

# CHICAGO ARTS JOURNAL

*Issue One  
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*FREE*

*Featuring:*

Kerry Reid on  
Theater Oobleck

Two Views of  
*Clumsy Sublime*

Personal History by  
Charlotte Hamilton

Baseball Fiction by  
John Starrs

A Conversation on  
*The Two-Character Play*

An Interview with Rick Paul

Music from Justin Hayford  
and Stephanie Rearick

## *Notes on This Publication*

Welcome, and thank you for opening the first issue of *Chicago Arts Journal*. This publication you are holding is intended as an appreciation of and a heartfelt offering to the artists and makers of Chicago, past and present.

This issue was assembled by a small gang of friends with common interests, but its contributors cut a broad swath across generations, schools of thought and cultural backgrounds within the Chicago arts world. In this first foray we have, as an experiment, asked of some contributors that they work in a genre outside their usual field. We have a poet writing fiction, a scientist reviewing new music, a musician responding to a play, and so on. As part of our mission to broaden our experience of art through multiple views and conversations, we open this issue with two independent reviews of one play — in this installment, *Clumsy Sublime* by Barrie Cole. We close the issue on an interview with Rick Paul, a hard-working and beloved set designer who relates his experiences from four decades in Chicago theater. Between these features we offer you more on theater and music, sports, and personal history, as well as spirited talk between friends.

On a personal note, I owe a debt of gratitude to each patient writer whose work appears here; to my friends and tireless co-editors, Carine Loewi and Dietrich; and a “special thanks” to Beau O’Reilly, whose energetic suggestions and keen ear for goings-on about town were invaluable to the development of our first issue.

We at the helm of *CAJ* believe in the concept of “adult word count,” leaving space for writers to say what they will without strict editorial stipulations. Some of our contributors write pseudonymously; some do not. Likewise, some of you may be reading this under an assumed name. If you are not, please feel free to consume this journal publicly. Tell your friends. Hold it right up in front of your face on the train. Shout it from a tall, tall place.

If you or yours would like to pitch an article, recommend a work for review, launch a love letter or fire a tirade in our direction, please contact [johann.artsjournal@gmail.com](mailto:johann.artsjournal@gmail.com). I look forward to it.

*Johann Blumer*  
*Editor-in-Chief*

*Our front cover photograph, from the CAJ personal archives, pictures David Isaacson of Theater Oobleck. The images on the back cover and on page 15 originally appeared in Commie Dog (Issue 3) by Sue Cargill.*

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## Two Views

The first piece we present in our dual review feature is the latest play by Barrie Cole, *Clumsy Sublime*, performed this fall at Prop Thtr following its début as a staged reading at the Rhinoceros Theater Festival last winter.

### *Clumsy Sublime*

Reviewed by Beneven Stanciano

What is it about a frame? A frame seems to give people the impression that the negative space surrounding it doesn't matter, and that all deliberate focus should be pointed directly inward. A frame gives people a reason to stare when it is usually rude. People, places, and things exist in a frame to be observed, critiqued, and deconstructed. Moreover, a frame encourages an intense focus on the present moment. Otherwise, that moment is just deluded by the negative space. In the opening half-hour of Curious Theatre Branch's production of Barrie Cole's *Clumsy Sublime*, the use of frames is oblique. Half a door frame separates but barely shields mom-mourner Russell (Edward Thomas-Herrera) from Manic Pixie Dream Tween Delia (Bailey Boyle). A blue back wall displays Shelly (played in the opening weekend by writer Barrie Cole, stepping in for the injured Kelly Anchors) like a mechanized sculpture in a pop art museum. Finally, a man and a woman (Jeff Bivens and Vicki Walden) pose in a tableau in a room encased in the back wall. A

transparent, murky screen separates them from the action onstage, almost as if they are characters in a painting on the wall. And guess what? They *are* characters in a painting on the wall. All these uses of frames, from suggested to literal, implant an immediate impression into the audience's mind: these scenes are works of art. Moments displayed for your deconstruction. Vehicles for analysis as well as emotion. Yet, what appears to be an omnibus collection of quirky one-acts come together to form a beautiful three-paneled altarpiece. They would probably work fine on their own, but they hold each other up at the slightest suggestion of collapse. The results aren't always clean, but they certainly are never tedious.

