer, dancer, lighting designer. She's a theater artist in the broadest, best sense of the term. Same with Chris (ELEPHANT, WOLF, and BEAR)—composer, performer. Collaborating with other people that you trust, they are able to take the ideas and bring them much further. I mean, that's the hope and the dream of all collaborative stuff. You know, where you're working with people who are really good at what they do, and they can take ideas and run with them and transform them into something that's beyond what you could have done as an individual. These projects end up becoming communal events, from how they are built to how the audiences connect with them. This communal feeling starts at the core designer layer. Probably because that's how these things get built, radiating out, starting with me and all the writing and research I do; then me and Jen; then, say for ELEPHANT and WOLF, me, Jen, and Chris; then, for ELEPHANT, Val and Andy came in. So everybody's got their title, their special cap, but it becomes pretty fluid, everybody is doing what needs to be done.

This sort of culture spills out to the performers, artists, and students working on the show. One of the linchpins for this was Nicki Werner. She started with us running one of the spotlights in ELEPHANT when she was still a grad student. Every night she climbed up onto a catwalk laced with bat guano and worked the show. She's got this love of the kind of DIY ethic these shows have, so she'd connect with a lot of our students and bring them in to work, saying, "If you have time, come on by and help as much as you can." She was our stage manager for WOLF and BEAR. Her stage manager role ended up becoming more and more performative with each show. We'll have world class performers working in the show—folks like Cynthia Oliver, Aaron Landsman, Angie Pittman, Jessica Cornish, Niall Jones, Nico Brown, Stevie May, Kyli Klevens, Laura Chiaramonte, Beth Simpson, and Gary Ambler—right alongside professors, students, artists, and local community members like David Hays, Jorge Lucero, Toby Beauchamp, Guen Montgomery, Thomas Brown, Hana Yaginuma, Jason Patterson, Maria Lux, Phil Orr, Karin Hodgins Jones, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Cynthia Degnan, Mindy Manalokes, Tony Reimer, Grant Bowen, Joe Coyle, Xuxa Rodriguez, and Ellen Hartman.

For TIGER, we kept it small. I worked with a couple of good local friends: Susan Becker, the amazing costume designer that's worked on all of the Bestiary shows, and Melissa Pokorny, a great sculptor, artist, and colleague of mine in the School of Art & Design. Then I worked with my old friend and collaborator Jayne Wenger who was the dramaturge and codirector of the piece. Sound designer Jacob Ross brought in all of his amazing skills to round out the team. Of course, keeping the band together is tough. People move. They've got projects of their own they want to work on. We all get older, priorities shift. And if the folks that you really trust live a long way away, well, if you want to work with them, you've got to raise the money to house them and feed them and pay them. That's not a big surprise. But when you

can't get everybody to just hop on the subway for rehearsal, it's a different situation. It changes what's possible.

And then there's the whole idea of working with your partner. Working with Jennifer Allen has been amazing. She's had a long career as a dancer, performer, and choreographer. There are definitely times when we've butted heads, but I think we've grown to understand how to work together. She doesn't let me get away with anything. But then when something works, we both know it. That's a great feeling. She performed in MONKEY; codirected, choreographed the dance sections, and performed in ELEPHANT and WOLF; and choreographed the dance sections, and performed BEAR. Even though she hasn't had any time to work on TIGER she heard me read it through a few times. During the times we're ramping up to these shows, they sort of take over the house, so, we have to be careful. I could talk about this stuff forever, but it's not very good for sleeping.

Ok, so let's go back to your question of how much is planned out from the start of these projects versus how much emerges as we go. There's no one way, you know. In the initial meetings with Andy Warfel about making ELEPHANT, there were plenty of ideas that got cut. But sometimes you'd end up with images spinning out of some of the stories we'd be considering. So, what would happen with the images? Maybe these images would show up in a different medium—video or sound or a puppet or dance phrase.

With ELEPHANT we ended up taking the story of Hero, the elephant that was gunned down in South Dakota, and telling it different times in different ways. Telling the story, retelling the story, retelling, from different angles. Each time Hero's story comes up through a different media, it pushes different buttons. The story got told with stop motion video using clay models, once with the character of the old museum curator, and once with this quiet, hypnotic video. For this last example, this video is of a snowy blue night—an Illinois cornscape. It tells a stripped-down version of the story. Chris Peck made this beautiful bell sound to accompany the slow pan of the snowscape and the simple graphic text telling of Hero getting shot 300 times and the idea of mirror neurons. As far as we know, there's only a small group of creatures on our planet that have mirror neurons: elephants and whales and the great apes—apes like us—and they are suspected to tie in to self-understanding, self-acknowledgement, community, and empathy. It's a different level of intelligence. So, for the video, stripping it down to this very spare thing almost feels like radio—a cool contemplative medium which is really different from the awkward cartoon feeling of stop motion animation or the reenactment of the older museum curator's interview accompanied by four baby elephant dancers. I used the transcription of the interview I recorded of her telling Hero's story in the museum which was more like, you know, a thrift shop. So, it's a straight recording.

