

The audience Review

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The audience Review

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New York

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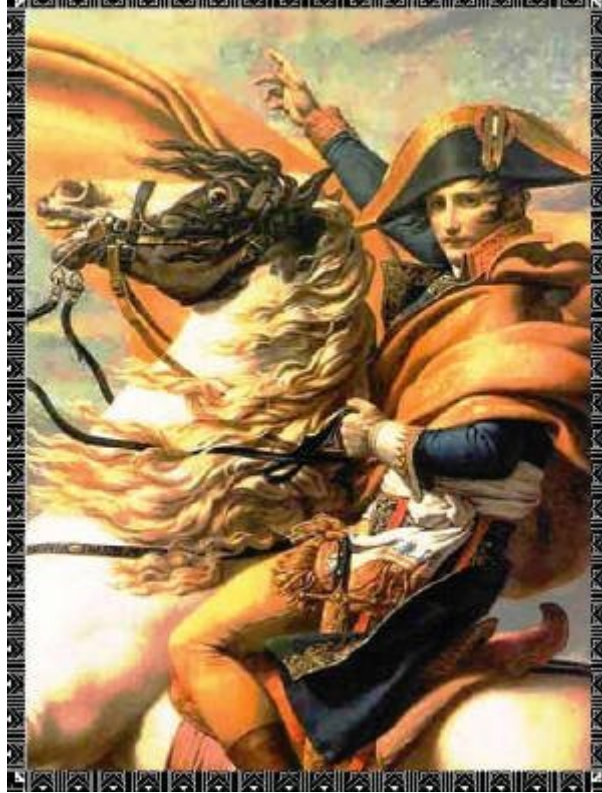
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WHAT IS POSTMODERN AVANT-GARDE?

A Review of Three Recent Examples of Plays

By

M. Stefan Strozier

There are prevailing themes in American theatre in 2006; specifically, in New York City, which, despite a rise in influence of regional theatre, is still the microcosm off which the nation feeds. What regional theater is rapidly learning, however, is they do not need New York City to tell them what to do – especially, New York City producers, scum of the earth they are. Up until the point where my theater company, La Muse Venale, Inc., www.lamusevenale.org, was rifled at gunpoint of equal billing, in a co-production of SECRETS, by producer John Chatterton, www.oobr.com, I might have protested this power shift; but not any more: I am all for it! To hell with New York City domination of theater! Why do we need it? I am now an active participant in the destruction of this power center! Let's all work together to undermine and destroy New York City theater power elites! Oh, producers: choose your enemies carefully.

Well, back to the themes, and there are several and they are all boring. Roughly, they are liberalism and political theater; social justice and unionism among theater industry's artistic professions; plays' subject homogeneity; and, postmodernism. In this review, I address one theme: postmodernism. There are some sub-themes too, such as the use of technology in plays; the decline of the critic, à la the demise of *The New York Times* in print via the ushering in of the Internet.

I start at the end of my list, with the sorry state of critics. Here is one example, and then another, and then I move on, since the topic of critics is so atrociously boring. I recently received a review for a play I wrote, called *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, riddled with spelling errors. The

review, from Martin Denton of www.nytheatre.com, was not all that kind to my play. Granted, some typos are hard to avoid. And, if there is only one or two people doing everything, with no income coming in, and their product is a new one, mistakes are understandable. Otherwise, they are unforgivable.

Theater in New York City is a liberal, political affair, because that's what *The Times* dictates. But newspapers, too, are collapsing before our eyes, and *The New York Times* in leading the charge into oblivion. *The Times* is the undisputed 'King of Culture' in New York City, and the King's critics wield absolute power. I submit: things are in much greater disarray than institutions such as *The Times* will admit (while they spy on us). For now, however, the ship holds – it creaks and leaks; but it holds.

I confess I come to postmodernism as a babe in the woods (thankfully). Certainly, any age can have avant-gardism; I argue the age just closed is called postmodernism. And, the "art" of postmodernism can only exist in the world of avant-garde. But, after enough time has passed, a thing is no longer avant-garde.

Recently, I wrote and produced an Aristophanes-based play called, *The Whales*, which drew a rather profound backlash of criticism, both inside and outside of New York City. (I guess this means I am on the right track.) The play, from the standpoint of the audience – and especially the large ensemble cast – was nothing short of a love fest (quite literally), as well as a financial success. The play is a simple farce, and I am still tweaking it; but the point of the play is to rail against postmodern avant-garde. *The Whales* taught me ½ of an audience laugh at satire; the other ½ frown at it.

