



DOMINICK DUNNE (LEFT) AND TAKI

DUNNE PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK DEMARCHELIER
THEODORACOPULOS PHOTOGRAPH BY ?

HOW TO MAKE ENEMIES AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

BY MICHAEL GROSS

AGED SEVENTY AND EIGHTY-ONE, RESPECTIVELY, PETER THEODORACOPULOS—BETTER KNOWN BY HIS NOM DE PLUME, TAKI—AND DOMINICK DUNNE ARE WRITERS WHOSE CAREERS PROVE THAT EVEN IF THE TRUTH DOESN'T ALWAYS SET YOU FREE, EXCESSIVE CANDOR WILL KEEP YOU VITAL. WHEN WE MET FOR LUNCH AT BG, ON BERGDORF GOODMAN'S SEVENTH FLOOR, FOR THIS LATEST "BG CONVERSATION," TAKI OPENED IT BY RELATING AN EXCHANGE HE'D HAD NOT LONG BEFORE WITH ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN OUR LAST "CONVERSATION," VANITY FAIR EDITOR GRAYDON CARTER. CARTER ASKED TAKI HOW HE STAYED SO YOUNG. TAKI REPLIED THAT HIS FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH WAS AN ABSOLUTE ABSENCE OF AMBITION. THAT MAY BE TRUE. WHAT CERTAINLY IS TRUE IS THAT TAKI AND NICK, AS FRIENDS CALL HIM, ARE BOTH HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE AND ROLE MODELS FOR JOURNALISTS AROUND THE WORLD, REVEALING AND REVELING IN THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF MEANING IN SEEMINGLY SUPERFICIAL STORIES FOR MAGAZINES LIKE *THE SPECTATOR* AND *THE AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE* (TAKI) AND *VANITY FAIR* (DUNNE) AND BOOKS LIKE TAKI'S CLASSIC *PRINCES, PLAYBOYS & HIGH-CLASS TARTS* AND DUNNE'S BOOKSHELF-FULL OF BEST SELLERS FROM THE *TWO MRS. GRENVILLES* AND *PEOPLE LIKE US* TO THE FORTHCOMING *A SOLO ACT*. IN ADDITION TO WRITING, NICK HAS BEEN A HOLLYWOOD PRODUCER, AND TAKI, A FORMER CAPTAIN OF THE GREEK KARATE TEAM AND A PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYER. BESIDES COURTING CONTROVERSY, BOTH ALSO LOVE TO SOCIALIZE AND HAVE FAMOUS FAMILY CONNECTIONS: TAKI IS THE SON OF A SELF-MADE GREEK SHIPPING MAGNATE AND THE HUSBAND OF AN AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN PRINCESS; DUNNE'S LATE BROTHER WAS THE AUTHOR AND SCREENWRITER JOHN GREGORY DUNNE, WHOSE WIDOW, JOAN DIDION, IS PROFILED ON PAGE 30 OF THIS ISSUE.

DOMINICK: I've never been in here.

TAKI: Neither have I.

DD: So this is new, then.

TT: What are you going to have?

DD: Steak au poivre. What are you going to have?

BERGDORF GOODMAN: I am going to have the pistachio-crustéd shrimp salad.

[As the waiter took our orders, a woman approached the table.]

WOMAN: How wonderful to see you!

DD: How are you?

WOMAN: Very, very well. How are you?

DD: Marlene Hess, Taki.

TT: How do you do?

WOMAN: They have very good salads here. [laughter]

TT: I'm going to have your salad, then, too.

DD: What kind of salad are you having?

BG: Pistachio-crustéd shrimp. It's really good.

[As Marlene Hess retreats, a woman dining alone at the next table leans over.]

WOMAN #2: I love everything you write about.

DD: Work that in the story! Heh-heh.

WOMAN #2: You're the only reason I read *Vanity Fair*.

TT: Irresistable, isn't he?

DD: That's a good way to start lunch.

BG: You know what I want to know first? How you two know each other.

TT: We met...

DD: We first had lunch at 21. Remember, with Eva Gabor?

TT: But that was...

WOMAN #2: Excuse me, but I'm having the most divine lunch I ever had. [laughter all around]

TT: Nick was pumping me about [Lord] Lucan [Richard John Bingham, aka John Lucan, the seventh earl of Lucan, a British aristocrat and gambler who disappeared in 1974 after his children's nanny was found murdered] and his friends Jimmy Goldsmith and Aspers [aka John Aspinall, an eccentric conservationist and gambler who founded London's most elite casino]—and not that I

didn't want to tell you, but I was a great friend of Lucan's, and nobody has ever found out [what happened]. Everybody knows, had the statute of limitations run out, I would have spilled the beans.