BAK: And that was also somehow funny, right?

DK: It was kind of comic. Yeah. But at the same time, it's not comic because at the same moment you're looking up at these big video images of the gun that was used to shoot him.

Or another image of her awkwardly holding a travel bag made out of his skin while she's talking about skinning the elephant and having elephant steak. There can be a moment for the audience where you're imagining what a different time 1915 was, where in a farm town where if you're going to have steak, you gotta butcher the animal, compared to today when we are so far removed from the actual production of our food.

BAK: Absolutely. So how are you seeing the resonances now that you've done five animals and you're working on TIGER? What kind of convergences are you seeing between all of the different pieces that you've already done and also between each performance and the people who have seen it and talked about it with you. And what kinds of feedback are you getting?

DK: Well, I mean, it's a little bit weird that it's going so slowly. MONKEY was 2009 and then ELEPHANT was 2010 but then it was 2013 for WOLF, 2016 and '17 for BEAR and TIGER in the fall of 2019, and a little bit into 2020 before the shutdown. So far, it's been a three-year thing. For feedback to the shows? Well, I mean there's all kinds of levels of this. After ELEPHANT people were coming up to me and it's like they had just had sex, their faces were actually flushed. So, I wasn't entirely sure what we'd done, but that seemed like a good sign. They were just so open, really excited, you know. WOLF started building a strange mythology. People have said to David Hays—

**The "Unreliable Bestiary"
is a nomadic, brutally
underfunded, renegade
national park with a
cultish underbelly.**

BAK: He was a ranger?

DK: Yeah, in WOLF and BEAR. So, David would walk from his house to the bus for the WOLF show in his ranger outfit. And people would be saying, "Thank you for your service." And they weren't kidding. And sometimes people will see him in other parts of town, and they're like, "You work at that wolf sanctuary, don't you?"

Just to be clear, we did not build a wolf sanctuary. But there are people that really believed that we had released wolves in Allerton.

BAK: No offense to the people in the wolf costumes. But you could tell that there were people in wolf costumes. I can't really imagine thinking that they were actual wolves.

DK: No. But you can imagine somebody telling this story and somebody mishearing it and then telling it as if there are wolves in Allerton right now. I mean, our bus driver for the WOLF show was convinced that wolves had been released in Allerton. He hadn't seen the dancers. He only heard what was happening on the bus. Of course, that's the history of performance. So many things never got documented. From the early performances, the only record of these ephemeral events were terrible grainy photographs or people telling stories about being there. And all of that becomes part of it.

The stories—the video, the sound, the whole experience—ideally, it's building a kind of dream, which you'd revisit in your mind.

BAK: Right. What about the interconnections between the different animals that you've already done or that you imagine doing?

DK: I like how we're continuing some of the ideas from WOLF, where "The Unreliable Bestiary" is a nomadic, brutally underfunded, renegade national park with a cultish underbelly. This sensibility was part of BEAR and informs TIGER. The last three shows have all included a park ranger character (or six).

The real national park rangers, say at Yellowstone or Isle Royale, are in this strange position of being figures of authority, but at the same time, they have to keep their mouth shut politically. And, sadly, things as basic and obvious as clean water and clean air have become politicized. So, the rangers have to read their audience. And the audience changes every hour, from very red Republicans to very liberal hippy kids. The rangers I've met really care about the environment. So, they find themselves doing this weird balancing act, you know? Trying to communicate with the public, but at the same time knowing that we're in the midst of a very dark time ecologically. The biologists are another step past the rangers. They often have a public, optimistic front, but it can mask some deep despair.

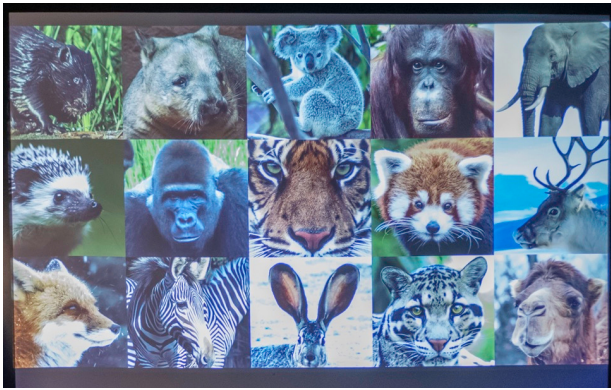
These performances are usually dense with information. I'm hoping that the stories and the information within the stories—the video, the sound, the whole experience—ideally, it's building a kind of dream which you'd revisit in your mind. I don't know if that actually happens, but that's what I hope.