According to www.dictionary.com, here is the definition of postmodern:

post·mod·ern (pŏst-mŏd' ērn)

adj.

Of or relating to art, architecture, or literature that reacts against earlier modernist principles, as by reintroducing traditional or classical elements

of style or by carrying modernist styles or practices to extremes: “It [a roadhouse] is so architecturally interesting... with its postmodern wooden booths and sculptural clock” (Ruth Reichl).

n : genre of art and literature and especially architecture in reaction against principles and practices of established modernism

We are in the process of leaving the peat bog of PAG (postmodern avant-garde), beginning with the 21st century, with the aid of technology and the Internet. For me, postmodernism is art produced prior to the Information Age, which began September 12th, 2001. It is quasi-art, which is highly academic, political, and boring. Postmodernism tries to make fun of everything, in a very academic way – it understands its subject-matter thoroughly; but this movement is not art. Absurd theater finds its home squarely in the middle of postmodernism, appropriately, as a form of theater about nothing. If postmodernism is rebelling against Modernism, fine – I do not care; but if postmodernism claims to introduce “classical” themes, it is only doing this, again, to rebel against Modernism. Postmodernism “re-introduces” classical themes in bits and pieces, to try and tease out some common sense in postmodernism’s otherwise confusing nonsense. In other words, postmodern “classical” themes are not to be taken serious; they are also farcical, as I shall demonstrate in a moment, when I review my plays. In our new ‘Age of the Internet’, classical themes *are* taken seriously – well, I am taking them seriously; hence, my precisely structured, Aristophanes-like play, *The Whales*, which rails against postmodernism.

This discussion is imperative, for both of us, to understand what is happening in theater today. But, without getting bogged down in an academic discussion of PAG, suffice it to say: While we have, officially, left the peat bog, sections of it still cling to us: our boots are still mired in black, primordial ooze; we reek of a foul, ancient odor; our limbs move slow, drained of any life, energy, or vitality, from fighting to free ourselves, and our very souls, from the peat bog of PAG. Ironically, PAG hold-outs, such as the 3 plays I am reviewing here, might now be called “post-postmodern rear-guard” (PPRG).

The three, rear-guard plays I recently saw are: Goethe's *Faust, Part I & II* (I only saw *Part II*, praise Allah), brought to us by director David Herskovits, artistic director of Target Margin Theater, and hosted by Classic Stage Company (<http://www.classicstage.org>; 136 East 13th Street, NY, NY), on Sunday, May 14th, 2006; *Herakles Via Phaedra*, brought to us by Great Jones Repertory Company and (primarily) Ellen Stewart, founder and artistic director of host La Mama Theatre (<http://www.lamama.org/>; 74A East 4th St., NY, NY), on Friday, May 26th, 2006; and, *Macbeth*, hosted by Delacorte Theater, in Central Park, brought to us by director Moisés Kaufman, and artistic director Oskar Eutis, of The Public Theater (<http://www.publictheater.org>; 425 Lafayette Street, NY, NY), on Saturday, June 24th, 2006.

These three plays are, in many respects, identical twins – triplets, perfectly ensconced by my argument, like a big, pinko blankie. They define the spectrum of the New York City power base, which I ambitiously seek to destroy, along with producers' control.

But, before I discuss the triplets, I am going to take a quick peep at the tragedian Arthur Miller, and his play, *The Crucible*, which I saw on Saturday, May 13th, 2006, a few days after reading *Death of a Salesman*, in an edition containing several reviews of the play.

The Crucible and *Death of a Salesman* are very different plays. I don't remember reading Arthur Miller; but I now understand his concept of "the common man's tragedy" (my paraphrase). In fact, I wrote a similar play, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, about a washed-up war veteran's painful adjustment to civilian life. Not satisfied with my play's outcome, however, I tried my hand again at tragedy, with *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*. In the course of writing, and producing, these two plays, I learned a few things about the nature of tragedy. Like Miller, I consulted Aristotle's *Poetics* for the rules of tragedy. And, without delving into an essay on the subject, I note there are rules to tragedy – very specific rules. Miller breaks these rules. His protagonist (or, antagonist) is not high bred. In this, Miller is affirming the communist philosophies of his day, and the political (highly subsidized) ideology of the Group Theatre. While this might still be okay; Miller goes further in his insolence: there is no plot in