While playwright Barrie Cole focuses in on a variety of styles and stories, just as in a large-ensemble Hollywood movie, "everything is connected." Delia tries to sell magic paraphernalia to Russell, a middle-aged gay man who recently lost his mother, expectedly leading into a relationship that evolves from bare tolerance to happy acceptance. Meanwhile, move stage left where Anne and John embody the Edward Hopper painting *Excursion into Philosophy*, all the while existentially musing on their ambiguous, sheltered existence. Move even further left for Shelly, Delia's floozyish stepmother with a knack for sleazy telemarketing and heightened vocal patterns. Gradually, these worlds start to overlap, to not only interact but to comment on each other, employing whimsical deus ex machinas like magic boots, books with parallel storylines, and, of course, a painting that springs to life.

At some point, Cole's scenes of extensive offbeat musings beg the simple question: "Why?" Why these scenarios? Why do they need to be together? What makes this an effective triptych? Why have them interact at all? Cole makes a compelling case for her

characters to remain on their own part of the stage throughout. Some of the play's most entertaining and engaging moments are when her characters merely sit and say what is on their minds. But in a way, that sorta does a disservice to one of the consistent themes throughout: isolation. All the characters seemed to be trapped by their existence. Unemployed, bereaved Russell passes the time planning parties he doesn't have anyone to invite to. Delia seems to enter a world of formalized, Shakespearean melodrama in the presence of her stepmother. John and Anne, meanwhile, remain literally stuck in an everlasting moment with little variation beyond an occasional change in reading material. Perhaps the band of outsiders that find each other is a cliché borrowed from oh-so-many indie films these days, but here they really seem to need one other — if for no other reason than that they are the closest outsiders with an open door.

*Clumsy Sublime* offers plenty of fodder for your average cynic. Cole oftens sacrifices forward story progression for a series of well placed turns of phrase, which typically go on for about three minutes longer than expected. Dramatic shifts in tone and style almost feel like dictated exercises from a group writer's workshop, and she sometimes undermines beautifully random moments by self-consciously explaining them rather than letting the audience inevitably accept them as part of the world she has already established. And, at a liberal two and a half hours, the play seems to widen rather than build to its conclusion. However, it's also precisely these risks that make the play so memorable and engaging in the first place. Cole's dialogue is almost always sharp and funny, so long, aimless periods of it never feel like a bad thing. Scenes where Shelly and Delia converse in Shakespearean verse are so well

written and clear that they never become distracting. As a result, it becomes much easier to glean personal meaning from them (i.e., these characters are never truthful to each other but "always acting a role"). By letting these moments go almost unnaturally long, the play reveals more about the characters' aspirations and general internal logic. The production almost plays like a Meisner repetition exercise, which, while having little repetition, has that same sense of letting the stream of consciousness take over. Just like a dream, the journey to that unexpected end is exhilarating.

But no matter how well written and clever it is, a quirky two and a half hour comedy could only sustain itself so long without a game cast, and, boy, did they ever find it. Jeff Bivens and Vicki Walden are particularly dazzling as the "not-couple" in the painting. Both strike a great balance of the quiet moodiness that the painting suggests and the bombastic theatricality that Cole's writing implies. Their existential musings feel more refreshingly curious than melancholy, especially when they find themselves speaking random words that they don't quite know the definitions of. As Russell, Edward Thomas-Herrera is a nice, subtle contrast to the histrionics surrounding him, though he does have a couple of pleasing opportunities to play. As Delia, actual teenager Bailey Boyle sometimes suffers from stilted line delivery, but at the same time, legitimately seems to understand and *be* the character she's inhabiting. Like Thomas-Herrera, she comes to play at the right moments. Though merely stepping in for the opening day performance, Barrie Cole herself infuses Shelly with the same theatrical flair and energy she gives to readings of her poetry and fiction. Also, director Stefan Brün makes the most of the small

stage, creating effective, segmented stage pictures, encouraging the audience to take in the action moment by moment.

Even though *Clumsy Sublime* is clearly a complete, polished product, one necessary compromise on opening day became a great example of accidental poignancy. Having barely a day's notice, Barrie Cole performed Shelly with script in hand. Amazingly, this was never distracting, and she never had a bit of awkwardness spitting out the lines and physicalizing the action. This of course would never have been a real artistic choice with the luxury of sufficient rehearsal time, but there was something interesting about seeing that script on stage. Shelly is a character whose personality seems to change instantly based on who she is talking to. Over the course of the play she goes from sassy saleslady (a people who often work from scripts) to Shakespearean noblewoman to flirtatious Southern aristocrat. She almost plays different *roles* for different people, and that very pragmatic use of the script still reads as a sort of Brechtian alienation device, calling attention to a theme in the play. Though a fully memorized performance by the always excellent Kelly Anchors would have truly been something special, too, it's moments like this that make *Clumsy Sublime* so endearing. It's not perfect, but its "flaws" are so glossed up that they're almost more beautiful and potent than something that is. It truly lives up to its title. It may be a little clumsy, but it's still sublime.