BAK: Are you imagining that they will be archived and collected somehow? Are there videos of each one? In the performance piece that you did at Allerton, which was a compendium of all of the ones that had been done up until that point, there were video clips of a lot of the performances. Will they be archived as they build so that someone could see them all together at some point?

DW: Yeah, that's the idea. I make a book and a video-document for each performance. I'm really proud of the books. So far, I've designed and published them myself, an artist book edition of 100 that gets printed locally. For the bigger performances I also make a solo version that's not site specific. The solos combine video documentation and me telling some of the stories live. It gives the piece a little bit more life because I can take it to theaters, film festivals, living rooms, and classrooms.

Of course, the books, videos and solo versions are all going to give folks very different experiences than the original big sprawling site specific pieces where you're in the stock pavilion for ELEPHANT or walking through the woods for WOLF or BEAR. But I think that's ok. Maybe you saw that talk with Rick Powers and Pinsky about translations of –

BAK: – Dante's *Inferno*.



Images used in *TIGER*. From a photo by Nathan Keay, 2019.

I've started with the idea of charismatic megafauna, these animals that have been the superstars of our children's books, cartoons, and zoos.

DW: Yes! And they're talking about how writing *Inferno* in Italian might not be the end-all-be-all, right? If the Platonic ideal of the poem is up there in the clouds, there's the possibility that parts of a Swedish translation might get closer to the ideal than the Italian "translation." I love that.

So, in *WOLF* there were different things that would happen to the different groups that were going off on different trails. There was no way that a single group would be able to see all those different things out there in the woods. You'd only see one of those things, right? But in the video, you can see all of those things, or in the book, you're able to carefully read the script. Each medium or each iteration of the whole thing has got its strengths and weaknesses. So, yes, the idea is to have a book for every performance, and a video for every performance. The hope is to be able to keep shape-shifting with the technology. All of this is assuming the world doesn't end.

A few university libraries have bought DVDs and streaming videos of the shows. Some universities have bought the books. A couple of years ago Holly Hughes and Una Chaudhuri edited a University of Michigan Press book, *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, a collection of solo performance texts dealing with animals. The book included *MONKEY* and a big chunk of *ELEPHANT*. They got scholars to write about the work. And because of being in that collection, every once in a while a library will buy the DVD or the digital file.

BAK: That's really good that there's some sense of archives. So, last question. I don't know how fully you are going to switch from strictly animal into habitat—*PRAIRIE*, maybe *TREE*. How does that feel to you to switch from an animal to a habitat? I mean, obviously they are completely interrelated. And are you thinking beyond *TIGER*, of other animals? I was thinking of the Yangtze river dolphin as a good candidate. My first contender was blue whale, but both the B and a W have been taken. But with Yangtze river dolphin, it could touch upon whales and oceans.

DW: Or cetacean. It would be great to do both whale and dolphin, you know? Yeah. I'm treating the alphabet-naming part pretty loosely. There are, like, 250 different monkey species—more, I don't know. The word "monkey" becomes a fairy tale category. Earlier, you were asking how I choose the different animals for the shows. I've started with the idea of charismatic megafauna, these animals that have been the superstars of our children's books, cartoons, and zoos. So, Yangtze river dolphins, could be put in a show called *CETACEAN* which could include orcas, whales, and porpoises.

[Update: This is what we're working on: CETACEAN (The Whale)! The target for the performance date is September 2023]

BAK: That would be amazing.