BG: This was when you wrote about Lucan for *Vanity Fair*, Nick?

DD: Yes.

TT: I had volunteered to go and take care of that killer who murdered Nick's daughter, who went free, and I really meant it, because I was so...I'd just had a daughter, and I was so upset when I read the story that Nick had written about it [Dunne's debut as a writer, in 1982, decried the three-year sentence his daughter's killer received] that I said to him that I could kill that S.O.B. and there would be no connection with me whatsoever. But Nick is a Catholic and all that.

BG: He was looking out for you. But you hadn't gone to jail yet. [Taki's 1984 arrest at Heathrow Airport for possessing cocaine inspired his crime-and-punishment memoir, *Nothing to Declare*.]

TT: No. Then Nick called me when I wrote that thing about the Puerto Ricans [a wildly politically incorrect column in *The Spectator* condemning the raucous behavior of spectators at a Puerto Rican Day parade on Fifth Avenue]. He called me out of the blue, and he said to me, "I'm worried about your children. So I sent them to Southampton."

DD: Who was mayor then?

TT: Giuliani. He was furious.

DD: It was brilliant, but it offended a lot of people. And I got worried! When Giuliani criticized him [denouncing the column and suggesting a boycott of *The Spectator* unless Taki was fired—he wasn't], I thought something's gonna happen, and I called him in England. I'd forgotten this.

BG: Taki, many people first noticed you when you wrote a column for *Esquire* in the early eighties when it was edited by Clay Felker. It seemed there was absolutely no check on you then.

TT: Well, there wasn't in those days. Now they won't let you write anything. That was Clay [Felker]. Clay would let you do anything.

DD: That was before I became a writer. I didn't begin writing until I was fifty. So I missed that era.

TT: By a minute.

DD: By ten minutes!

TT: When I wrote that thing, "Panting for Paley," about all the women who wanted to marry Bill Paley [the then-chairman and founder of CBS] when he became a bachelor, Clay encouraged me. I had an idea of calling them, you know, "the piranha," "the shark"...

DD: The blowfish.

TT: Yeah, blowfish. Clay said, "Put the names in." And it worked! But nobody would let you do that today, because I mean, there's too many invitations, too many interconnections. But in those days, Clay only saw journalists. He didn't care at all.

BG: Speaking of connections, Nick, your "Diary" piece in *Vanity Fair* about Taki's seventieth birthday ball was terrific. Especially your description of the magnetic Scotty dogs—you and some of the people you've written about—avoiding each other at a party.

DD: Well, people hate me.

BG: People hate Taki too! Which just means you both do your job.

DD: That was a strange thing at your party that night. I mean, I am generally a popular person. But I have a small group of very powerful people who truly hate me. Anyway, two people with whom I have truly interacted badly were at his party. I know you said don't write about them, but I had to mention it. They were involved in my life.

TT: Sure. Exactly. But you didn't say anything bad.

DD: I didn't say anything bad.

BG: No. You were very polite, actually.

DD: I said that they looked well, we snubbed each other, and we stayed in different rooms, it was Taki's night, and Taki is a friend of all of us.

TT: Well, you were very, very gracious about it. Because the one thing you can't do is tell one friend you have to get along with the other. A lot of people do that. You know, the funny thing is, I had no idea that Nick was going to write about it. But I invited him because he's a friend of mine, and he was always nice, and I invited [*Vanity Fair* editor] Graydon Carter, and then Graydon called me up. I was in my chalet in Gstaadt, and he said, "We'd like to...Do you mind...it's Nick." And I said, "As long as it's Nick, it's fine." Then, of course, typically, a guy calls from the *Daily Mail* who writes under the pseudonym Ephraim Hardcastle.

DD: It's awful.

TT: Awful. So he calls me up and we have a chat. He asked if *Vanity Fair* paid for the party. I said, "Don't put this in the paper; nobody paid for the party." Nevertheless they ran it. [Hardcastle's item cast doubt on Taki's denial and claimed Carter helped draw up the guest list. In a subsequent column, he described Dunne as an "octagenarian lounge lizard," Taki as a "furtive, olive-skinned creature," his guests as "grotesque Eurotrash rabble," and the resulting article as "a two sickbags masterpiece of sycophancy,"] That's typically English. You tell them black, they write white, and vice-versa. Nothing very surprising. Which doesn't matter at all. When the tax people come after me, I'll just tell them there's nothing to tell!

BG: Now Nick has to do a party and invite you and all your enemies.

DD: [laughs]

TT: Nick interrupted his book to do that party. How's the book, Nick? Finished?

DD: Not quite. I've never had as hard a time with a book as I'm having on this.

TT: Really? Why?