his play; the action is not clear or deliberate, and technically, not even 'action', as most of the play is "remembering" past events; there is only 1 character; there is no real character development; and, the play is full of extremely complex stage directions. Furthermore, there are "musical interludes" between scenes – a sure sign (along with the stage directions) of auteurism – or, lack of play writing skill. Miller's era was one of directorial power and authority – even more so than today, if that is imaginable. The play is much too long and lacks any humor. Miller breaks other rules of tragedy; but my short list of his transgressions is egregious enough. And, because of all this, the play is not quite whole. It is an interesting experiment, and Miller can be partially blamed for more experimentation to follow; but tragedy is either tragedy, or it is not. This play hangs desperately, clinging agonizingly to its premises; but in the end it fails, and falls to its death in oblivion.

Having reached this disturbing conclusion, I set out to see *The Crucible*; and, upon leaving the theatre, I was beginning to realize Arthur Miller is a sub-standard playwright. *The Crucible* has too many characters on stage (I counted 20 in one scene); a whiff of a plot and story; and, the language is painfully discordant because all the characters talk in "Salem-speak," saying things like "prithee this." Obviously, *The Crucible* is Miller's answer to U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy's (witch) trials in the 1950s. In America, a play can survive a long time on its political underpinnings. This is what has happened with *The Crucible*. As a critic, I feel I am as objective as anyone because I truly do not care. I don't care about Republicans, Democrats, McCarthy, Communism, or Mr. Miller's Judaism (though I greatly admire Judaism, and I believe I am actually 1/8 Jewish, from my mother's Lithuanian grandmother), etceteras. In fact, I don't care, so much so, that I enjoy making fun of these topics, and the seriousness with which Americans take them. The play's the thing, period. *The Crucible* is not much of a play. Politics is an ancillary element of a play, far, far behind things like plot, character, action, dialogue. *The Crucible* is also far too long and devoid of humor.

The Academic Triplet

I saw *Faust, Part II*, on Sunday, May 14th, 2006. Wisely, I only wasted \$35, plus tax, on Part II, as I did not pay to see both parts. The entire *Faust* runs over 6 hours. The first thing wrong with this “play” – if it is one – is that there is no plot. *Faust* is a story, told in a series of encounters. A play is not a story, a play has plot. Is this so hard to understand?

But, the main problem with *Faust* is David Herskovits’ directing. Mr. Herskovits is the artistic director of Target Margin Theater Company, which came out of Brooklyn. As a non-profit theater company, they do not pay taxes. The playbill tells us Mr. Herskovits’ direction is leading us to insight in the 21st century. The playbill says that Mr. Herskovits is showing us that Goethe’s play is all about living in the moment of Zen, and that because 2006 is a very uncertain year, Goethe’s Zen knowledge, via Mr. Herskovits’ directing, will change everything – or, something like that.

Target Margin Theater Company has been, according to their glossy literature everywhere, work-shopping this play(s) for years or even decades. Much of the cost of this activity is funded by yours and my tax dollars, from massive federal, state and local grants, awarded to behemoth theater companies, such as Target Margin. Does the audience even want this production? People in the lounge, during intermission, were commenting how they were “totally lost” and “had no clue what was happening.”

Academia – institutions like ‘dramaturges’ – do not mix well with theater. Academics love to “get excited” about things, and it is easy to get excited about theater, even with just a few moderately skilled Actors’ Equity Union actors reading mishmash on stage, as we have with this play. Indeed, academia was out in force for this production, and it was widely billed as “superb” and “tremendous” – “a must see” – by *The New York Times* and all its leeches.

Technically, this play was a lot of choreography, moving and expensive sets, elaborate costumes, singing and dancing, clips of cheesy music and cliché sound effects, and words that were either expositional or did not make sense. Mr. Herskovits translated the “script”.

Here is another work of “Literature,” dragged out of the crypt, its dead, black hair brushed from its face; its diseased body clothed with pretty, expensive costumes, sent dancing about a stage; and, to be called Theatre! “See!” – The elderly academia moan out from their seats – “We can do it too!”

The Strange Triplet

On Friday, May 26th, 2006, I saw *Herakles Via Phaedra*, which was “assembled” by Ellen Stewart of La Mama Theatre, in “Downtown” (The East Village) New York City, and Great Jones Repertory Company. This production occurs every spring at La Mama, for god knows how many years now. It was well-reviewed by *The New York Times*. Incidentally, there is now a Great Jones Street in the same neighborhood.

