

The audience Review
www.worldaudience.org

ISBN 978-1-934209-34-9
10-digit ISBN 1-934209-34-1

\$11.99

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The audience Review

World Audience, Inc.
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Issue # 4
March, 2007

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THE TRAGEDY OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN
BY
M. STEFAN STROZIER

A TWO-ACT PLAY, FREE TO PERFORM.



The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln is a play by M. Stefan Strozier. For a production record and reviews, please visit www.lamusevenale.org. *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* is FREE to produce. The playwright only asks that you provide him with proper crediting. With its cast of 21, it is a great play for schools or educational settings of young or old. This historical play focuses on the last year of President Lincoln's life and the dramatic events that surrounded it. Other major historical figures of this period are thoroughly explored: Generals Grant and Lee; John Wilkes Booth and the entire Booth family; Frederick Douglass, Mary Todd Lincoln and others. *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* is \$10 and available at www.worldaudience.org. No request for production or remuneration is required to produce *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* (ISBN 978-1-934209-36-3), and the script may be printed for free at: www.mstefanstrozier.org.

Broadway Lightning Designer Donald Holder

An Award-Winning Designer Sheds Light on His Art

by Doug Holder

Donald Holder is my brother. He also happens to be a Tony Award winning lighting designer for the *The Lion King*, and just recently worked on a musical based on the songs of Bob Dylan *The Times They Are A Changin'*. Since he graduated Yale Drama School twenty years ago, I have seen him transformed from a gangly post-collegiate to a husband and a doting father of two wonderful kids, Josh and Sarah; not to mention one of the top theatrical lighting designers in the world. Over Thanksgiving dinner at his home in Croton-On-The-Hudson, N.Y., I asked if he would be interested in doing an interview as a follow-up to one we did several years ago. He generously consented.

Doug Holder: Dylan is such an enigma...can you tell me, what were your first impressions of the man were when you met him in L.A.?

Donald Holder: Based on my one brief encounter, Dylan struck me as a shy and unassuming man. He clearly is a very private person, and doesn't enjoy a lot of attention, at least in the situation I observed him in. I thought this was quite a paradox, given what an iconic and legendary figure he's become.

When we were working on *The Times They Are A Changin'* in San Diego, there was a lot of speculation among the company members about when and if Dylan would visit. One afternoon, a few minutes before we were going to start a dress rehearsal, I noticed a small and disheveled looking older man sitting in the back row of the theatre: long, unkempt hair sticking out of a black woolen cap, black jeans and overcoat. My first impression was that a homeless guy had wandered into the building. When I looked again, I realized it was Bob Dylan himself. What really

gave him away, on my second look, was the beautiful and much younger blond woman sitting next to him...

Dylan's participation on the project (beyond the few conversations he had with Ms Tharp) was limited to this one viewing of the show. He sat next to Twyla during the run-through, and was clearly enjoying himself. Afterward, he walked up onstage and spoke very quietly to the actors. I could tell he was particularly taken by Thom Sesma, who played the character of the old tyrannous circus leader, and who sings and looks very much like Dylan himself. I heard only bits and pieces of his conversation with the cast...At one point he told them he had never heard his music performed so well, and suggested, "You guys should cut a cast album, and then I could retire..." Twyla introduced me to Dylan on his way out the door and when hearing that I designed the lighting, he shook my hand and said, "It looks good to me..." Not much of an encounter, but exciting just the same. A few moments after we had all said our goodbyes, he suddenly reappeared and pulled Twyla aside to speak with her privately before quickly slipping away once again. Twyla told me later that when he had walked outside into the light of day, he felt the impulse to return to remind her how special he thought the work was, and urged her resist all the imminent critical response and not change a thing.

Doug Holder: My first impression was Dylan's music doesn't lend itself to a Broadway musical treatment, like [Billy] Joel's did. Your views?

Donald Holder: Billy Joel is a master storyteller, and his lyrics lend themselves much more easily to dramatization. In *Movin Out*, Twyla told the story and expressed a huge range of emotions largely through her movement, and Billy Joel's music. The piano man, located above the playing area, who sang all of the 24 songs throughout the evening, functioned like a one-man Greek chorus, sometimes helping to tell the story, and other times clarifying or commenting on it. Because Joel's writing can be fairly literal, Twyla was able to craft what actually resembled a classic story ballet (much like Giselle or Swan Lake) told in a very contemporary style. The first act contained a lot more exposition and classic storytelling: the second act was

more abstract, probing the emotional underpinnings of the characters, exploring their sense of guilt, anger, loss, and disenfranchisement. Although some audiences were a bit confused at the outset, most eventually connected with the material and enjoyed the evening immensely. The lighting functioned largely on three levels:

1. Create a tangible, naturalistically based environment in the first act to help the audience navigate through the important expositional moments;

2. Create an abstract, emotional landscape that reflected the inward focus the show takes late in the first act and for most of the second act;

3. Frame the piece in a contemporary, rock-n-roll concert aesthetic, since the kinetic energy and style of the music demands it. We also felt it allowed a wide audience base to enjoy the show on more than one level: either as rock concert accompanied by dance, a performance art piece with clear social commentary, or as a moving, heartfelt story told in an innovative and unusual way.

Bob Dylan's work is more abstract and esoteric in nature: his words evoke dreamlike images and deep-felt emotions rather than a linear storyline. Twyla responded to the challenge of making a musical that's centered on Dylan's work by creating an abstract dreamscape, located in a desolate, surreal circus reflective of some of the more psychedelic of his songs. Using a cast of real, tangible characters Twyla tried to tell a simple coming-of-age story that also explores the epic themes so often associated with Dylan's lyrics: love, loss, power, greed, faith, war and peace, etc. I think it was a daring, exciting and hauntingly beautiful exploration of Dylan's world, and a very timely commentary on the state of our society today. Because the world of *The Times They Are A Changin'* was highly abstract and expressionistic, many people left the building confused rather than enlightened, and the critics harshly dismissed the piece.

The lighting was inspired somewhat by our visual research into

the traveling carnivals and circuses in the early twentieth century. I also drew some of my inspiration from Fellini's film *La Scala* and other cinematic works created in the "film noir" aesthetic. I wanted the light to have a dark, sculptural, expressionistic quality. I was also interested in creating a design that defied the conventional wisdom re: what a Broadway Musical should look like. I wanted the work to at times have a "spontaneous" look, as if the performers themselves created the light in the space by rolling out some spotlights and focusing them in on the action. There were several "play within a play" moments that took full advantage of this approach, such as "God Gave Names to All the Animals". Other songs, such as "Simple Twist of Fate" and "Knockin' On Heaven's Door", were presented as a character's inner monologue, and in these cases, the light got increasingly dark and dramatic. In the song "Rollin' Stone", which in the context of our show was a character's outward expression of frustration/anger after being rejected by an older woman, the lighting felt like a cross between Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Circus (which I did light, actually), and a Bob Dylan Concert held at Madison Square Garden.

Doug Holder: Twyla Tharp is known as a brilliant, demanding, innovative taskmaster. How is the dynamic working with her? Do you feel it a good fit between you two?

Donald Holder: Those words represent an apt description of Twyla. But she's also a great collaborator, and I think maybe because she's also a mother, she has a tremendous nurturing spirit. Twyla is a brilliant visionary, but she respects the contribution her collaborators can add to the work, and she actively seeks our opinion. Not because she's at all indecisive, but because she trusts our instincts and our particular point of view. In my work with Twyla, she has always encouraged me to express what I think or feel about a particular moment or the work overall, rather than dictating what she feels the work means or how it should look onstage. She clearly realizes that she'll get the best out of her fellow artists by allowing them to be partners in the process, rather than people who merely implement her singular vision.

Twyla never *demand*s things from me, but expects my full attention and commitment to the work. She's brutally honest and straightforward: if she doesn't like something, she'll tell you, and she'll be very clear about the reasons why. I find this attitude refreshing, rather than intimidating

Twyla is the hardest working person I've ever met, and her laser-like focus on the work is extraordinary. She readily admits that her work is her life, and creating new work is what keeps her going. I respect and admire her for her integrity, her vision, her intellect, and her sense of humor. And, she takes incredible care of herself. At the age of 63 (I think), she goes to the gym every morning at 5:30 or 6, and respects her body just as much now as she did when she was a young woman. She still looks every bit like the dancer she's been for most of her life.

Doug Holder: Lighting designers (pardon the pun) are rarely in the limelight...how is that for you?

Donald Holder: I'm a lighting designer principally because I'm fascinated with light and love working in the medium. I enjoy the collaborative process, and have always been attracted to the sense of community that is so much a part of working in the theatre. Being a part of new work, collaborating with people who inspire me, being challenged intellectually, and expressing my self creatively are all reasons why I continue to work as a lighting designer. Although I've achieved a certain degree of fame in my profession, that's never been a motivating force for me.

Doug Holder: You are now the head of lighting at the California Institute for the Arts. How do the students differ, from when you were cutting your teeth? How hard is it for you to remain cutting edge?

Donald Holder: I decided to try teaching on the graduate level because I feel I've come to a point in my professional life where I have something I can pass on to young artists, and I also feel I can be a positive force in their professional development. Over the last several years I've been thinking that I need to do more in my professional life than focus on the advancement of my own career. When the chance to teach at CalArts came along, I felt it

would be a good opportunity to help others who share my passion for lighting design. I also remember how important a mentor was for me when I was just starting out, and the idea of mentoring others in the same way seemed like a good thing to do.

The students at CalArts are not particularly different, or in a different place, than I was when in graduate school. As did I, most of them need to discard all the pre-conceived notions and bad habits they've acquired over the years when it comes to design, and discover a process for creating work that grows out of the text and the director's vision, rather than raw instinct.

The technology related to lighting and lighting design has changed dramatically since I was a student at Yale, but the principles of good design will always remain the same. What I always stress to the students is that all the new technology available today can be wonderful and very seductive, but it will never take the place of a great idea. And that's what needs to be at the center of all the work that they produce.

What I like about CalArts specifically is that the entire faculty is composed of working artists, and we're encouraged to maintain our professional careers. I have no interest in curtailing my work as a Broadway Lighting Designer for the sake of teaching, but intend to involve my students in my work outside the school.

Doug Holder: What are your upcoming and current projects?

Donald Holder: Currently, I'm designing the Broadway revival of Craig Lucas's play, *Prelude to a Kiss*. I just finished designing the lighting for a new Broadway-bound musical based on the movie *The Sister Act*, at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, and *Radio Golf*, August Wilson's final play, of his 10 play cycle, at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. In the works, is a new play by David Henry Hwang called *Yellowface*, in Los Angeles, a new production of *The Lion King* in Johannesburg, South Africa, and revival of *South Pacific* at the Vivien Beaumont theatre at Lincoln Center in New York.

Doug Holder: What would you want your artistic legacy to

be? Ten years down the road...where do you want to be?