## *Clumsy Sublime*

Reviewed by Jim Joyce

Last weekend I was able to catch two showings of Barrie Cole's new play, *Clumsy Sublime*, at the Prop Thtr. Both times I got a serious pleasure out of seeing the production in a storefront space like the Prop, where every seat in the room puts you directly in front of the drama, and you can buy a beer for two bucks. Can't get either at the Steppenwolf or Victory!

So — the lowdown: Delia is our teenage hero. Her father died recently in an upholstery-related incident. As a result, or now with even greater fervor than before, Delia passes her time selling outrageous thrift store shit door to door with the claim that the items, since coming into her possession, have become magical.

Delia's wares include a magic pair of rain boots (highly covetable big boots, good for winter, great for April), a copy of *Terms of Endearment* on VHS, and other salivation army treasures. The only man who buys in on Delia's mania, more out of pity than belief, is Russell. Russell is a deeply lonely 49-year old who lives on same block as Delia. He too has lost a loved one, his mother. To make matters worse, Russell's bachelorhood is perpetually lonely as hell, too, seeing as his ideal paramours are gay male alcoholics, and in the play's part of town those are hard to find if not harder to keep.

Despite the years and differences between them, the woeful pair Delia and Russell colludes into friendship over a painted

reproduction of Edward Hopper's *Excursion into Philosophy*, which Delia thrifts and presents as a gift to her new friend.

Though there are other characters in *Clumsy Sublime*, the play works in compressed pairs. When Delia's not with Russell, she's with her stepmom, Shelly. Shelly is a Diet Pepsi sort of evil. She is heavily occupied by the edible makeup business, and she rarely speaks with her stepdaughter Delia, though in the moments when she does, Shelly talks in Shakespearean English hyperbole. Later, we can hear from Shelly's over-the-phone Ponzi scheming that the bard-speak is an affectation. She's from Toledo, Ohio.

Then there are the painting people. Joseph Riley, the set designer, effectively places a picture frame-genius box in the center of the stage, big enough for actors to hide out in. That's where Anne and John, subjects of Hopper's *Excursion Into Philosophy* can be seen alive inside the painting. Still, their painting life is not a magic Walt Disney existence. Rather, the platonic couple can only sustain each other through Beckett-like tennis talk — *I say this, you say that* — and await the occasional arrival of a new book from the outside world, which they hear a little of, as if from inside an echo chamber. John wants a sandwich, too.

Shelly, Anne and John parallel and extend the conflict premise set up by Delia and Russell, who for most of the play, scheme ways to be less depressed. They wonder — will a pair of magic rain boots help? No. A 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party for Russell? Maybe. And the action of the play bounces around like this.

After a while, I felt like I was watching one of those open-ended 21<sup>st</sup> century deals where characterization directs the plot, and in the case of *Clumsy Sublime*, conflict seems to form from the question of how decent folk try to function in already unfulfilling

lives, to say nothing of the added knife of extra loneliness that arrives in the way of lost loved ones.

For the sake of these bizarre characters and surreal worlds, Cole's play maintains a level of buzz and charm. The reviews of her previous plays *I Love You Permanently* and *Fruit Tree Backpack* consistently point out Cole's brilliant wordplay, strikingly bizarre view of reality, and continual interest in the absurd. I think these descriptions are true for *Clumsy Sublime*, too.

In the viewings I was lucky to have, the nuances of the play emerged, though I still felt that after enjoying the idiosyncratic characters and their hapless attempts to find love and balance, I had difficulty finding much of a sense of completion and catharsis by the play's finish. The closing action, though clearly expressed, seems to leave several corners unresolved.