A note about La Mama and Ellen Stewart, who is the founder and artistic director of La Mama, Inc., which is *the* bastion of Hippy, 60s, off-off Broadway theatre. It has been around over 40 years and now they own several buildings on the block, multinational corporations, theatre companies, etc. They receive massive tax-funded grants. As a non-profit theater company, they do not pay taxes.

I had heard about Ellen Stewart, and I imagined her to be an old, confused woman – a figurehead – whose vast empire was managed by an oligarchy of first-tier lieutenants. Apparently, this is not correct, as her reign of tyranny appeared well intact. She rings a little bell when she wants attention. I overheard her underlings complain about her.

Herakles Via Phaedra is a strange mix of dance, live music, stage lighting and sounds effects, and shabbily but expensively costumed actors numbering about 25 (have I begun to demonstrate a trend?). The spectacle-trying-to-be-a-play is about the 12 labors of Herakles, and it is

also the story of Phaedra. The two myths are unrelated, despite the ‘Via’. The play is arranged episodically. Various scenes portrayed each section of the myth(s). When actors entered or exited, they danced like fairies. For example, in one scene (typical of many others), 2 male actors (buttocks’ naked) exited, clapping hands as they simultaneously skipped, sideways, across the length of the stage. This extremely gay dance step took several minutes to execute because the huge stage is, perhaps, 25 meters wide. Exiting in tandem with the skippers was a third male actor – buttocks naked – who did not have a partner, so he had to clap the air in front of him, as if he were playing an “air guitar”.

At the beginning of each of Herakles’ 12 labors, one actor, who was on the second level of this auditorium-like stage, sang one sentence, in an operatic voice, such as, “Now, Her-a-kles, you must kill the Lion of Nemio!!” This was the only dialogue in the play, other than someone called the narrator, who appeared at the play’s opening, dressed in a tuxedo, sang for 10 minutes about nothing I could understand, and then left and did not return. It was hard to follow the action along, because there was no dialogue.

So, after this scene’s operatic announcement of the action, another actor appeared, dressed with a mop head painted gold – otherwise naked – and wrestled with Herakles. The “lion” was then destroyed, thrown to the ground, and the actor danced offstage, as if he were a fairy.

And so it continued, for several hours. Many scenes were so avant-garde they were confusing. For instance, in one scene, the Amazons (I think this was who they were) were dancing, with some male actors, to traditional Spanish music, with all the click-clacking. And, this made no sense at all. Much of the action occurred on the second level, which placed the actors back, out of view from the audience!

There was a live band – quite good – consisting of drums, a violin, a keyboard player, a guitar player, and the band members used many other instruments. The actors and the musicians all wore microphones, so everything was very loud and clear, but incomprehensible. The singing consisted of “la, la, La!” Each actor’s movement was perfectly timed to

music, or a sound effect, all of which was very cheesy. There was one dance step in particular, choreographed to some modern, Michael Jackson-sounding song, which was so distorted, it was strangely painful to listen.

The props were elaborate and bizarre, such as a very large piece of silk, which several actors carried onstage. The fabric resembled one of those giant U. S. flags soldiers carry, and the actors moved it up and down, creating giant waves in the fabric. In one scene, a 6-headed “hydra” appeared, consisting of 6 Styrofoam heads, like those of mannequins, stuck on a large, wooden, unpainted board, shouldered by an actor, who danced around the stage (like a fairy). Herakles pulled each head off of the board and tossed it, until he had “defeated” the hydra. I must confess, when I saw the hydra scene I started laughing loudly, not *with* the play; but *at* it. No one else was laughing, however.

La Mama, Inc. represents American theatre in 2006, in an all-encompassing way. Here’s an example of what I mean: According to their glossy literature, La Mama, Inc. recently bought a castle in Spoleto, Italy. If the pictures are a correct indication, the castle is vast and overlooks a large town. At this La Mama, Inc. castle, directing classes are held, which cost \$3,200 for 3 weeks. Classes offered: ‘Poetics and the Body’, ‘Creating Works in Time and Space’, ‘Documentary and Socially Engaged Theatre’, and several more. Indeed.