Donald Holder: I want to be known as an artist who brought a unique and inspired approach to each and every project in which he was involved, who never settled for less than the best he could possibly do, who was fun to work with, and who approached all his work with integrity and meticulous detail. In terms of "down the road", I love what I'm doing, and from my perspective, there's not a lot more I feel I need to achieve in my profession. 10 years from now, I hope I'm still able to work with people and on projects that stimulate and challenge me. I'd love to do more opera, and maybe get involved with lighting in film or television. I'm really enjoying teaching, so I hope I'm still in a situation where I'll be mentoring students, but maybe at a school that's a little closer to home.

An Interview with Leslie J. McClinton

Conducted by Ernest Dempsey

Leslie J. McClinton is the author of the recent nonfiction book *Dinner With Da Vinci* (Great Reading Books, Texas, 2006). She believes in rebirth and has written a scholarly account of her ideas in her book. Here we take a look at what she says about her views and the book.

Ernest: Leslie, would you like to tell us a little about your academic and professional background?

Leslie: My background is exceptionally diverse. I have earned a B.S. in Biology (pre-med) because I planned to become a doctor. I decided against that at the time because my two children were still young and I was a single parent. I immediately went to grad school and earned an M.A. in socio-cultural anthropology at SIU-Carbondale. Anthropology is the closest discipline to what Helena Blavatsky would be placed if she had earned a degree in that lifetime. After graduating I returned to Chicago and became a medical transcriptionist for the next 5 years. I worked with top-notch spine surgeons in the Chicago area. I decided I wanted to become a teacher. For that I felt drawn to Texas. I relocated to Texas in 1995 (October 31st) and within 3 years I was a certified and tenured science teacher here in Texas. I later became certified to teach French but have not held a teaching job for French language. Besides working as a transcriptionist for surgeons, I have worked as a copyeditor for accounting executives (CPAs), as a part of my new business.

Ernest: What is your most favorite discipline of study?

Leslie: I love history, and the Classics.

Ernest: How was the idea of *Dinner With Da Vinci* conceived?

Leslie: While teaching science at an inner city school I had the chance to spend a week at NASA in Houston. Just before that I

decided I would write: A year in the life of a science teacher-type book. So that year I made daily entries to my journal. I told the person in the book, my Bobby character, that I was writing this book and that everything that he said to each other and/or experienced would be a part of the book. During that time period (2000) little did I know but Dan Brown was also working on a book that involved physicists: *Angels and Demons*. But in that year I discovered the reborn Leonardo Da Vinci. I took or rather borrowed this chapter, originally titled: Summer 2000, and placed it in *Dinner With Da Vinci* and it became the first chapter of the book. The publishers then thought that should be the title of the book. I wanted the title: *Androgyny*.

Ernest: Do you agree that your book is way too off the exoteric publishing matter?

Leslie: This book is esoteric in nature—I don't deny that. But nothing is too anything not to become published. It is much in the vein of Virginia Woolf, who wrote and published her journals for the world to read. What makes my book so different is that I have mined it for spiritual content. This is the same thing that I have done with some of the fiction that I analyze. I used the writings of Zadie Smith to show that she was the rebirth (I believe) of Sylvia Plath. I have a new chapter that is already written and will be downloadable at my new Web site: thechurchofanswers.com about a famous past life for Dan Brown. It was conceived in the same way as my other works: through revelation, study, and dreams (which are a component of prophecy).

Ernest: So why this uniqueness?

Leslie: I am unique in the same way that Blavatsky was unique. I am fulfilling what she started in her life as a Russian occultist.

Ernest: Do you claim that *Dinner With Da Vinci* has an appeal to the general readership? (Had you a target audience in mind while writing it?)

Leslie: Yes, I do claim that it has an appeal to a general readership. At least I hope that it does. My new Web site has the subtitle: Rational Christians Reborn. Why? Because these

are the people I hope to attract. We are the rational Christians who are reborn. So when I hear of a scandal in any one particular church I think, "Hmm, that's good for business." But seriously, the Christian world is my target audience. I wonder did Dan Brown know that Christianity would catch fire about his book. My book is considerably more cerebral than his book, that's the difference.

Ernest: How much of religious influence you think you had in pursuing the concept of rebirth?

Leslie: I was born and raised Roman Catholic. I took the sacraments up to Confirmation. We were never taught anything about rebirth in Catholic school, which I attended for twelve years. Basically, the teachings of reincarnation and rebirth have been taken out of the Western Christian tradition. They have been replaced instead with communion and confession. The religious leaders and the church fathers have had to replace this essential teaching with something. When I told my students that I was starting an online church they immediately asked me: Will you have communion online, or how? I thought that was a great question. When I realized that this has been subsumed in Christianity I had to come up with what it has been replaced with. My students gave me the answer. I have decided to call that section "eye contact." In the tradition that I follow now: Sant Mat, or Radhasoami, we believe that through eye contact the soul of one individual makes a spiritual connection with another. That is my substitute for communion.

Ernest: So what's the story of rebirth?

Leslie: This is related to karma. It is therefore complex. It is a deeply complex study and that is why it has taken me 35 years to write about it. I have written extensively about the first law of rebirth and its connection to karma and Sufi religious traditions. It will be available as a free download at thechurchofanswers.com under "The first law of rebirth: The Law of Karma."

Ernest: John F Kennedy appears the person, or persons if you allow, with which your book's subject appears most engaged. Any explanation why?

Leslie: There are a number of “famous” people mentioned in the book. But fame is relative while apotheosis is superlative. There is no hill a soul will climb that is higher than this. It comes at the end of a series of “famous” lives, based on my research. Therefore, it is an integral part of the book. JFK is my life of apotheosis. I trace many lifetimes in the book, but not as deeply. I have used four lifetimes as the cornerstone for this study: my present life, John F. Kennedy, Ruth Merton (mother of Thomas Merton), and Helena P. Blavatsky. There is an overlap between the lives of Ruth Merton and HPB of about 3 years. There is also an overlap of this life with that of JFK of ten years. The Buddhists call this bilocation or also split soul. I have multiple journal entries in which I recall that I split my soul into two distinct individuals.

Ernest: What good will it do if we happen to recognize a rebirth of our own or some one else's?

Leslie: My direct purpose is to establish the existence of God: God, as an intelligent, designing, dominant, energy force in the universe and beyond. How? If it can be shown that there is order in the higher and lower universe and purpose to all life, then it can be argued that it was created by an intelligent/superior being. The 55 laws of rebirth are used to that end. They establish that there is order, procession and hierarchy to life on earth and beyond. Who we are, who we become is not an accident nor formed from chaos, but purposeful. I admit it is not knowledge that is available to everyone at this time. But then neither was the theory of relativity until after 1905. Finally, the writer of the Bailey books: Alice A. Bailey wrote that Blavatsky and her work would be vindicated. She also made a prophecy that the laws of rebirth would be given out to the world. The Bailey books then are a part of my frame of reference. There is also a popular prophecy that eventually people would take up the study of their past lives as part of the new education in the future. I predict that people will not have to spend great energy in study of new things in the future. They will discover that “there is nothing new under the sun” including themselves. I believe that they will be able to access automatically all information available on the mental plane. It will be similar to how we use computers except that it will be directly obtained. This is also the definition of intuition:

direction perception/knowledge. I believe that humanity is going in that direction. I also see a dark side of this new knowledge: Black magic will become more widespread and more powerful. This can lead to people being forced from their bodies or taken over by another entity, much like science fiction movies show. Finally, when the smoke clears, there will be little or no need for the astral plane, except as a place of storage and learning until the applicant can work purely on the mental plane.

Ernest: Have you shared your ideas of this concept with other scholars, especially psychologists and scientists etc? (what was their reaction?)

Leslie: I have had a difficult time getting people to take the time to study the book. Everyone says that they are too busy and so on. Like the Wright brothers, who kept their secrets to flying under wraps for five years (according to a recent PBS documentary), I wanted to get my work written out and copyrighted before letting anyone else see it. Therefore, I was not sending it out freely for opinions. Why? The book is just that special and unique, especially the 55 laws of rebirth—the last chapter in the book. In fact, Newton kept his work *Principia*, completely secret for years. I am secretive by nature. While scholars and the like have not given me any feedback, regular people have and they find the book and my interviews interesting and thought-provoking. I have a bibliography in the book that is ten pages long. If I had included everything that I had ever read or that influenced this book it could have been 25 pages long. I am a voracious reader of history, the Classics and autobiographies, to name a few.

Ernest: What plans you have for furthering your research in this direction and for future writing quests?

Leslie: My new Web site will contain much of my work present and future. I also plan to make a documentary film and write a book about my family in this life. My maiden name is Adams. My brother, Phillip Adams (my mom named him after Prince Phillip) and I (whom I identify as Joe Kennedy, Jr.) plan to collaborate in an effort to prove that we are direct descendants of John Adams and John Quincy Adams. We have strong evidence that one of

their cousins fathered children by a slave woman who in turn became the patriarch of our family. His name was Butler Adams. At one time the Adams family was one of the wealthiest black families in Chicago.

Ernest: Thank you for sparing your precious time!

Leslie: Thank you for this opportunity Ernie.

Beyond Christopher Street A Night of Gay Shorts

Presented by Wings Theatre's Gay Plays Series

Reviewed by M. Stefan Strozier

I was given a complimentary ticket! That makes two complimentary tickets for this reviewer. Well, actually, everyone was given a free ticket on this night, because the producers of Wings Theater needed to paper the house (fill the seats with free tickets). Then, after the producers had the house full, the announcer explained his theater's dire situation, and made us all feel guilty for our complimentary ticket. So, he passed around several plates for donations to the sound of soft organ music. It was a very underhanded and brilliant fund-raising tactic; I was taking copious notes. But, in a way, this is a good analogy for my feelings about the gay community and its connection to theater in New York City: generosity, strictly enforced.

The Wings Theater is a nice house at the far end of the West Village. One goes down a level and the theater seats about 75 or more. It is a black box theater, about average size, where the audience looks up at the stage. The production was a series of short sketches, mostly comedic, all current gay topics. The subjects were very current, such as finding sex partners through Web sites. This subject was the topic of two of the shorts, in fact. There was a fair amount of nudity, which sells tickets, of course. The sketches contained enough of a story to hold their own, and they were all humorous. There was a farce that was very funny, and the last sketch featured an excellent song accompaniment by Paul L. Johnson. The acting, overall, was good and the characters believable and very real. At times, Andrew Shoffner seemed to be trying too hard, as if reaching for a dream, or some better place, which we, the audience, had no idea about. Standouts were Jason Griffin and Michael Cuomo. There were many few one-liner zingers; sadly, I did not catch them. I am sure I was the only person in attendance who did not catch the

theater references, much to my detriment. I tried to search their meanings in Google later, at home; but to no avail, despite having taken notes of what I thought I had heard said, while seated in the theater. Oh well, as my mother might say. All told, it was a very nice night at the theater—a little bizarre for a straight man.

I have opportunity now to do what I have wanted to do for a long, long time: redress the gay community in New York City Theater: What, exactly, does the gay community represent to theater in this town?