DW: But I might end up doing SWAN, you know, because my dad –

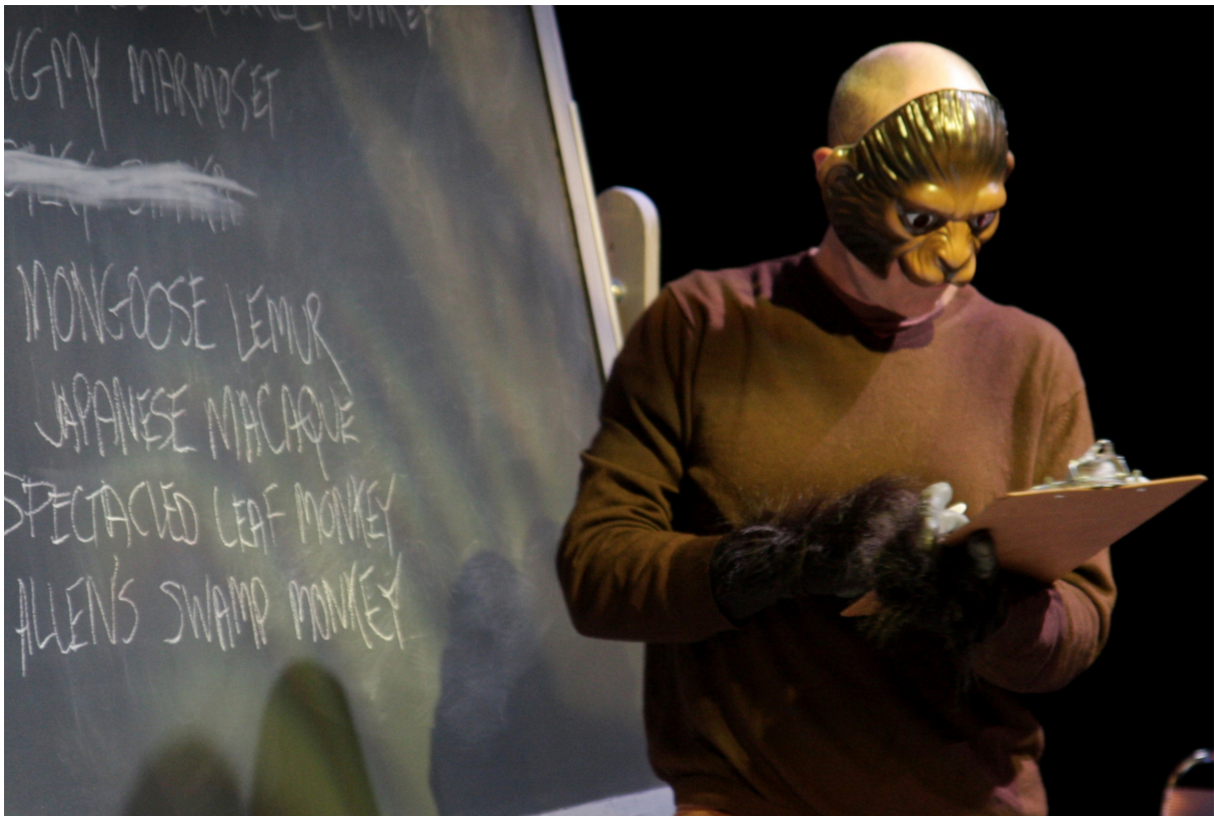
BAK: Are they endangered?

DW: Well, in the past, trumpeter swans have been close. Dad's quick to tell me that they're not officially endangered, but they had been completely hunted out of Minnesota by the time we had moved there when I was a kid in the early 1970's. By the 1930's there were only 70 of them left in the lower 48.

BAK: Okay. Because your dad is an ornithologist.

Yes, he was one of the people that helped reestablish trumpeter swans in Minnesota. I've got all these stories and photographs from growing up. As a kid there were a couple of times I'd go out banding with Dad. Banding is where scientists capture birds, mark them with identifying leg bands, and release them. This way people can track the birds and compile information about their lives. On some of these banding expeditions I'd wind up with a swan in my lap, you know? Literally. The thing with these shows is that they are about the animals, but it's probably more accurate to say that the shows are about all the interconnections between people and the animals.

Una Chaudhuri asked an evil question about the project (evil by her own admission). She



Deke Weaver in preshow for MONKEY. Photo by Valerie Oliveira, 2009.

asked, "In terms of the research you do in connection to *The Unreliable Bestiary*, what percentage of it falls into the area of 'science' (broadly conceived)?" So, I said to Una, "I have no idea." I guess it depends on the particular project . . . and what gets counted as "science." If science means looking at a 500 page collection of wolf data/information,¹ then sure, pretty science heavy. Most of it is very science specific, but it also includes a chapter on wolf/human history and the intersecting cultures springing up from that history (like ... wait for it ... the culture of SCIENCE!). That book was very important to the wolf project. So was going out to Yellowstone for a "wolf management workshop," a field seminar at the Yellowstone Institute, which is kind of science-ish I guess. It was taught and lead by scientists/naturalists, but it felt mostly populated by older tourists who want to go a little deeper in Yellowstone.