DD: I just don't know. It's a novel. It's about New York. It will get me in trouble again.

TT: Well, that's all right. I find it very hard to write the columns now, compared to twenty years ago, when I knew much less, I had much less experience, I could knock off one column after another. I do a lot of them; I have to do one this afternoon. I am writing about Truman Capote. The one thing his ball had...it had legs. Forty years later, they still talk about it. I went to all the great balls. The Bestegui ball. My parents were invited. I went to the Rochambeau ball. I went to the Rothschilds' balls. I said, "Haven't people ever heard of these balls? They call Capote's the 'Ball of the Century.'" What Capote did was, he invited a lot of marquee names he hardly knew and, of course, it was the first promotional party, and it's all been a promotion ever since. Don't you agree?

DD: Absolutely.

TT: He was the first one to think of it. So crowded balls became public spectacles, and that was the end of Society. I was writing it last night, but I had a very tough time just getting the words right.

BG: Why do you think that is?

TT: I think it's age.

BG: Do you?

TT: I'm sure Nick...Nick and I have...Yeah, I think it's age.

DD: Why do you say that?

TT: Writing is like sports. You'll never be as good at seventy or at eighty as you were when you were thirty.

BG: But do you find that you hesitate because you worry more about consequences now?

TT: No, no, no. Not at all. Not at all!

DD: You know what? I don't either. No.

BG: Good.

DD: I figure, "Write it as you do..." Then if you have to change it in the editing, fine.

BG: Taki, what was the worst reaction you ever got to something you'd written?

TT: Obviously the Puerto Rican one.

BG: You think so?

TT: Oh yeah. Giuliani used to say, "Has he been deported?" and they should boycott Conrad Black's 200 newspapers. That was dreadful. The little thing he didn't know was that I was an American citizen. And the libel case [a 1986 lawsuit in England brought by a seventy-one-year-old socialite he'd described as "a high-class tart"] didn't help. I lost my house in Southampton paying for it. Then, six months later, my father died, and I came into some money, so in fact, I could've paid it. All I had to do was take out a mortgage, for God's sake, and pay off the libel, but I didn't...Anyway. [He sighs.] Five and a half acres on South Main Street in Southampton gone for less than a million. It's worth a fortune now.

DD: Is [the socialite] dead?

TT: Yes. And later, her husband came up to me in Salzburg. He asked Alexandra [Taki's wife], because I turned my back, "Could I please have a word?" He's an old man. So Alexandra said, "Of course." He said, "You know, I feel so bad, but don't forget, I was her husband at the time and I was dependent." He was very direct and open about it, so we said, "Fine..."

DD: And he married a richer woman than [the socialite]...

TT: Much richer. [laughs]



DD: I love that. But listen. Talking about what it's like to run into people who you have written about. Let me just tell you...

TT: Please.

DD: I'm having dinner at Le Cirque with my son and a girl he was very interested in at the time, whom he wanted me to meet. I get up to go to the men's room, and [a business mogul] appears, just out of prison. Okay? Now, I had written quite nicely about [him], although I felt he was guilty. But it was a sissy crime, and he's done enormous, I mean, incredible philanthropic things. I put it all in. I always sort of stuck up for him. This is what I didn't understand. And he comes up to me, Taki, and he said [referring to a defamation lawsuit—later settled out of court—brought against Dunne by the member of Congress Gary Condit, who was suspected of involvement in the death of a congressional intern with whom he'd had an affair], "They're gonna get you. They're gonna get you!"

TT: My God.

DD: I mean, it was like I was supposed to just collapse in front of Mister Powerhouse out of prison.

TT: I remember what you wrote about him. It wasn't at all bad.

DD: No! Nothing.

TT: Same thing happened to me. And it was exactly the same person. This happened at Conrad Black's book party.

DD: I was there.

TT: Yeah. He was there too, and when he came by, I said, "Hi," and he said, "You [expletive deleted]." Because I had taken the side of someone who had a falling-out with him. I got angry. I started yelling.

DD: And you were right to do it.

TT: So to make a long story short, people like that, they like it when [what you write about them] is positive, but unless it's hagiographic, they don't like it.

BG: Do they think they rule the world?

DD: Rule the world? The fact is, we're talking about an ex-convict here!

TT: I am an ex-convict too. [laughs] Except my crime was not to make a profit. It was spending money. I spent. I didn't make.

DD: That's so funny! Hilarious. [laughs]

[The conversation turns next to Claus von Bülow, the British bon vivant who was convicted but then acquitted of attempting to murder his wealthy American wife Sunny, who remains in a coma to this day. Dunne had heard that von Bülow was in ill health. "But then I walked into your party, and there he was and he looked great!" he was saying to Taki, when the woman at the next table leaned in again to say good-bye.]