It should be noted, in case readers are not aware, that the gay community has a very strong presence in New York City Theater (and elsewhere). It should be future stated that theater in this city largely defines that of the rest of America. Thus, plays that are presented in New York City often have gay themes. But, further, with such a dominant influence over theater, the gay community does, in fact, select plays for production that have traveled through a funnel of sorts. This might not be a bad thing, if the funnel were controlled by the likes of Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, or W. Somerset Maugham; but this is not the case. The gay community has produced its ranks of great writers and dramatists. Williams was America's best playwright, and he was also a poet. Oscar Wilde had a profound influence on me, and I admire his bold, brash take on life and art. Wilde's fearlessness struck me, when I was young, as a form of anarchy (now, he seems a bit passé). W. Somerset Maugham's clear and even tone was like Joyce's writing, and I was also deeply moved by it. But, the gay community has not seen a writer of the above caliber rise from its ranks for eons. Why not? The gay community is nothing if not diverse, even politically. Yet, the writers that have risen to the top, in modern history, have been very political. Those writers I have named were not political, with the exception of Maugham, it might be argued. Perhaps, politics is not a requisite of creating exceptional art?

I have nothing but good things to say of the gay community, and the kind and generous and fair people that comprise it. It greatly pains me when people treat gay people with cruelty, because, beyond being ugly, it is so obviously unwarranted. It seems to

me the main sticking point among the gay community is that they want to be accepted as ordinary people. I can relate to this, because I am a Schizo-American. I have felt like I damaged goods in American society all my life. By not accepting gay people in every fabric of American life, it only looks bad on *all* Americans, and makes us look like a bunch of uncultured children, in comparison with the rest of the world. Thank God the gay community is there, in fact, to give us a measure of dignity and culture to the world, or we would have none *whatsoever*. Other well-cultured countries (such as all of Western Europe) have no problems with their gay communities. Why do we have problems, then? We are simply lockstep with countries like Nigeria and Belarus and Iraq when we stoop to gay bashing. So, Americans must get over our unjustified ambivalence towards gay people. I am not here to preach or lead a movement. I could care less, sorry to say. And, frankly, other minorities have it far worse than the gay community does, in my opinion. But, this subject does broach upon my livelihood, to some degree.

I would not have been able to reach the successes that I have in theater without the assistance of the gay community. I am not saying I have achieved any kind of “greatness”—au contraire. Still, in any other structure my standing would come with strings attached. This is not the case in my situation. I have been given my position—albeit, a minor one, my theater company, the productions of my plays, the use of theaters, etc., all gratis.

I submit the gay community is suffering from an identity crisis. To be any kind of dramatist, one must be honest and write from the heart, with all the rage and passion and flaws that every human heart holds. At this point, the game is largely won: Kushner has had his *Angels in America* produced and seen its vision become reality. (I suspect Wilde could have written that play if he’d chose. And, Wilde might not have done it so overtly.) I wish that the gay community would produce a dramatist of worth sometime soon. To quote Oscar Wilde’s (from *The Audience Book of Theatre Quotations*, ISBN 978-1-934209-28-8, www.worldaudience.org), “Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess”.

The Tragedie of Macbeth

Presented by the Workshop Theater Company

Reviewed by M. Stefan Strozier

Back in August, 2004, I remember feeling nauseous riding the elevator up to the Workshop, when I saw my play listed in their playbill as *Guns, Shackles & FUR Coats*. Most playwrights' first plays are autobiographical in nature, and it was no different for me. A "workshop" understands this. I had been a soldier; I had problems adjusting to civilian life, following war; and, I have spent some time on the streets—two long winters.

So, I have a history with Workshop Theater Company on 36th Street and 8th Avenue, New York City. After the performance of my play was over, the professional staff of the Workshop harshly criticized it (the audience wasn't allowed to speak; my friends were told, unceremoniously, to put down their hands).

For this Liberal bastion to make light of the plight of soldiers, during war in Iraq and Pakistan, seemed a very, very cruel thing to do, indeed. Even many of the comments about my play demonstrated, not just a naivety about soldiers; but a latent, ruthless hatred and scorn of soldiers and the army. Of course, the hippies famously spat on soldiers returning the Vietnam War and I suppose I had thought we, as a society, had moved on; but we have not. As I sat there, literally in the middle of the stage with a spotlight on me, I felt like a rock, placed between a hammer and an anvil. The anvil was my play and the hammer was the so-called criticism I was receiving from the professional staff of the workshop, à la Scott C. Sickles and Timothy Harris.

Alas, I was a certain kind of rock: flint! And, the Workshop stuck that flint and the sparks flew! For the 3 years subsequent to this experience, I have been trying to do any-thing different from the Workshop. Despite Sickles' clueless criticism of *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, the play went on to do extremely well. In all honesty, had *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* proven to have

been a bad play, or a poorly-written one, then even the mockery of the plight of American soldiers during wartime by a Liberal establishment would have been something that I could have overlooked and forgotten. But, the fact is, the play is superb.

Then, my second production, *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, with its large cast of 21 (which no one on any level of Broadway every attempt because it costs too much; however, everyone works for free off-off Broadway) in April, 2006. Lo and behold, my play is soon followed by a full production of *Macbeth*, at the Workshop. *Lincoln* appeared right across 36th Street, also off 8th Ave, at Where Eagles Dare Theater and rehearsal space, an establishment that is run by my mentor, John Chatterton, who I've since parted with over a triviality; but whom I still admire greatly as a wise sage of the theater community. It was Mr. Chatterton who I found after my experience with the Workshop. People come and go in my theater company; but Mr. Chatterton (aside from me) contributed much to the vision of La Muse Venale, Inc. Indeed, Mr. Chatterton is a shrewd businessman, whose success grows steadily, as he works diligently. He taught me a lot about running a business, which I've applied to my theater company, La Muse Venale, Inc.; and to this very publishing house, World Audience, Inc.; even to the marketing of myself as a brand: the playwright M. Stefan Strozier. Roughly, Mr. Chatterton's invaluable business teachings:

1. Eliminate or greatly reduce all necessary and unnecessary costs.
2. Utilize leverage at the business-to-business level, at every possible juncture.
 - a. (Understand nos. 1 & 2 are intimately related.)
3. Constantly implement new operations at the macro level; broaden or enhance existing ones; and, don't waste precious time on lower functions.
4. Maintain high standards and experiment; yet, never loose sight of the fact that art is, first and foremost, a business and must make a profit to survive.
5. Become an "eminence griese" among your peers.

Mr. Chatterton also showed me how to be a theater producer, and introduced me to all the players in the ingrown, New York

City theater community, while carefully discerning the fools from the people that matter. By showing me how to approach art (and *especially* theater) from the point-of-view of a shrewd business practitioner (and profiteer), Mr. Chatterton freed me up as an artist, and I am grateful for his teachings. Finally, in his diffident way, he taught me about criticism, which allowed me to start and run this very publication, *The audience Review*, which if you take this issue as a sample, has become successful and profitable in its short history. The theater, unlike the rest of the real world that may wish for such a thing, has a long history of no-kidding mentorship. I used to refer to the theater community as The Mafioso of Misfits; but I think it is rather more like a medieval country where power is vested, not in the state; but in the individual fiefdoms, constantly warring against each other, battling for power. For those of us with day jobs, one hears about this kind of feudal arrangement frequently, and I've worked in more than my share of bureaucracies in the past, both in the public and private sector (fairly high up the food chain, I might add); yet, in reality, such talk among bureaucrats is nothing more than wishful thinking. The reason this is true is because the bureaucrat must never forget his or her mission—even in government—or be out of a job. In the theater, however, there are no rules, or even a mission; perhaps, not even so much as a purpose. In theatre, there is only the backdrop of money, funding, budgeting, Angels, etceteras, set up against the art of creating plays. Thus, it is a kind of medieval war, full of torture, crude weapons, rage, peasants and kings, and whatnot. A fine example of this chaos is portrayed in the play *Macbeth*, which is what this review is about.

It's not a race, as my mother was fond of saying. But, I still won it, and I will demonstrate how:

1. *Macbeth* only had 17 actors; *Lincoln* had 19 + 1 voice-over, so we won that one.
2. *Macbeth* and the Workshop are on the 4th floor; *Lincoln* was on the 12th floor, thus, our struggle was greater here.
3. For reviews, I have read one for *Macbeth* and I think my reviews were better, though in all fairness, they were perhaps about equal.
4. In attendance, my theater only sat 30; this one sat at

least 50, so I've won that one too, in terms of the pain and misery of an off-off Broadway producer.

5. In the elevator ride, after the play, the lead actor (who was the producer of *Macbeth*) said he had been in rehearsal for 3 months; *Lincoln's* rehearsals took about 2 weeks, so I won that one, because we were more efficient in our use of time.

6. *Lincoln* had a host of authentic swords, hats, costumes, etc., as did *Macbeth*; yet, while *Lincoln* got everything by thievery or for free, *Macbeth* no doubt had the largess funding of the Workshop to buy anything it required. I win here too.

7. *Lincoln* had literally no funding. I didn't even pay for the theater, as if came out of ticket sales. One can only guess at the vast amount of taxpayer cash that was thrown at *Macbeth*. The winner? Again, I am the winner.

8. *Lincoln* had more performances than *Macbeth*. And, let's not forget that *Lincoln* is spoken in the actual English language, and features American characters; while, *Macbeth* is about ancient English characters and the lines written and spoken are in a dead language (not even British-speak) that no one understands. I am, again, the winner. Clearly, you can't touch this.

9. In terms of playwrights; ah, well, it is with great pleasure that I announce I am very much alive, healthy, and young; whilst Shakespeare, is very old and very dead (and very English). I won and I will keep on winning. I might add that I am very *American*; but more on this in a moment.

One might accuse me of being petty; but it's not being petty when you're on the short end of the stick. Put it this way: As a critic, no one can tell me that it can't be done, and done well.

I might as well begin with the issue of comp tickets for reviewers, as this seems to be a recurring theme for this reviewer. An actor, who appeared in *Macbeth*, was also in *Lincoln*, and he sent me an email flyer for *Macbeth* that was playing some dates in January, 2007. I was very interested in reviewing it, so I asked the actor to see if I could have a comp ticket to review *Macbeth*, and this is standard business practice, as well as tradition in the

theater. The actor replied that my comp ticket would be under the actor's name. In other words, my request for a comp ticket, as a professional reviewer, was denied by the Workshop Theater Company. I emailed the actor to ask to whom I should send my review, and to notify the Workshop that it would take me about 2-3 days to finish it. And, further, that my review is printed in a hard cover book, and an e-book (both with ISBNs), and distributed worldwide, professionally, unlike other off-off Broadway reviewers, who merely write for Web sites, such as:

www.offoffonline.com

www.nytheatre.com

www.onoffoff.com

I waited in line, only to learn that, in fact, I did not have a comp ticket, not even one from the actor! I presented my card, showing me as artistic director of a professional theater company in New York City. I said my name; silence was the reply, along with awkward looks, stiffened necks. I was not "on the list".

Oh! Do you know who I am, *dahling*?