This is American theatre – now marketed commercially abroad. This Great Hippy, Ellen Stewart, has become the Great Capitalist of American Theatre. She ships her philosophies out, and then she brings in hordes of foreigners to the East Village (and they are an asset), brain-washing the various theatre companies from places such as India, Poland – or wherever – with La Mama, Inc.’s philosophies. So, now America is seen as the bastion of postmodern avant-garde, via La Mama, Inc.’s philosophies. And, since we are a super-power, with global reach and global power, our vision for theatre must be right. But, the problem is, La Mama’s philosophies have nothing to do with art. I cannot emphasize enough *Herakles Via Phaedra* is not a play. And, the philosophies of La Mama, Inc. are strange, having nothing to do with theater.

The Weird Triplet

On Saturday, June 24th, 2006, I saw *Macbeth* in Delacorte Theater, Central Park, New York City. It was not *Macbeth*, by Shakespeare; but rather a Shakespeare Spectacular! – Shakespearian extravaganza!

Moisés Kaufman directed *Macbeth*. Kaufman is the “playwright” who arranged scenes called “moments,” in a documentary for stage called *The Laramie [Wyoming] Project*, which made Matthew Shepard a martyred Saint.

Oskar Eustis is the artistic director of The Public Theater, whose stated goal, in an interview in *The New York Times*, of staging *Macbeth* was to protest the Iraq War. As a non-profit theater company, they do not pay taxes, and they receive millions of tax-payer governmental grants.

Tony Kushner (who helped Oskar get his job) translated the other big play produced by The Public Theater this summer. Here is my list of some of the things wrong with this production of *Macbeth*:

- 1) Star Trek music plays between and during the scenes, sometimes even drowning the actors’ voices. As the audience is seating, there is a grainy, discordant, “war-like” radio broadcast playing over the speakers.
- 2) When the 3 witches drop their items into their caldron (which we can’t see), we hear a blue whale splashing in the ocean!
- 3) When Macbeth is speaking to a ghost, the ghost on a top balcony tier, behind Macbeth.
- 4) Some actors are dressed, to a degree, in World War One uniforms; but other actors wear Scottish Kilts. And, they wear swords! In World War One, the soldiers and sailors did not have swords! They fought with guns! And, there was no Air Force in World War One; but there are characters in Air Force blue.

- 5) Every time a character takes a step, they dance like a fairy. Macbeth is not a musical.
- 6) And speaking of musicals, we are subjected to asinine, avant-garde “fight” scenes. What is wrong with real swordfights?
- 7) The cast was devoid of talent; especially, Liev Schreiber.
- 8) The director added modern English words into Shakespeare’s play, such as the use of “dollars” – and other words. Why not just translate the entire script? I can never understand what the hell Shakespeare is saying.
- 9) The 3 witches single out audience members, with the aid of spotlights, and then speak directly to the audience members, which causes discomfort. I do not think Shakespeare intended this.
- 10) Etceteras!

Finally, I have a personal note for war protestor Oskar Eustis: I do not appreciate you using my tax dollars (federal and city) to fund your mockery of our troops fighting in the field. I am not a politician and I do not support war (see my play, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*); but I have fought in a war. I’ll make a bet you have not. I support our troops in the field.

I will never step foot again in the Delacorte Theater, or the Public Theater on Lafayette Street, and I will be a better man for it!

POET LUKE DAVIES

Interviewed by Magdalena Ball

Luke Davies' first collection of poetry, *Absolute Event Horizon* was shortlisted for the 1995 Turnbull Fox Phillips poetry prize. His first novel, *Candy*, published in 1997, was a critical and sales success and was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's award. His second collection of poetry, *Running With Light* was published in 1999 and won the 2000 Judith Wright Calanthe Award for Poetry, *Totem*, published in 2004, won the John Bray Poetry Award in the 2006 Festival Awards for Literature, was shortlisted in 2005 for the Colin Roderick Award for literary works contributing notably to the body of Australian literature, and won the 2004 Age Book Award. He also wrote the screenplay for the recently released film version of *Candy*, produced by Margaret Fink, directed by Neil Armfield, starring Heath Ledger and Abby Cornish.

Magdalena: What are the origins of Totem?

Luke It literally exploded upon me, in northern Thailand in early 1999. A few encounters with real animals (pythons, monkeys, elephants) formed the conceptual basis for this grand love poem in which totemic animal figures, including the mythological, would visit and inform.

Magdalena: You've published novels, and collections of long, and short poems. What are some of the differences in the writing process between these 3 genres?