TT: Good-bye.

WOMAN #2: Good-bye. And it was wonderful. I was dying to hear more about him. Did he do it or didn't he?

TT: The court said no.

WOMAN #2: I know.

DD: But I didn't agree with the court. [pointing to Taki] He did.

TT: I did. I certainly did.

WOMAN #2: My daughter is going to be so disappointed she didn't have lunch with me. It's been a trip.

DD: Okay. Bye.

TT: That was nice.

BG: Taki, what's going on with your magazine, *The American Conservative* [the so-called "paleo-conservative" biweekly magazine he cofounded in 2002 with Scott McConnell and Pat Buchanan, which infuriated many neoconservatives with its outspoken criticism of the war in Iraq. Taki was its principal financial backer]?

TT: After three years of financing it, I gave my equity back to Scott McConnell, who has done all the heavy lifting throughout our four years in existence. And the magazine, I hope, will continue to appeal to those who believe that America is a republic and not an empire. We began [*The American Conservative*] in October 2002 because we knew from day one that Iraq was the greatest foreign policy blunder in American history. Unfortunately, we've been proved right, and I hope *The American Conservative* will get the credit that it's due.

BG: You still write a column, don't you?

TT: Of course I do, and I hope to do so in the future. But I don't pull my punches, and that always presents a problem.

DD: I love *The Spectator* [the British weekly newsmagazine where Taki has written his "High Life" column for twenty-nine years].

TT: I hate what they're doing to it now, though, all those luxury goods and all that. It's going to become *Town & Country* or *Vanity Fair* or whatever? We were *The Spectator*. We were unique. You could read right wing, left wing, center, and the only criteria were good writing. *The Spectator* was making £2 million a year when the Barclays [the multimillionaire Scottish twin brothers who own *The Scotsman*, *The Telegraph* newspaper and London's Ritz Hotel] took it over. What do they want, £4 million a year? It's a jewel. Anyway, I'm very disappointed, and next year, when I'm thirty years there, I'll take a serious look and make a graceful exit. Like Gore Vidal wrote, I hope I go before they push me. If I could write novels, I'd write novels like you.

DD: I'm in the same dilemma, quite honestly. Thinking about maybe ending it [his "Diary" column with *Vanity Fair*].

TT: Yeah? I wouldn't mind if Graydon offered it to me, because it's exactly up my alley, by the way. If Dominick ever gave up the column, I would actually write a letter.

DD: But don't do it until I do, because otherwise they'll push me out.

TT: Are you crazy? Graydon would never push you out. No. Most [magazine writers] now, they're hacks. They don't know any better. Sure, they can sit down with Barry [Diller] and...what's his name...Geffen...and all this. You also want to be able to go to Italy and sit down at some nice contessa's on an afternoon and write about it. It makes a change from the New Establishment. He likes both.

BG: Sometimes it seems, most magazines have forgotten that there was a world before 1990. Do you think there is a possibility that the pendulum will swing and people will actually again begin respecting the idea that remembering the past matters?

TT: It's very difficult, I think.

DD: Let me tell you something. I think the worst things at this moment in time for the young are [Dunne ticks off the names of a socialite, a singer and an actress and recites the unpublishable details of several recent highly publicized scandals involving those and other young performers and socialites]. I'm not kidding. What an example to the young of our country!

TT: Celebrity-celebrity-celebrity. The idea that a young person today would envy, say, Jock Whitney, dressing up, going to the races and being very polite and low-key, simply cannot compete with the example of Paris Hilton. They'll say, "What a bore."

DD: I have a beautiful sixteen-year-old granddaughter. I say to my son, Griffin, "What does she think when she sees all this? It's every day in the paper."

TT: And yet, I went two nights ago, it was my boy John Taki's twenty-fifth birthday. He's an artist in Rome. He chose a place called Frankie's down in the East Village. It's a hole-in-the-wall, twenty-five people. I came in an horrendous mood because I'd been wrecked the night before; I'd inserted something in my ear that makes you stop taking drugs and drinking, which of course, I overcame! [laughs] So I arrived there. I've never seen such a nice bunch of people. They were all in their early twenties. They were all looking wonderful, even if they were sloppily dressed, in T-shirts. They were all artists, documentary-makers. They're wonderful because they're not at all trying to be cool, they are simply sweet and young and not at all spoiled, and dedicated to only one thing, art. I almost cried. They were just so perfect. And they don't read the newspapers; they don't even know who Paris Hilton is.

DD: None of the young read newspapers. It just fascinates me. If I miss the newspaper!

TT: It really gave me a feeling, "If there's more like them..." BG