I wonder about how Anne and John, who come to communicate with Delia and Russell (though I won't share to what extent), lead to any development. I wonder how necessary Shelly's strange love of accents might be, and if this play is dropping commentary on how expectations of cohesion and catharsis are unreasonable parts to ask of 21<sup>st</sup> century art and reality? Or maybe I'm missing the point — that, as Shelly, Delia's stepmother, says, "under-thinking can mess you up ... like being an idiot and believing that if [you're] ... nice and sweet everything will work out," like you'll understand the weird shit "and no one will die on you."

Then again, my favorite movie is John Carpenter's *The Thing*. So what do I know?

In any case, Barrie Cole's newest play will keep most viewers entertained with absurdly funny voices and a beautiful set that

balances the mellow doom of suburbia for Delia, Russell, and Shelly with the art-theory painting realm of Anne and John. Be prepared for ambiguity and strangeness, though. Cole, like Hopper, is going to say a lot while still leaving a lot unsaid.



*Vicki Walden and Jeff Bivens in Clumsy Sublime. Photo by Jeff Bivens.*

*Clumsy Sublime* was written by Barrie Cole; directed by Stefan Brün; starred Vicki Walden, Edward Thomas-Herrera, Bailey Boyle, Jeff Bivens, and Kelly Anchors; and played at Prop Thtr in Avondale (3502 N. Elston Avenue).



## *Dreamworld*

Stephanie Rearick, Jr. (Uvulittle, 2013)

Reviewed by Carine Loewi

My friend Dietrich gave me this new album by Stephanie Rearick, Jr., who I think is the funhouse-mirror babysitting-charge persona of regular Stephanie Rearick, but I could be wrong. Dietrich said would I review it, I said “Dietrich, I don’t know anything about music, don’t make me pretend to know anything about music,” Dietrich said something like “Tough toenails, sister” and kept handing me the CD with a determined face until I took it. So let me just tell you about some thoughts I had as I rambled around Chicago listening to this album a bunch of times on my car stereo (I don’t have a music player outside my car, Dietrich; tough toenails, Dietrich).

My initial thing with this album was, “Wow, this is pretty. How do I get inside it?” The songs had a shimmery, watercolorey exterior that made them pleasant listening, but I felt sad that I couldn’t figure out how to sing along with them. This feeling made me think maybe I don’t like *music* per se, so much as I like *songs*. Give me a Cole Porter-ish trochaic waltz thing with a beginning and an end and a middle I can ball up and carry around in my pocket, and I’m set. The Rearick, Jr. songs burbled and looped along and all sounded very neat, but they refused to invite me up for coffee.

Another thing I thought of, on the surface of it, was video games. Old Nintendo theme songs, you will probably say, but then

also ancient wooden boardwalk-arcade machines that plunk out something mysterious when you release the crank; the melody the quarter-machine fortune lady sings before she turns Tom Hanks into a grownup and the whole scene vanishes overnight; a bunch of whirling lights, a tiny piano (or is it a synthetic harp?), and you’re stuck against the padded wall of the Gravitron, losing all your pocket change. A slightly cold magic about it, the album has.

Okay, also, and let’s say this is the meat of my feelings about *Dreamworld*: I thought a lot about plate spinning. You remember plate spinning? Johnny Carson? The composition of the songs seems to be like that. A fake-piano jangle, set to eternal loop; a skittery drum machine, tip-tapping underneath; another piano toddle, loop; a voice, a breathy voice like Carla Bruni, saying something kinda sexy, kinda indiscernible, loop; another voice over top — all of this, whirling around like the prettiest industrial clothes drier you ever saw. It is mesmerizing technique, I tell you that. And then I think: wasn’t most of the impressiveness of plate spinning that you could never sit down? That you had to have an eye in every corner, looking for what was whorling out of orbit and would very soon shatter? How do I love the plate spinner when it’s the machine that’s keeping things afloat? Nothing can ever fall down here, unless the power goes out. It is the technological opposite of the one-man oompah band on the streetcorner in Dresden; a computer’s knees give never give up, no matter how many cymbal crashes. You may think: Carine, this is a metaphor. This is a metaphor and you are belaboring it. You may be right. I’ll add these unsettled sentiments to the feelings I often have about Modernism: it’s beautiful, it’s well made, and I feel wary of its intentions for my heart.