I went to an ATM, got my cash, and paid for my \$18 ticket. But, the fact is, M. Stefan Strozier should have 2 big, fat comp tickets at any off-off Broadway theater he so graciously visits. What is it, then, about M. Stefan Strozier, that precludes this kind of treatment, and causes this vehement reaction? Yes, this part of Mr. Chatterton's teachings has yet to take its form. It has nothing to do with me, personally, because I am a well-liked, charming and witty man, and I have lots of friends.

But, you can keep your frickin' complementary tickets, Workshop Theater Company, on 36th Street, in New York City! In fact, I have no use for the entire New York City Theater Community (or, should I say, Community Theater?) at this point. There are no living playwrights to challenge me, name or no name. I have no use for Broadway, other than to conquer it, which I suppose I will, just because it is there. I can write and produce my plays anywhere, with the assistance of a few good actors. Where will I go next?

Now, I will move to my review of *Macbeth*. David M. Mead as Macbeth was a solid “B” in his performance. He seemed a bit miscast, as he has the demeanor of a Wall Street executive than a murderous ex-soldier. David M. Mead is a very good actor, however, and does a good job in portraying a Shakespearian character. Still, at times, he was not able to rise to the poetic aspects of the bard’s writing, which is the bard’s main strength. The rest of the cast were all quite good. At times, it seemed as if their speaking was hurried. I am not sure if this was because it is a long play (and this production was unedited, as far as I could tell) and the cast wanted to hurry up and finish. Additionally, I noticed a tendency to bark out the lines by many of the actors; especially, the male ones. But, I think this is mainly Shakespeare’s fault, because while the bard can be poetic, it’s a kind of guttural, lowbrow-poetry, after all, is it not?

There were some excellent performances. First, the 3 witches + the witch supervisor, Hecate, who were Letty Ferrer, Audrey Maeve Hager, Alexandra Devin, and Leanne Littlestone, respectively. I have read somewhere (please don’t ask me to cite the reference; some scholar can trifle with that later, in need be) that scholars believe Shakespeare collaborated with another writer on *Macbeth*, as Shakespeare did with a number of his later plays (above and beyond his normal *plagiarism*). And, that the witches chant actual spells of some kind. Well, when done right, as with this production, the female actors portraying the witches have me hypnotized.

The other great performance was the porter, Mike Finesilver, who also played the Doctor, 2nd Murderer, and Soldier. But, as the porter, he did something magical and I was lost in it for a time, believing myself to be a commoner back at The Globe Theater. Mr. Finesilver’s porter was actually funny, touching and spot-on-target. Mr. Adair, who had been General Grant in *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, was also good; but his acting seemed to have a touch of subtleness to it, which stood in contrast to the brazen barking of some of his cast-mates. When Mr. Adair, as Ross, delivered the bad news to Macduff, he does with nuance, like an actor. I couldn’t help wondering if Mr. Adair soaked up some of the nuances of the Lincoln production, because that seemed to be the consensus of the actors in

Lincoln: subtlety.

The last performance I want to mention is indeed the best, that of Lady Macbeth, portrayed by Susan Angelo. Oh my; watching her perform Lady Macbeth was something special. It's sort of like asking the question, "Where have you been all my life?" I have read *Macbeth* many, many times. It is my favorite Shakespeare play. And, I have long-imagined Lady Macbeth in all the performances of *Macbeth* I have seen; yet, no one ever portrayed Lady Macbeth as I imagined her; until, now. Lady Macbeth is a criminal. She is domineering and gets progressively more psychotic. Ms. Angelo captured all of this diabolic insanity in splendid fashion. At times, she even seemed restrained; but perhaps this was the director's doing. There was some weird blocking too, such as when Lady Macbeth jumps on Macbeth and wraps her legs around him, as if she were a debutante greeting her football player boyfriend, after the game.

The directing, overall, was superb. The director was Charles E. Gerber. The cast was well-trained and they all understood their movements, precisely. A couple of times, an actor forgot or stumbled over a line; but who can understand anything Shakespeare is saying, anyway? The aesthetic theme the director seemed to be seeking was an authentic representation of the actual time. And, it worked well. Yet, there was not much experimentation. I don't mean fancy gimmickry. I am taking about searching the bard's lines for deeper meanings, poetry, and bringing the poetry to the fore. If this did happen—in the places I cited, it came from the very talented actors, exclusively. But, just succeeding at directing an ensemble is an accomplishment.

The sounds that played in the background definitely seemed distracting to the acting being performed. The sound designer was Andy Cohen. The sounds were kind of "medieval-ish"; and, at times the sounds kept playing as the actors were speaking, even after the transition between scenes that the sounds had been used to support had ended. Still, sound effects were all right, and I've certainly witnessed a lot worse attending plays.

The lighting was, for the most part, appropriate. But, at one point,

the lighting designer (Carrie Yacono) tried to put a spotlight on Macbeth's face on several occasions, as if to imply that Macbeth was in his own world for a moment. The trouble was the spotlight was turned on several seconds before Macbeth's aside began, and Macbeth had to move *to the light*, so to speak. And, the light itself bobbed awkwardly. As the coach tells the mediocre athlete, who is not being a team player, "Don't try to get fancy". The thing about Shakespeare that virtually no one these days—producers, directors, companies—understands, for some bizarre reason, is that Shakespeare is a master at stage management. The writing is specifically created with everything in mind. There is absolutely nothing you can possibly do to improve it. We don't need spotlights to "emphasize" a character's aside in a Shakespeare play, that is why they are asides to begin with—furthermore, the meaning of the lines spoken aside, in combination with their poetic rhythm, create, and are far, far more powerful and effective, than any spotlight. This is why when I see a postmodern production of a Shakespeare play it comes across as a very strange farce.

I thought the Classical Theater of Harlem did a much better job at portraying Shakespeare, overall, than the Workshop (see my review, last issue). Of course, one has to take anything I say about the Workshop with a grain of salt; but I feel I am being very fair and objective here. As a play, *Macbeth* is over-played. It's not even a real Aristotelian tragedy. The argument that we've advanced beyond Aristotle's vision of tragedy I reject. It's science; you don't move *beyond* it.

One last item (previously alluded): For some months, I fully admit, I have been unsettled. Several actors have complained to me, directly, that bitterness is consuming me, and that it is, possibly, even beginning to show in my art. I must acknowledge this criticism; however, I reject that it is showing in my art. If I am sounding bitter, it is my characters who are sounding bitter, and they are controlled by the events of the play in which they find themselves. However, after some lengthy talks with a diverse body of said actors, I have uncovered the following truths: First, Americans are uncultured and largely political (I already was well-aware of this fact); second, the business of movies and other media dominates in America; and, things like art, poetry,

painting, and dance are minor endeavors, frequented by a handful of Americans; third, playwrights, unlike other creators of high art, are emissaries of culture to the society in which they live and work; fourth, in other countries—notably, England, Shakespeare and the *theatre* are nothing less than a religion and the fact that we, as Americans, don't recognize this fact is because we, culturally-speaking, are buffoons; and last, I must accept that I can do nothing to change these realities, and that the business models that own and operate them are too vast and too strong for me to even make a dent, and that I must simply abide my imagination in the hope that my work will—perhaps, someday, become more appreciated in my native land; or, that a younger generation of Americans will grow up with a wish to change the status quo, and thus my work will be graded on its merit alone, instead of by other, more ambiguous criteria; and, that I can either move out of America; or, that I can remain an American citizen, and continue to produce my work in minor theaters with no help or funding—albeit, with the sincere help of excellent New York City actors, truly great work, hoping that I will have a large and powerful effect on the next generation of Americans, those who come after me, those whom grow up to understand me as a household name, as a new, American standard of excellence in theater, of which there is no competition, whatsoever, neither now; or, even in America's past, or in the near-future.

After much weeping and gnashing of teeth, I choose the latter option, despite the fact that I realize *there is nothing higher that I can achieve in America*. I am giving, and giving again, truly. Please, for the record, take note of this fact. I fully expect a dramatic increase in fund-raising operations, to La Muse Venale, Inc., as a result.

The Unknown Terrorist by Richard Flanagan

Reviewed by Magdalena Ball

(Picador, November 2006,
ISBN-13 978 0 330 42280 2, paperback, \$32.95.)

In Richard Flanagan's first three novels, his prose stood out for its silky smooth invisibility; combining a stunning richness with well paced characterisation and fiction that transcended its form. He's a writer unafraid to delve deeply into the silent beauty and horror deep in the heart of all of us. But his latest novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, is a perfect example of why polemics and fiction don't work well together. Dedicated to Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks, the book struggles with the fictional voice from the first page, and this fuzziness between the polemics of its political message (Richard the writer with something to say) and the integrity of the novel's own story (the fictional narrator) is one which continues throughout the novel, and, in the end, undermines it's fictional power. It might have helped the novel a little to eliminate the opening chapter, which sets a confusing and unpleasant tone to the book. In a voice entirely different from the main narration, the opening tells us a story about Nietzsche and Jesus; the failure of love, and the danger of dreaming:

Nietzsche wrote, "I am not a man, I am dynamite". It was the image of a dreamer. Every day now somebody somewhere is dynamite. They are not an image. They are the walking dead, and so are the people who are standing round them. Reality was never made by realists, but by dreamers like Jesus and Nietzsche. (2)

Although the voice is confident of the truth that it is conveying, it is completely incomprehensible. Is this passage supposed to be referring to suicide bombers? How do they create reality? Are these qualities being lauded? Is Hicks being likened to a Jesus or Nietzsche? The notion that "love is not enough" is a leitmotif repeated fairly often throughout the book and mirrored identically

between page 1 and page 96. The repetition doesn't help make sense of the sentence however. Love is not enough for what? To save our lives from being meaningless? To save us from the corrupt, ugly people that we are? To overcome our inherent faults as human beings?