Luke: At the core there's a great similarity: one way or another, I'm telling stories. But there are big differences. I like my prose to be simple and transparent: let the story emerge. With poetry, there's a greater density: sometimes the story IS in the language. Certainly language is at the forefront. Though the novel I'm trying to finish right now is an exception to the rule; I wouldn't comfortably call it "simple and transparent".

Magdalena: Which genre do you find most difficult?

Luke: The long poem ("Totem Poem") was physically demanding -- perhaps because of the sustained nature of the construction. But it all has the potential to be an equally difficult -- as well as equally joyful -- experience. I like the Richard Hugo quote "I never worked hard in my life except on a poem"; so maybe poetry is the most difficult.

Magdalena: What are some of *Totem's* main themes/concepts which you explore?

Luke: It's very simple in the spread of its concerns: it's about love in all its manifestations, from the physical to the mythological. It's about how to live, and how to face death. "How best to taste the plumness of today." How to enter "the gap in things."

Magdalena: The love poems seem to be connected - lines repeat from one poem to the next, and the structures are identical. Did you write them together as a set?

Luke: The whole book, the big poem and the 40 small ones, was conceived as a single interlocking, echoing, reverberating work. The book took four years to write but, yes, the poems were all written consciously as a set.

Magdalena: What is the relationship between the love poems and "Totem"?

Luke: They inform and interact with it. Lines are recycled and morphed between the two sets of work. There's a lot of repetition. The effect is incantatory.

Magdalena: Poetry has long been considered the non-lucrative 'high art' cousin of prose. Has this been your experience? (eg do your novels sell better than your poems?) If so, why do you think this is?

Luke: Yes, thank god for the novels. You can't make much money from

poetry, but of course, you don't do it for money. In fact, you can't make all that much from novels, so maybe I should say, thank God for the film options of the novels. I think it's always been this way. Poetry has been described as a "difficult pleasure". It's a respite from the labours of mediocrity. But not everyone wants that respite. In any case none of this matters: it will always be there, it survives across the millennia, and it is, as Peter Porter has called it, "the one art form which is not threatened by not having an audience.

Magdalena: It's a paradox - poetry remains one of the most popular forms of self-expression, but it doesn't tend to be commercially viable. Why do so many people write, but not read poetry?

Luke: Too many people write but don't read poetry. It's why there's so much bad poetry around. Poetry is not the outpouring of the contents of your head. But you wouldn't know that from reading a lot of it. It's an arrogant (or ignorant) attitude, but a whole lot of people feel the need to "express" themselves as poets, but have no interest in or knowledge of the form, the tradition, the structures.

Magdalena: Do you think that this is changing? That poetry is undergoing a renaissance, at least within Australia?

Luke: News of its renaissance is probably about as exaggerated as news of its imminent demise.

Magdalena: What was it like to have an editor working with you on *Totem*? Tell me about the process you went through and some of the bigger editorial changes which were made.

Luke: It was a wonderful luxury, and a rare thing in the world of poetry publishing. I won the inaugural Dorothy Hewett Memorial Fellowship from the Varuna Writers' Centre in the Blue Mountains. The fellowship included money to pay an editor of one's choice. Peter Porter made some general contributions and comments. Judith Beveridge did the close work in the trenches. I literally "invited" her into the poem. I didn't want someone pussyfooting around. People get funny about editing poetry.

They steer clear of the details. Not Judith. I asked her because I really admire her work, and yet I think we're doing very different things. So I imagined it might be an interesting clash of tensions, of different sensibilities. And I think it worked well! She got very specific: about things that were tonally wrong, about lines, even words, that didn't work. I didn't agree with every suggestion; but the changes I made as a result of her editorial input were significant. (You can see the difference between the pre-Beveridge edit, as published by Ivor Indyk in HEAT magazine last September 2003, and the final version as it appears in the book.)

Magdalena: Is there a new work or works on the horizon that you can give us a hint about?

Luke: Various. Two books of poems, one mixed, one a specific theme; the third novel which I'm trying to finish; a couple of scripts; even a play hovering on the horizon.

A REVIEW OF TOTEM, BY LUKE DAVIES

By Magdalena Ball

Allen & Unwin Australia

ISBN: 1741143489, A\$21.95, Paperback , 96 pages, May 2004

“there was a gap and we entered it gladly.”