When I went up to the Salish-Kootenai Federation to talk about bears with Dale Becker, the wildlife management guy for their Natural Resources Department at the time, we talked for about 90 minutes. At one point he pointed to a map posted on the back of the door. He told me about all the different folks he has to deal with and how they make up this quilt of a map. He's gotta deal with the tribal leaders. He's gotta deal with the feds and the state. He's gotta deal with the strong young men who are sick of the racist bullshit and are starting to take some action. He's gotta deal with a white supremacist at the end of a lake who also happens to be a very good, detail oriented, observer of trumpeter swans; he's this very good steward of the land but is super-dark when it comes to dealing with the tribes. On another part of the lake are a bunch of new Amish families who are eagerly planting fruit trees and raising chickens and sheep, all of which are like ringing dinner bells for bears. It went on. Dale said it was like watching a parade. You think it's over, the last band has passed, no more floats, when . . . oh, lookie there, something else comes around the corner. It's non-stop. And all of it is about human relations, trying to deal with the people to make the habitat work for the bears/wolves/bison/etc. Sooo.... is that science? Because, uh, I was talking to a scientist. None of this is a surprise.

Here's a more recent one that I used for *TIGER*. A study. It's peer-reviewed. It's from an international science journal, but the entire paper is about trying to figure out why people are attracted to one animal but not another. Literally with hopes of finding poster-animals for organizations dedicated to habitat/species conservation (including the Big 5). So, it was actually a marketing study in science clothing. One of the criteria was something like "rate fluffiness: no fluffiness, some fluffiness, extreme fluffiness." Science? Sure! It's sort of like the whole idea of "species." You start digging—you don't even need to dig, just start scratching, tickling the surface—and you start hitting controversies amongst scientists about whether a certain organism is a species, a subspecies, an anomaly. Are there nine different subspecies of tigers or just two? Is it better to saw off the horn of the very last rhino in existence, put a 24-hour machine gun guard on the rhino, keep it in a tiny pen? Is this science? Where does anthropology/sociology studies fit in? Science? Or the dreaded "soft" science? It's not about the chemical makeup of tiger saliva. I spend much more time reading

¹ Mech, L. David and Boitani, Luigi. *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

about science as interpreted by people like David Quammen, Richard Powers, Barry Lopez, EO Wilson, Doug Smith, Katy Payne, Rob Nixon, Gay Bradshaw, Cynthia Moss, etc. Some are scientists, some are novelists, some naturalists. They all tell stories about going out to collect the data—the anecdotes that aren't allowed in the science.

I think the stories are incredibly important. Yes, of course, the biology, the science, is crucial. But even more crucial is connecting people to the science through stories, through art, song, culture, experience, and spiritual practice. Hitting people emotionally. We've all heard the term "change the narrative." Couldn't be more important than right now. The arts and humanities have been taking a beating for years, but all this emotional human behavior is what drives policy. It's driven policy in the past and will drive policy in the future. But . . . policy. Good lord. Policy. We can find all kinds of biological reasons for why it's important to protect these creatures and the habitats they live in but finding emotional, spiritual reasons for why it's important to protect these creatures and the habitats where they live? The habitat is just as important—more important, you know?

BAK: Right. But the whole planet is starting to become uninhabitable. It's that local-global idea again, where each piece of it—everything—is ultimately interconnected.

DK: Sure, so this is Lovelock's (not to mention Indigenous cultures' around the world) old Gaia idea where the Earth, the entire planet, is this living breathing organism and everything—the creatures, the plants, the rivers, oceans, forests, skies—all of it is part of the enormous living breathing organism. This is the definition of a bestiary—everything on earth has a spiritual purpose. A reason for being. But to really get the whole picture, think we need to

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extend this idea to include all the parts of the system—our daydreams, our spiritual and emotional life, our sleep, our love and hate, our imaginations, our economics, our hunger, our desperation, our culture and how all of this intersects . . . well, no, not intersects . . . it's not like it's some single point of contact. We are water, air, soil, micro and macro organisms.

BAK: And that's why I think your work brings out so many important resonances between things that we might not otherwise see.

DW: Well that's the hope. But I'm getting older, right? And these performances are coming out every three years.

So, uh, 26 times three—probably not gonna make it.

BAK: To the end of the alphabet.

DW: Right, so I've been thinking about building a frame so it can continue. Maybe the Bestiary becomes curricular? Right? So maybe we open it up to colleges, high schools, and elementary schools all over the place and everybody does three-minute performances about a specific species of beetle and then we archive it all online. Making templates, open-ended curricular "scores" to connect people to The Unreliable Bestiary's bigger idea. But maybe, maybe, right now, we should start growing trees?

Even more crucial is connecting people to the science through stories, through art, song, culture, experience, and spiritual practice.



Performers in ELEPHANT. Photo by Valerie Oliveiro, 2010.