Once into the novel we are presented with four days in the life of the Doll, a twenty-six year old pole dancer, who is wrongfully accused of being a terrorist after a one night stand with another wrongfully accused man. Although it's a little murky, one can imagine that the "love" which the narrator keeps referring to, is that moment between the Doll and Tariq, the lover she meets after he saves her friends child on Bondi and then conveniently re-meets during the Mardi-Gras. It's a fairly flimsy consummation to build the book on and I imagine that this kind of love wouldn't be up to much at all. As a character, the Doll doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. The narrator keeps her, and everyone else, at a kind of cinematic arm's length, so we never really appreciate her beyond the roundness of her body, her old fashioned face, or the stereotypes out of which she is constructed:

Their world was one of suburban verities, their world was that of today: the house, the job, the possessions and the cars, the friends and the renovations, the resort holidays and the latest gadgets-digital cameras, home cinemas, a new pool. The past was a garbage bin of outdated appliances: the foot spa; the turbo oven; the doughnut maker and the record player...(7)

For a novel to work there must at least be some kind of tension between positive and negative characters, but there really are no appealing characters in this novel. Even Wilder, the Doll's one "true" friend, fails her in the end, proving herself to be as empty as everyone else:

But the Doll was remembering the bonsai garden Wilder treated so carelessly, where the only thing that ever seemed to grow was the mound of dope ash in the Bakelite ashtray and where the beautiful plants she had bought only to laugh about withered

in the terrible heat and then died. (252)

It would probably be easier to dismiss this work if Flanagan weren't so talented at constructing sentences. There are times when his writing is as delicate and beautiful as poetry as this description of the end of a marriage:

Every day some small thing—a joke, a shared intimacy, a sweet memory—had been found to have withered and died. Caresses fell like dead leaves. Conversations cracked and then broke. And in the end there was nothing to quicken the trunk with the rising sap that fed and was fed in return by the branches, by the twigs, by the leaves. (72)

But in the end, pretty passages are simply not enough to save this poorly plotted and poorly characterised tale. The book is full of clichés and stereotypes as brutal as those Flanagan criticises. The poll dancers who talk about the Doll are all utterly vacuous. The bad guys, Lee Moon, Frank Moretti, the anchorman Richard Cody, or the wealthy people at Katie Moretti's party are all characters with no depth or dimension to render them realistic. Sydney itself is seen as a kind of game park with grungy areas like Kings Cross, suburban areas like the West, or wealthy areas like Double Bay all fulfilling their stereotypical functions:

It was their success and their prosperity; their mansions and apartments! Their Porsches and Bentleys and Beemers! Their getaways in the tropics! Their yachts and motorcruisers! Their influence, their privileges, their certainties! Would you doubt it? Who would question it? Who would wish to change any of it?(28)

The Doll herself is little more than a vehicle for the message this book seeks to promote—that our governments are corrupt; that we're all vacuous and grasping, that life is more or less meaningless, and that we'd all sell out our best friends for a few less wrinkles, a promotion or a few more hours of oblivion into the media that keeps us quiet. The voice that seems to resonate in the Doll's head is so obviously not hers, and so intent on

passing on its message of emptiness that it destroys any kind of fictive dream for the reader:

She looked up and saw Homebush Olympic stadium in the distance. When it was being built for the Olympics and she was a teenager, its wings had reminded her of angels. Now she could see there was so much that was more amazing than any angel, but that there was nothing left to believe. People put all their energy and brilliance into making things more extraordinary than themselves, only to have it make them feel that they were, in the end, less than nothing. (248)

Who are these people? As Flanagan himself has shown so beautifully in his first three novels, the world is much bigger, and people so much richer and more complex than the screenbites we get from television. The narrator is so sure of himself, and his generalisations so sweeping that they create their own damage. The polemics, which provide a one sided inditement without alternative, are transparent and unpleasant, involving such overt television style symbolism as covering a body in money, or slashing art to prove how useless it is against greed. *The Unknown Terrorist* is being sold as a Trojan Horse of a thriller masquerading the seriousness of the societal critique it provides, but even that statement is a Trojan Horse. At the core of this novel is a nihilism so bleak—"F*uck you all!" (312)—that it makes even the horror of the terrorist act, of murder and suicide, seem minor in comparison. It's almost the complete opposite of the joyous affirmative humour which undermines *Gould's Book of Fish*, and except for the occasional forays into a beautifully rendered prose, it's hard to believe this is the same author.

The Fluorescent Sun by Michael de Valle

(Poets of the Dandenongs Series Number 10, A Woorilla
Publication, April 2006)

Reviewed by Magdalena Ball

The 25 poems which make up Michael de Valle's *The Fluorescent Sun* are brief, and written in plain, Wallace Steven's style. Immediately accessible, they present a range of modern experiences, moving deftly from the tattoo parlour to the world of politics, and through fear of death towards the terror love that comes with parenting. On the whole, these are well written, powerful poems which readers will have no trouble penetrating, and feeling moved by. Where the poetry works best, it traverses the psychological landscape between the immediate experience of sensation, and its deeper meaning, as in "Metamorphosis":

The neon door sign beckons
OPEN
here you can buy metamorphosis
not sleepy numb and sweaty
or pinpoint pupil headrush
instead a sensation cryptic
pain that almost isn't mine
but is (5)

This notion of disembodied pain is one which continues throughout the book, going back to the tattoo parlour in "Sixty Five Dollar Rose" for the metaphor of life that this physical embodiment of blood, ink and pain represents:

With the sign sealed in blood and ink
my wounds are dressed dry and away from the sun.
I pay my passage and collect my coat
and Sixty Five Dollar Rose
takes hold of my arm for life.(13)

There's immediacy to the poems as they take the reader past the tables of a café, in the sensual clatter of coffee making or 1970s music ("Café Revival"), or the one night stand thinness of "you go". It is part of the poet's perception to be both inside the experience and out of it, turning the moment into a bigger sense that others can relate to. "In St Kilda" de Valle maps the old and new, melding the once seedy foreshore with the trendy cosmopolitan "money belt". While the poems don't rhyme, there is inherent rhythm, words playing off syllables and repetition to create motion:

You'll take anyone with a dollar
welcome the onward and upward
while the downward move outward
in search of cheap rent. (20)

The poems are often funny, playing with language to highlight the absurd, and turning the cliché on its head. Where this doesn't work well is when de Valle remains disinterested, as in "Narrative free zone". While the reader might chuckle and nod at the cleverness of lines like "the humble phone book/that all original/narrative free zone." The lack of intensity makes these poems forgettable. The same occurs in the wordplay cleverness of "Five Poem anthology" or the "haiku" which don't quite add up to a meaning beyond the moment of their puns. In poems that combine the clever word play with the obvious passion that comes with love, the poetry reaches a much greater depth, combining humour with profundity as in "mathematics for poets":

And so the answer
is a reminder
a constant
and a poem
eight characters
three words
one line
meaning

I love you. (25)

The generational family poems also achieve this powerful

mixture of the wry and nostalgic combined with black humour. There are three males who mingle deftly in *the fluorescent sun*: the poet's father in "Poppy", the poet himself as youth as in "what do I say to the little me" or "Saturday morning 1967", and the poet's son. The interaction between the three is something that occurs within but also collectively outside of the poems. There's always the consciousness of time's progression—the ticking clock that leads to death. Poppy has already disappeared; his yellowed photos the only artifacts of a lifetime:

By March you were gone
in an accidental instant
to where earth ended
and ocean began
the undertow
that stopped your watch. (28)

Similarly, the boy "fixed in paper" is also gone, submerged into a life that carries on:

The heaviest luggage
your heart will carry
and the only thing to do
is love
and be yourself
as life unwinds like clocks. ("what do I say to the little me", 29)

Cancer is something that affects everyone in one way or another, and de Valle weaves this through his work; a sense of death that works as the white space between the lines. It's to be feared, it's omnipresent (almost a god-like figure), but also to be dealt with bravely. The joyful exuberance in the son poems is always tempered by this notion of death "riding along". Death is a wasps sting in "Wasps", or the "The horizon of his dreams" which aptly ends the collection. This final, beautifully written poem brings together the many male voices in the collection, speaking to both the older deceased Poppy, the mid-life father, the poet as a young boy, and the poet's son in a moment where death and life collide in a make-believe flight through the living room:

This is flight training
for us both
he knows I'd never let him go
just as I know
eventually
he'll let go of me. (32)

Overall, de Valle's first poetry collection is an exceptional example of the power of the chapbook, showing the poet's capability while drawing the reader in to the universal metaphor of time's arrow in a way that is immediately accessible.

James Stinks (and so does Chuck) By Nick Riemer

Reviewed by Magdalena Ball

(Puncher & Wattmann, ISBN 0975240501, 2005, \$24)

At 62 pages, *James Stinks (and so does Chuck)* is the most 'booklike' of the chapbooks being reviewed here, the most expensive, and also the most difficult to penetrate. Placed third in the 2006 Mary Gilmore Prize it has been well lauded, but like the title of the book, there seems to be a random serendipity to the poems that simply doesn't translate to meaning for the reader. The book is broken up into 3 separate sections: "Surrounded Lyrics", "To Not To", and "Birdbrain Goes Wracking", and each of these has a graffiti like experimentalism which seems almost mind-mapped – images thrown on the pages without an organizing principle to draw them together. Prefacing the sections is a lengthy 3 page poem called "The Fence" which uses the concrete form and textual elements in a way that could be described as post-modern. But the poem is almost dramatically insular, addressing a person called Ken, who the reader has no idea about. Nor is it easy to understand the multiple acronyms, the disconnected references, or even the odd distorted tone—is this sad, defiant, political, happy? The poem reads, as many in this collection do, as if it were an overheard conversation. At a big stretch, I could read this as an apology to the reader, who is perhaps the Ken of the poem, for the lack of meaning in the poems to come:

master strongly influenced by Flemish art,
anyway it's all part of the fence
that goes without saying like most things,

hence, the fence
so, this has all been about my voice hasn't it
sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry
sorry (14)

Throughout the rest of the book, Riemer's talent is evident in almost sumptuous word play, sensual detail, and a gorgeous rhythm that might just work when read aloud with confidence. But the metaphors seem to be deliberately defiant of creating meaning, as in this poem on air flight:

The sea is what, too heavy?
The land is what, too tall?

A grazed, non-echoing moon.

The thinness in the sky. Bulbous planes
Grooving through it, headed LAX, CDG, NAR. ("Perfect
Clouds, a yeast of rocks", 17)

"A grazed, non-echoing moon" sounds lovely, but it's impossible to visualize. The reader is simply left out of the reflection.

Although the titles give nothing away, the first section of the book seems to focus on the observation of nature while in motion. While not exactly accessible, it is probably the most accessible section of the collection. "This glass" could be on the road, and perhaps, although again this is a big stretch, another shot at the difficulty of making sense of anything:

Trees write behind glass. I
walk a lithe road, bird-
chat dappled. In
approaching you

I do not get larger—their branches
rotors, this tape delving
into glass finding
dialogues addressed (20)

The section "To Not To" seems to be about the difficulty of language to penetrate into meaning (though that's probably the theme of the entire book), and traverses a landscape of broken words. Again, the language is rich, and each word plays rhythmically against one another as we cross "wilted roads", sign

language that won't sign ("the coins above/are coinage (sun, etc.).", the breaking down of language ("Whenever/you understand,/you're on/your own.") (32), at times pure Lewis Carroll inspired nonsense ("Degre is atruxtruwl difwrwtuoin" (35) and polystyrene that is absolutely meaningless: "Don't think you're getting more for less in this poem: it's a poem about an oblong of polystyrene. Now forget about it." (42))

The final section, "Birdbrain Goes Wracking" has a grand Biblical feel, and a distorted god-like narrator, who is, perhaps "birdbrain." There is certainly a bird's eye view of the world as the poems fly through past and present, around Australia, England, South America, the Middle East. God is dissected, presented as a wicked old man playing with his children humans, and if you stand far enough back, there might be a hint of meaning about the viciousness of our world and the creator. Move in close though, and again you're assailed by attractive words and imagery that is so nihilistic that it defies you to make sense of it beyond the obvious irony in the title:

22 Looking down the shiny corridor, carriage on carriage
on carriage.

A sad and guilty vandal loops designs. ("The Meaning
Plan: 40 Aerial Shots", 48)

In "Park André Citroën in winter" Riemer says "Some things get less abstract the most you look at them." (21) I'm afraid that doesn't happen in this collection. There's plenty of beauty here – many superb words, sensual imagery, details observed, and sensations to pick at, but there's no moment when they move into sharp focus. Despite the accolades heaped on this work, it never comes together to a meaning which a reader can draw out, other than that nothing is fixed, everything is elusive, and meaning a concept to be laughed at.