Luke Davies *Totem* consists of one thirty nine page poem, and forty ancillary poems, all interrelated, and all united by the main topic of a single love story. The imagery is intense, and highly personal, so much so that the reader at times feels a kind of guilty pleasure, as if they were the recipient of words clearly intended for someone else. Davies isn't afraid to get right into the heart of the moment, to show his heart on his sleeve and turn consummation into something much grander - the “great gibbon of convergences,” or the central point at the moment of the big bang. Davies' love is the union of the most mundane physical attraction with the greatest forces in the universe. It is both minute and expansive. This duality is what makes it so powerful. In the lengthy and almost epic “Totem Poem” Davies begins with a nod to “The Wasteland” with its spring imagery full of lilacs and pollen, its unreal city, its bits of French, and the hint that this gap in time occurs at the “violet hour,” - that moment between wanting and receiving. The mundane is simply two human beings in love. A woman sits on a warm car bonnet: “How the bonnet was warm on your bottom! And the metal continued tick-ticking though the engine was off.” (5), a piece of a letter is read out loud, two lovers make love in a field and eat nothing but chocolate bars, drive along and watch cane toads in the car headlights, or miss each other while waiting for a departing airplane flight. But each of these things becomes something else, something grand – the source of all intelligence, all meaning in the universe.

Although “Totem Poem” is mystical, instead of Blake's Heaven and Hell, we have dark matter -- that moment of quiet before everything begins, the

gap. The poem pivots around that gap. Davies creates metrical music by returning to his themes, the lusty monkey boy, the blue time of lilacs and the yellow time of pollen, girl of light, world-in-a-belly, and always the gap, entered. The poem is fecund, very rich and overflowing with metaphor and references from Greek (Minotaur, Asterion) and Hindu (Ganesh) mythology, the Bible, natural scenes, history, emotion, desire, time and space, condensed tightly into those thirty nine pages. At times, the heavy fecundity of the poem threatens to overwhelm the pages on which it has been printed:

World-in-a-belly. The Minotaur rounds the final bend,
Weeping with fear and elation. The ocean opens out.
He doesn't move a muscle. It all goes in. Fine day for a brisk dip.
The fluttering of butterflies, glorifying his name,
Clustering around his astonished head, soaked in sunlight.

Heart of the world. From the yellow time of poppies
To the blue time of poellen, lament becomes epithalamium.
A gecko after rain means happiness. The sky has burst;
The air is wet with blossom. There is a gap; at every plateau,
Praise. A shining isomorphousness rings out --(38)

But Davies has a very strong grip on what he is doing and always pulls it back to the personal at the very moment when things threaten to overflow, to explode, static crackling:

Stop we will hold each other here.
I am listening. I am listening.

The Forty Love poems are all short, no longer than a page each, and although many of them were published individually, they were designed and written to work in conjunction with one another, as Davies says: "the whole book, the big poem and the 40 small ones, was conceived as a single interlocking, echoing, reverberating work." While "Totem Poem" takes the concept of love in its most grand and encompassing sense, the poems explore the minutiae, moving in closer, to things like a woman's nakedness, two lovers together, the sound of the wind, a kiss, a blossom in

bloom, a sensation of loss, a dream, or physical beauty. These poems are like moons orbiting around the Jupiter or Saturn of Davies' big poem. The smaller poems contains bits of the larger poems, whole lines, like "Stop we will hold each other here" (Clasp), images like the car still ticking after the engine has stopped, characters morphed such as the Girl of Light who becomes Sugar Lee, and concepts, such as the gap, "space inside a pulse." The shorter poems are a little more casual than the longer one, with little jokes, a nod to Adam (the first man), the Sex Pistols, Shakespeare and reggae, but again, Davies manages the balance between light and heavy deftly, and gets away with the kind of juxtaposition that few other poets would be able to master.

Despite the jokes and the odd bits of popular culture, *Totem* is not a simple or an easy read. It requires sustained concentration, and ideally, a number of re-readings, so the deep layered textures of the words can be felt fully, the rhythm can come through clearly, and the many puns and connections teased out. This is a very concentrated piece of work, a poem cycle if you will which touches on the biggest and most important themes - love, life and death in its broadest most cosmological sense, and the relationship between these. Keeping in line with Davies' metaphysical themes, it is, in effect, a literary "mTheory" (the unknown 'theory of everything'), which is to say, it gives the reader everything. What could be more generous than that?

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