No Other Life But This By Nathan Curnow

Reviewed by Magdalena Ball

(Five Islands Press, New Poets Series Eleven, 2006,
ISBN 0734036337.)

Nathan Curnow's *No Other Life But This* follows a similar terrain to that explored by de Valle. It's as grand in conception as Reimer's work, although far more accessible. As the title makes clear, the chapbook is focused on a humanistic transcendence. Like de Valle's work, the interchange between life and death is the focus of nearly all the poems. The work takes the reader through the most immediate of modern details into the moment where the Church breaks down and life reasserts itself. The poems are rife with grief, pain, impending death, but are also, almost entirely affirmative, even at their darkest. While this is modern work at its best, and there are plenty of visual clues, rhythmic techniques, and rich metaphors, there are no linguistic tricks. Again, we are in the realm of everyday life, and it's easy for the reader to relate Curnow's imagery to their own sensations.

"Braving the Awkward", sets the book's tone by combining a clear sense of love, care, pain, death (hole in the heart), and fear. The visual imagery is so clearly presented we could we watching a film:

There may not be portals but there are holes,
like the defect he was born with. Steam curls up
below her chin in perfect tongues of silence.
I will not be still, in the kitchen, in grief,
some mistakes are welcome. (4)

This moment itself is a microcosm of life—that place where the mundane and the wondrous meet. The poems are charged with parental love—a little girl wrapped in a pink towel, or the

naïve/profound questions a child might ask about life: “what does ‘radar’ mean? Do all of us have one for home?” (“Dead penguins”, 6). There are no answers, but the questions are self contained, and asking them is all that matters.

As with Reimer’s work, God comes in for a beating, taking the blow for war, destruction and death—a faulty, itchy Atlas (“Atlas”) or a drug addicted, church slave, as in “Faith and the Ferrit”: “floating smoke rings to the surface of what some people might regard as the mouth of a billowing volcano (20). But, aside from the fact that at its most black, Curnow’s work is utterly comprehensive, there is never a hint of nihilism. “No Other Life But This” doesn’t equate godlessness to meaninglessness. The careful construction of the book is evident in the way the five part poem, “Not dead just gone to battle” is followed by the title poem, “No other life but this”. In “Not dead”, the poem tells the story of aging, juxtaposing middle age with old age—the aching bones of the aging with the crumbling bones of the dead. Curnow poses the big questions in this piece, and poses them simply: “Either Benny’s a fake, God doesn’t exist or He chose to leave him standing for a reason.” The answer to this one is obvious, but less so to an earlier one, “is it a life worth living/and all things are laid straight in the end” as we feel the longing for a dead grandma:

Playing Scrabble she would place her word
one piece at a time, suiting the board, every line,
straight, deliberate, scoring. Letters were important,
words worth remembering exactly, considering
that with every square we made a map
of time together. (8)

The title poem provides the answer in the form of a bird drinking from children’s water containers. It isn’t just the bird herself, although Curnow’s descriptions are both minute and beautiful:

Caution
has a rhythm, she plays it precisely,
every two-legged jump potential take-off.
Eyes sharp, head tilting, her tiny, peanut brain
drawing angles into comprehension. (10)

The answer is in the last sentence – the hunch fitting into the bird’s head the narrator’s hunch (and now reader’s hunch) too: “there is no other life but this.” There’s a rich, almost haiku like simplicity in this piece, and it is emphasized and coloured by its connection with the other works included in this tightly built collection. For example, “Banquet by the swing set” provides us with another zen-bird, the young daughter playing high tea. The contrast with the ‘real world’; and the very natural conversation is deceptive, and perhaps wouldn’t work so well if it didn’t come straight after the title poem. Or immediately before poems that take us right to the edge of pain and depression and then pull back with that secular moment of transformation: “somewhere in the mystery, kiss.” (“An argument for kissing”, 13)

No Other Life But This is full of these birds: the newborn baby; the moment of care as a post-nightmare forehead is stroked; a transient win over a bully in Mcdonald-land; the beauty of a pregnant woman’s curved back. Though never overtly sentimental, *No Other Life But This* is, despite the ever present doubt, fear, pain and hunger, an uplifting, sensual, honest and striking debut. With its careful construction, eye on a clean theme, and poetry that works in perfect conjunction towards meaning where there once was none, this is an example of the perfect chapbook.

Making Few Words Count: The Art of the Chapbook

by Magdalena Ball

There's something rather special about poetry chapbooks. The term 'chapbook' was coined in the nineteenth century as a variety of ephemera, including such things as ballads, pamphlets, political and religious tracts, almanacs, and of course poetry. Most chapbooks were and continue to be around 24 pages, but there's really no standard, either in terms of quality, which can range from terrible to sumptuous, and in length from a few pages of broadsheet to about 60 saddle-stitched pages (any longer and you are in 'book' territory). The key idea behind chapbooks though, both historically and for modern works, is that they are inexpensive to produce, buy and post, and have been designed to take printed 'words of wisdom' to a wide and common audience. As technology makes printing cheaper and easier, the poetry chapbook has once again become popular, and what makes it particularly special is that it isn't only accessible financially, but because of its brevity, is easy to take in. For those not well versed in poetry, a chapbook is a lovely place to get a well structured start—sampling a smallish group of one poet, or reading groups of poems clustered around a theme. At their best, they build to a kind of collective meaning that adds value to the individual poems—leaving the reader with something fairly profound to take away and come back to.

The Last Word

An Essay on Internet Publishing, Circa 2007

by M. Stefan Strozier

The revolutionary loves the fight, not so much the cause. He'll gladly scarp one cause and pick up another, just to keep fighting. If a country is breeding no revolutionaries, the populace will never take up arms and continue suffering and devolving. At least in countries where there is fighting we can say there is a will for change. And yet, such people can't imagine a world absent of fighting, and for them it would be a boring world. Warfare and physical conflict must soon become passé. In ancient times, warfare necessitated expansion. But the planet soon gave up its uncharted territories and we had nothing but warfare itself to sedate us. To make excuses to continue fighting, we say that we must fight for ideology and democracy and religion, even sexuality or art. But it is simply the need to expand and grow that drives us to fight. It is impossible for human beings to be placed on a single planet in the middle of the universe and be expected to live in peace, or remain on that planet for long. We must rebel against the universe, against order, or disorder; but we must always rebel.

Our most romanticized characters are our revolutionaries. The "forgotten wars"—WWI, The Korean War—are so named because they had no revolutionaries. WWII is a much better war for the history books because its plot was much better, and its characters were more clearly defined, than those "forgotten wars." And, WWII had ample revolutionaries. The Spanish Civil War, the setting for WWII, was so engaging as to attract writers and poets to the front lines. Conversely, the American Civil War was a very boring war and artists and revolutionaries avoided it. Civil Wars are always a bit embarrassing too, because now we're not expanding at all.

A new world awaits us: the Internet! Yes, there is the inherent problem with this new world: It is not very romantic. The Internet

café just isn't the same thing as a hardscrabble café where revolutionaries discussed literature and war, the topics feeding off each other.

The Internet has forever altered the profession of publishing. In one sense, this is what the Internet is, at present: a huge printing press. After all, its main strengths—or, at least the first ones to show—are all related to publishing: blogs, graphic design, desktop publishing, word processing, individual Web sites, the ability to reach a lot of readers, print-on-demand printers, inexpensive laser and color printing, business tools such as email, web conferencing, Skype, and many others. (I think that blogs are simple a copy of Web writing sites, where the first online writers worked in the late 90s.)

Each of these things has now been perfected online. Graphic designers have adapted the tools of the Internet to their profession, and this industry has vastly altered. The Blogosphere has taken shape, and it now impacts politics. But publishing is an industry that cuts across several industries, and those the Internet does best. And, publishing involves writing, which is art. It also affects newspapers; but newspapers are not art. Publishing is a very influential industry because it basically controls the dissemination of words, and words direct how we live and grow. Perhaps ironically, in a free society, publishers themselves have a great amount of influence. A nation's culture is largely shaped by the books that presses publish. Bookstores are stocked with the books selected for publication by publishers, and those are the books that are read by the populace and then passed on to libraries, where they are reread many more times by current and then future generations. What happens when the bookstores and libraries disappear, along with the publishers? But, they haven't disappeared, they've just moved to the Internet. Well, in 2007 they exist in both worlds; but this won't last for long, because only one business model will hold.

Online bookstores, such as amazon.com or Barnes & Noble, are vast and established business, and within the last year many e-bookstores, such as Diesel-books (www.diesel.booksense.com), have become reality. Now, the e-book Readers (Sony's palm reader and others) are sold in physical bookstores. Their list

price is about \$300; but like any new technology, that price will quickly drop. And as it does, their popularity (and acceptance and use) will dramatically increase. This normally takes about 1 year to happen with any new, similar technology. Online libraries are also in place (www.nypl.org), though they have only really existed since around 2004, when Google's BookScan project began, and major libraries began to digitize their collections and create new databases. The final step for online libraries and databases is to connect to each other, and this has not reached fruition yet; but this fact will not slow the growth of online publishing. Libraries will become databases in the future; their physical numbers will decrease, though a few will always remain because there will exist a small market for printed books. The rest of the tools of the online publisher previously mentioned (graphic design, desktop publishing, etc.) have been in place, *realistically*, for some time, at least back to the late 1990s (and some may argue earlier). So, the online publisher has everything he needs at his fingertips. It is all instantaneous in speed, vast in its breadth, powerful in its reach, and influential in its power. It is pointless to argue that this is not the case, or that there is anything less than absolute efficiency in online publishing in 2007.

It is no news that newspapers are gasping for their last breaths. This past year, newspapers have been covering the bitter business feuds over who will control them, and which millionaire will be generous enough to buy them and save them from extinction. The Tribune Company's woes are one instance and there are many other unimportant examples.

Here is how the business of print publishing works. It is necessary, to some degree, to distinguish between the larger corporate publishing houses and the smaller, so-called "independent" ones. I recently caught a close-up glimpse of this business, when I submitted my memoir, *The Labyrinth*, to Seven Stories Press, who is an "independent" press. The business of print publishing has managed to do a lot of adapting to the digital age. But, a writer still submits a book to the print publisher through an agent (in paper). The publisher decides the book is marketable and will make a profit. Allegedly, some presses publish books they believe won't sell, simply because of the

artistic merit of the work. I find this innocent notion hard to believe. Even books that won't reach a large audience are published because they appeal to a niche.

Certain kinds of books sell better than others, such as self-help books, or books about politics and current events in the media. In fact, fiction is and always has been the least sellable genre and makes up about 1% of a publisher's sales. However, this percentage may soon change, online. Part of the reason for this inequitable distribution in print is the result of the way printed books are marketed or physically delivered. Publishers' endgame is a bookstore; this is what they must consider for sales. Once a book is accepted for publication, in some cases it can take a year before it hits the bookstore. There is a build-up to publication that is integrated with marketing. This long wait really has little to do with providing editors time to work on manuscripts. It is common knowledge in the publishing industry that quality editing, from print publishers, is at an all-time low. If one picks up any book in a bookstore and you will find many, many typos and error and poor editing. Editing has been an exact science; but it has never been worse with print publishers.

Print publishers, at present, are able to exist in the digital world and the print one by printing their books for the bookshelves, and also placing them in e-bookstores. When the printed book finally does hit the shelves it is delivered in boxes and stored at the bookstores. A single run of a book is printed. This can number a thousand or more books, for a new writer. For more established writers (who will bring more sales), the number of books printed in a first run is much higher. According to Dan Simon (*Keepers of the Word, The Nation, 2000*):

Here's how financial pressures can distort the publishing process at the large houses: Minimum projected sales thresholds frequently prevent editors from signing up the "little" books that would include many of the most important books ever published. At some of the larger paperback imprints, that threshold number is 20,000 copies; few serious new works will generate that level of sales. So a misbegotten rule holds sway: Serious works need not apply. But the less serious books that are acquired in their

place don't necessarily meet the 20,000-copy quota with numbing regularity either.

20,000 books! I can't imagine. However, the reality is that whatever number that is printed, it is almost always impossible to sell all of the books. If an initial run of books sells out, a new run has to be printed and this takes time. The unsold books are returned or destroyed and sent to landfills. The writer is paid a few thousand dollars or up to many millions. The "science" of advances, royalties, and author remuneration is broken. This entire print publishing business model is very old and tied to the past. It involves things like antiquated copyright law that has been adjusted over the years to accommodate the print publishing business model. But however the copyright laws have been and tweaked doesn't matter any more; none of it is applicable to online publishing (which I'll explain). And it is fairly well understood that there is no single governing body for the Internet, nor can one be set in place.

The print publisher is almost entirely dependent on every kind of business that comes into contact with his. The writer must come to the publisher through an agent. Many people in the industry of words argue this is not a good thing, and I agree. Agents are a new profession, and when they did not exist, the relationship between publisher and writer was special, important, and valuable. One only need think of Max Perkins. Granted, Perkins was an editor; but in those days, editors had much more authority, and in fact were what we'd call today "publisher." Perkins made decisions about which authors to publish. Indeed, writers are the best agents. And, they will carefully screen applicants. This is precisely what Fitzgerald did with Hemingway, when he sent him to Scribner's and Perkins. Agents have networks and lists of who the most marketable writers are. Those are necessarily the best writers, however. By now, the best writers—especially the young ones—are largely ignoring agents. Distribution too is an obsolete business model. Distributors expect a high discount and they interact with bookstores. On the internet distributors are not a factor. They are unnecessary.

I move to the brave new world of online publishing, where the publishers are also the editors, and to a lesser degree, the

distributors and retailers. But before I do, I should explain my biases. I have formed my publishing company as a “c” corporation in New York State, United States. Most book publishers are not corporations, rather they are non-profits, or independent i.e. no status. The large corporations that recently acquired the smaller presses, over the last 10 years, were not formed to be book publishers and they do many other things besides—and unrelated—to publishing. My goal was to get the best of both worlds: to operate as a small press; but with the independence of a corporation. So far, my plan seems to be working very well, just as I envisioned. I hold allegiance to neither model.

For a long time, I have wanted to be a writer. I have had a lot of luck without really trying. Then, I became a playwright and discovered I could operate in absolute control, and I also found my plays to be very well-received, so I have become content with theater. However, I still aspire to be an established writer. So, like Virginia Wolfe, I formed my own press and published my own books. I have the eye for talent. Many—if not virtually all—editors are not able to recognize excellent writing. I do have that gift, and I have proven it over and over. I edit and publish (and market) excellent, very high-quality work that people love. In my own case, however, there was no one to recognize me, at least in the print world, so I have had to build my own reputation and explain my strengths directly to my audience, as my own editor. This is taking a long time. I would have preferred to have had someone see my talent and made me famous. It is hard to not see political bias too, on the part of the Leftist, American “independent” press, who have not published me. I have settled for being a different kind of author. I am going to be the *author* of the destruction of the Leftist, American “independent” press. While not as good as a “book deal,” becoming the author who opened the floodgates and whose battering ram team smashed the castle gates wide open will sufficiently sedate me. To be fair, this tide of change will also affect the large publishing corporations, though I am not sure exactly how they will be affected. The Leftist, American “independent” presses will simple cease to exist in print in less than 5 years.

The online publisher has books printed at a print-on-demand

printer, such as Lightning Source (www.lightningsource.com). The cost to print a 6x9 perfect-bound book, with a high-gloss, multi-colored cover, is about \$3-\$4, for a page count of 100-200. There is a one-time setup fee of approximately \$100. There is also the cost of paying an artist to design a cover, which is pricey; but very much worth it, as well-designed covers greatly help sell books. Additionally, there is the price to edit, format and set up the book. Lightning Source charges \$12 for each book to list it in its worldwide database. Finally, there are other business costs, the expense of marketing books, and the shipping (the most influential cost).

The quality of a print-on-demand book is equal or higher than that of any book found in corner Borders or Barnes & Noble bookstore. All formats are available: cloth, hard cover, saddle-stitch, etc. Trade discount is 55%, which means that after the book is distributed and sold online for approximately \$15.99 (not directly through the online publisher), the publisher makes about \$4 per book. The online publisher, however, casts a wider net as time passes. Thus, he can afford to offer less of a discount to distributors, because what is the distributor doing except selling his book at a cheap rate? Online distribution is simply a matter of having your books listed. Anyone can do a Google search for a title and find the cheapest copy and order it. Online publishers can offer discounts, and use the distributor mainly for advertising. The publisher can even under-cut his distributors, by offering them little discount, and this would drive Web traffic to his site, and also increase sales. But, there is no physical distribution in online publishing.

The other issue—and another separating online and print publishers—is shipping, and mailing or subscription lists. The manner in which the online publisher obtains and retains customers is much different from that of his print great-great-grandfather print publisher. Print publishers—especially, the small ones establish vast lists of people who are loyal to them and their magazine, or the books the print publisher sells. In some cases, the publisher may also run a small, physical bookstore and thus attract more people and obtain their addresses. Print publishers also place ads in trade magazines and gain new customers (and their addresses). The print publisher then sends

out routine mailings to his list of customers, and due to marketing factors, he must send his notices routinely. These mailings cost a lot of money, from stamps, paper, envelopes, time, and other costs. Most small presses even do their own shipping. If they have hired a printer who takes care of their shipping, most print publishers have at some point gone through the cumbersome process of mailing books to customers. If a printer handles the shipping, the printer can send the books with “bulk rate” discounts, and non-profits presses have mailing discounts (in the United States). Actually, anyone can mail books at “media rate” in the United States at a discount.

Conversely, the online publisher has nothing to do with mailing lists or physical addresses. His customers come to him in different ways, such as through his growing presence online, at his own Web site and those that link to it. He acquires email lists and those are his primary marketing tool for newsletters, and for advertising his books. Each customer purchases 1 or more copy of his book(s). The shipping for each order means that the profit margin is slightly lower for the online publisher than the print publisher, who pays the printer to send his books to his customers with “bulk rate” discounts. However, the efficiency with which the online publisher obtains and retains his customers—and reaches new ones—is far superior to the print publisher. So, the online publisher requires slightly more customers than the print one to make the same amount of profit, due to shipping costs. This is further relevant in a global market, where books are shipped overseas, costing even more in shipping.

Here is one relevant example of the disparity between online and print publishers: Most small literary journals have subscriber lists 1,000-5,000. It is industry standard that readership is multiplied by 3. The readership number is a more accurate number to gauge success and profit margin and marketing success. What is the impact, online, where instead of 1 book being given to 2 friends, a PDF file is forwarded and read 1000 times, or more? This reality has a value of some sort that is yet to be identified.

Mailing lists, of print publishers, cannot be easily transferred to online, if at all. And this is another reason why print publishers

will not transition to online operations. Most of the customers of small presses, or bookstores and the like, will not be Web-savvy (because they are from a generation that did not grow up with computers or the Internet) and strongly resist any attempt to migrate to the Web, forcing the print publisher to keep his snail-mail operations. But, again, a publisher cannot exist in both worlds. The snail-mail lists require the use of an offset printer and someone to handle large shipping operations. The online publisher does not mailing or shipping, and his time saved is used elsewhere.

One speed bump that has recently appeared to block online publishing is the unwillingness by a small percentage of bookstores (such as Waldenbooks; but not Barnes & Noble and others) and some of the larger distributors (such as Bilbo Distribution, Inc.; but unlike Ingram and others) to not accept books from print-on-demand and require that they be printed by an offset printer. In truth, the quality is the same between a book printed at an offset printer and print-on-demand. I prefer the look and feel of a print-on-demand book to one printed at an offset printer. The POD book looks much more “modern.” And, it is industry standard that any book printed is going to have a slight margin for error—, so, how can a distributor make this additional demand in quality? I do not recommend that anyone does business with Waldenbooks or Bilbo Distribution, Inc. One should always be wary of anything or anyone who is resistant to change. This is especially true in any business.

In the world of small publishing—and the same can be said of off-off Broadway ticket sales—profit is made by selling to a small network of people or friends. This venture never becomes a big business, because it never reaches the mainstream. But, on the Internet a small band of writers can buy books among themselves, and given the low setup costs (compared to print publishers), the online publisher can make a profit from each book. By offering discounts, and managing sales, and combining it with marketing and advertising, the small publisher can quickly reach the mainstream—online. How does this fact affect which books an online publisher should print? In print operations, each book printed is a large risk and eats up a portion of a company’s capital. This is not the case with online publishing. Therefore, an

online publisher can be more focused on art, instead of strictly commerce. This is more uncharted waters, and to be explored by online publishers, exclusively.

The online publisher is in control of the process of publication, start to finish. He is like the train conductor, adjusting various knobs and levels, to find the right balance of fuel for sales and speed of growth. The online publisher is dependent on virtually no one. Perhaps most important to him is his reputation, because in an online world, a good reputation—or the lack of it—travels fast and far. So, he must build up a network of those he relies on to do his job. But, at no time is he obligated to any of these individuals or companies.

Print publishers' answer to the Internet is to exist in both worlds and insist nothing is wrong. Print publishers will not make the shift online, which is required for their survival over the next 5 years—primarily because of a technology divide, drawn between two generations. Publishing is inherently a risky business and one with little opportunity to “float” business models for long. If the market shifts, so that people are not buying enough books from bookstores shelves to make a profit for print publishers, this will quickly bring about their extinction.

The very nature of the Internet requires that online publishers sell many titles and also have a large audience. Can't an online publisher simply distribute its books to online bookstores, where they will be sold or distributed? No, because a book at amazon.com is not like a book in a bookstore and no one will find a book unless they are directed to it. However, if amazon.com were to put a very unmarketable, poorly selling book on its front page, it would sell many copies in an instant—and, again, given low setup cost, this would be a very wise business move. Therefore, the key to online publishing is relationships between the various parts of the business model. And, these kinds of relationships cannot be created overnight, or with money (at least not exclusively with money). The relationship between online publishing houses is far different online than in the world of paper. My company, World Audience, Inc. www.worldaudience.org has established crucial relationships with the Skive Magazine www.skivemagazine.com, The

Compulsive Reader www.compulsivereader.com, and New York Quarterly www.nyquarterly.com, among others. Our rapidly rising success is ingrained into the relationships I have with these other companies.

Writers, too, will have an impact on whether or not print publishers can migrate to the Internet. If the best writers exist online, and that is where their publishers are, writers will not bother with a print publisher. Even if a print publisher can put a book into bookstores, they may not be able to provide the same things an online publisher can, such as exposure to younger audiences. Writers will hesitate to sever relationships developed with online publishers in favor of print publishers. When the preponderance of excellent writers is being published online (if this is not already occurring) print publishers will rapidly atrophy. Writers want to reach a wide audience with their books and to make money. Thus, if wider audiences are reached online, a writer will shy away from a print publisher. Simply buying the best Web site, with name recognition, will not equate a wide audience. This wide audience is secured over time, by the publisher's name and reputation, and building relationships.

A large part of a publisher's business model is its brand, or reputation. Many writers from the online generation (those in their 20s, 30s, and 40s) will not automatically seek to be printed by a print publisher. This generation of writers may seek online publishers first. But the best writers will always want to be published by the most noteworthy and relevant publishers. In fact, during this period, while print publishers debate about whether or not to exist online, the online publishers have been creating their reputations with the best young writers on the Internet, who have not yet been published in books. This is mainly due to the nature of the Internet itself. A young writer is not going to waste time sending work out in stamped envelopes to journals or publishers anymore because he or she can get it published online. Here is another reason these same young writers will not look for agents who will market their work to print publishers, because the writers are already getting published online with relative ease. In 2007, with the economic reality of online publishing, young writers meet the young publishers and the circle is whole.

I have been mainly discussing the future of literature, the worst selling of genres. Will these same things occur in other genres of writing, from self-help to children's' books? When books published by online publishers start to sell in large numbers online, every writer will want to be published by an online publisher. But, what will make books sell online, in greater amounts and faster than those in bookstores? It does not have to happen, in order for all of what I am describing to take place. If the publisher has all the tools he requires, virtually zero overhead, a global market, and the best writers from around the world, what else does he need? The customers will increase as word quickly spreads that the best books are to be found by online publishers. "Word of mouth sells tickets," is a theater adage that cannot be disputed. Most people (especially young people) prefer to shop for books online, and search for the best deals there, than schlep to a bookstore. If people can access libraries on their computer, they will not travel to libraries by foot, to read books printed on paper. And, the younger generation is accustomed to "reading books on a computer screen," and comfortable with palm readers, e-books will gradually spread.

Academic presses are largely unaffected by Internet commerce because their market is themselves. The Leftist, American "independent" presses are connected with universities, and back and forth, in back-scratching scheme, whereby those books selected by Leftist academia are forwarded to the Leftist, "independent" presses and published. Academic presses themselves are funded by the universities where they operate. They are therefore vanity presses: they publish anything and are funded by other means than business.

The big corporate publishers will try to make the shift online by spending money; they are already doing this. Sooner or later, however, they will not be able to sustain their print operations in a profitable manner, and because the online publishers will have already become established, these big corporations will not be able to make the shift and they will expire. The big corporations will have no choice in this matter; they can't simply abandon their print operations, so the preponderance of their funding will go to sustaining these operations. Instrumental in the big corporations' demise will be when the best writers choose online publishers

over print ones.

Online publishers are a small group of die-hards who exist around the world, in countries that speak English. We've been interacting with intensity since about 1998, through workshops and writing groups. PDF files circulated on email lists that have evolved into online journals with Web sites, and finally, during the last year, into high-quality printed books. Like *true* revolutionaries, we don't follow the rules or laws, be they American or Indian or Chinese. We use the best tools each of our nations' provides. I have, indeed, a back-up plan, whereby if the IRS decides to close World Audience, Inc. tomorrow, it would continue to exist in Australia, and as a second option, India. This is the power of the Web. A Web-based company is centered on its Web site first and those who control the Web site second.

ISBNs are simply a marketing tool, a way to get books to as wide an audience, and into as many bookstores, as possible. The rules for ISBNs vary from country to country. We use ISBNs for quarterlies or books, or anything else we want. If there is ever any difficulty, no matter, we can live without an ISBN for a book and still see it distributed. We are not obligated to follow a certain standard—indeed, our ethics and cultures vary widely.

New copyright practices, and laws, will also be determined by us. We are still adjusting and juggling the contracts we are signing with our writers. Everything must be re-examined in our world: copyright, first-rights, royalties (because the costs are lower than those of print publishers, shouldn't a writer get a much more than 5%?) In reality, there is no "natural run" of a book online, due to the plethora of e-zines. This vast diversity means one online publisher does not affect the sales of the other. This is different in the print world, where if a story appears in a book and simultaneously in a magazine, readers will take note. In the print world, a book's sales happen early on and then drop. This is precisely the opposite online.

We must deal with the reality that there is no "ownership" of words in online publishing. The instant a story is posted—perhaps even written, in some cases—it receives worldwide distribution. Interestingly, a story that has been published is still reusable,

only a short time later. Readers of one ezine may have never heard or read of a writer, whose story was previously published at another ezine. The concept of “simultaneous submissions” is obsolete, as a writer must be able to submit to more than one place because there are so many places to get published online. Virtually none of the traditions of print publishing are transferable to online publishing, though many of these traditions are still utilized by most editors at ezines.

The stigma against vanity presses is inapplicable in online publishing. All online publishing—by an academic’s definition—is vanity publishing. Most books, that online publishers market, will sell a few hundred copies. This is far short of a print publisher’s expectations, or his profit. Therefore, the online publisher will not make much money with each book published, if he were to fund the entire operation, which costs \$400-\$800. Involving the writer more in the process, by having the writer pay part of the setup cost, is a good thing. The writer now has a voice in things like the cover design and marketing schemes and editing, whereas this was not the case with print publishers. Perhaps, as online publishers grow, we will be able to sell more copies per book, because we will have achieved a greater reader base and our connections will reach farther, faster. If so, the online publisher will be in a better position to fully fund new books and take the risk. However, the option will always remain for an author to fund part of his book’s creation in the online publishing world. In fact, this is precisely how online publishers work now. When the author assumes some risk for his or her book, the percentage of royalties to the writer increases. And, in fact, I have discovered that print publishers have always done the same thing. The author has to have something to offer to the online publisher, beyond the words, either in terms of marketing of his book, or sales, networking, and sound business practices. Technically, a vanity press is one that will publish any book, for a fee. After the book is published, the author never hears from the vanity press again. The online publisher still only publishes those books he wants, whether or not he charges a fee. As with any press, the key is to create a body of titles that exemplify the press’s culture, and do so in an attractive and high-quality manner that is profitable.

We are changing the face of the English language. Grammar and style are different online. We never indent paragraphs. One space separates sentences. Writing styles are changing, as writers from different cultures interact on a regular basis. The market for the type of literature that sells online is different from that which sells in bookstores. Attention spans are lower. The novel is dead, many people say, and it may be somewhat true (another reason for the demise of bookstores).

Editing is vastly improved in this new environment, because the editor and writer are normally from different countries. This lends more objectivity, so that only the writing is considered. Until only a few years ago, when large American corporations began to swallow up print publishers, virtually all American print publishers were run by Leftists that published a large percentage of politically-oriented books. Take Seven Stories Press as an excellent example of this and even their fiction has a Leftist leaning. Writers were chosen based on whether or not they were Leftists. If writers were involved in the Leftist community, their chances of getting published were greatly increased, despite the quality of the work. Therefore, certain editing styles were developed by these Leftists. None of this exists in online publishing, where we are inventing new editing styles. There is a community of writers online, who are constantly interacting, which lends to a sense of familiarity; but not intimacy. The online publishing world is so vast that the insular world of Leftist publishing houses is a thing of the past.

The money still being held at the print publishing houses (even the small ones) is still vast in comparison to online publishers. But all else, even large-scale advertising, has moved online. It is a matter of simple survival that when one force starts to achieve success and make money—however small an amount—it must take resources away from its competition. Because the competition is the only place that the resources, such as writers, advertisers, and readers, exist. And, trends tend to quickly snowball in the publishing business, so this too lends to the favor of the online publisher.

What the online publisher, and the entire online writing community, is doing is truly revolutionary. We are very quickly

and dramatically altering the landscapes of publishing (all of it), writing, and even business. The effect of all this on America—surprisingly or unsurprisingly—is limited. Writing in America is largely a political endeavor. Recently, this trend has gotten out of hand, and culturally, everything is either Liberal or Conservative in America. Literature and print publishing have suffered as a result, in America. The world moves on, however. In this brave new world, we must share. No one country emerges winner. Thus, the only thing that is important is the writing. It sounds very romantic, yes?

But still the question persists: Is there a revolution happening? Print publishers definitely deny there is any kind of revolution and they insist that any thing an online publisher can come up with—useful business models or other ripe gems, such as authors—is stolen, as if stealing candy from a baby. I suppose the only time these spectacular events will be called a revolution (and gain any attention) is when 1) the revolution is over and the print publishers are no more, along with big newspaper chains; and, 2) in their place are large online publishers, with thousands of the best living authors, from around the world, interacting in a new medium, and creating and selling the highest quality books anywhere. The 2nd thing will happen over the next 5 years. And when it does, the 1st thing becomes an automatic reality. Perhaps, the greatest thing for us revolutionaries is the fact that the war has only just begun. I give the last word to Mr. Simon, from his essay, *Keepers of the Word*, as he describes an entirely (Leftist) world, from the past:

What is the alternative? I believe the best among us expect to lose money on at least some of the books we publish. This allows other sets of values to cohabit with more commercial ones, as would be true also at magazines like *The Nation* and *Harper's*. At Seven Stories, for example, we look to have profit on one-third of the list to cover losses on the other two-thirds. If, at the large corporate houses, the expectation is for virtually every title to turn a profit, then their "bottom-line sensibility" is indeed a threat to any literary aspirations they may have, since I believe that literature simply requires a longer look.

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Abdul Karim Khan (pen name: Ernest Dempsey) was born in Hangu, a small town in Pakistan. As a child, he enjoyed two things: The joyful company of his brother and Khan's best friend, Shais; and, making airy castles with lots of characters in his mind. These two things pervaded through his spirit so much that he has given up valuable scholarships to pursue them. At twelve, he began his career by writing detective stories, horror, thrillers, and whatnot). However, a career in writing held no bright prospects in his society. So he studied geology. But his literary spirit demanded more attention and he started studying classics, alongside writing. The Internet reached his hometown in 2003, whereupon he began submitting his work to literary ezines. In just the last year, he has seen publication of his poems, essays, short stories, and literary reviews. He has been published in audience literary journal, and other literary journals, as well as other magazines. His reviews appear in The audience Review, and other places. Email: dempsey87@yahoo.com.

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