Let me also tell you about some particular songs on *Dreamworld*. Dietrich, who loves Leonard Cohen, wants me to mention that there is a Cohen cover, “Democracy,” on the album, and for my part I will say that it is one of the more rollicky, charging, and non-loopy tunes on the disc. It is cheerful and also eery, which I guess is the thing of that song in general. One of my favorite things on the album, what I kept scrolling back to when the CD tried to shuffle along, is a cover of “Laugh” by The Frogs. Now, I don’t know if you know The Frogs. I didn’t know The Frogs, but the internet told me a few things about them — some good things, some sad things — notably that “Laugh” is a rare PG entry in their catalogue. Rearick puts a minuet-sounding keyboard tune under it and sings the lines with a detached Nico-washing-dishes feeling: “Transfer my heart to Frankenstein/Cause this one’s breaking/And your smile turns me on.” Rearick’s sweetness here, and her strangeness, along with much of what I read about The Frogs, remind me of Ween, a middle-nineties favorite whose best production trick was pastiche: they could make friendly, bouncy pop melodies to buffer (or enhance) unkind or filthy lyrics. What I mean to tell you about Rearick’s Frogs song is that it comes off sounding polite and innocent and also a little dirty, and that is a combination I will nearly always like.

I return to the album while driving back from an early-morning appointment and consider that I focus too much on the trick of the loops. There’s a lot more in *Dreamworld* to hear and to listen for. Rearick’s next-to-last cut, “Impossible,” makes hay of the technological option by slicing up layers of ascending vocal notes, such that lines get cut off just as they glimmer toward resolution. The effect in my mind is that of standing in a field of waist-high

grass in sun, suddenly realizing the visible pixels on the waving blades, and the 8-bit color: again, lovely; again, unsettling. But enough with the synesthesia. Dietrich is giving me the wrap-it-up signal from the next room, so I’ll stop right around here. Despite my groans and tetches above I am telling you that this is a good album for tooling around town in your mid-sized sedan in the rain, or having friends for coffee or whatever it is you do, and I’d be interested, too, to see how the plates all spin in a live setting. I hear this is possible; look at [stephanierearick.com](http://stephanierearick.com) and you can probably figure out how to go see her perform in Ohio or Wisconsin or New York or someplace even far-flunger than those. Cheers, and enjoy.

*Dreamworld* features Stephanie Rearick on Casio, trumpet, loops, and voice. The album is available on CD or as a digital download at <http://www.uvulittle.com/catalog/stephanie-rearick-jr/dreamworld>.

## *More If You've Got It: Five Plays by Theater Oobleck*

Reviewed by Kerry Reid

*"I caught a show. I went to Steppenwolf. Yeah, I get in free to everything cuz I'm God. Is dat patronizin' or what? But it's free, so what the Hell. An' diss play dey had, well, it was a religious play, part of the new religion, the new religious pageant of plays dey had dere....."*

—Ugly in *Ugly's First World* by Jeffrey Dorchon

Steppenwolf was already an established religion by the time I started studying theater at Columbia College Chicago in 1986, but I was never a novice. I read the reviews and envied my high school friends with hipper parents who took them to see Steppenwolf's now-legendary production of Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead* in the now-gone Jane Addams Hull House Center at Broadway and Belmont. But like so many artifacts created by the generation immediately ahead of me they remained an idea of a cultural (counter or not) icon rather than a flesh-and-blood experience until many years into their reign.

Don't get me wrong — I have seen some of the most transcendent performances of my life at Steppenwolf. But they didn't seem interested in re-inventing theater as much as promoting the romance of the ensemble. The fact that many of the original ensemble were already grazing greener Hollywood pastures by the time I was in a position to see their shows semi-regularly wasn't anyone's fault, but it did leave me with that nagging sense of "If you think this is good, you shoulda seen 'em when they first started." The theatrical equivalent of "I liked their first album best."

For me, the one company that mattered, the one that challenged the old gods and old orthodoxies — of what a play means, of how it is created, of what yardsticks measure a "successful" company — was Theater Oobleck.

To begin with, the people behind the company were my age, rather than older siblings who, if they weren't actually present at the 1968 Democratic Convention riots in Grant Park, could at least reasonably argue that, like Maurice Chevalier, "I remember it well."

That right there impressed me and gave me hope. Imagine! People MY age were creating work that changed the terms and fit the moment and mindset of a generation too young to be part of the Sixties culture wars and too often lumped in — usually by smug aging veterans of the aforementioned Sixties mythology — with the Reagan Youth/*Risky Business* striving-wannabe-Yuppie stereotype. (I would sometimes mentally re-create patronizing encounters I had with the former, who assumed I was one of the latter, as my own version of the Beatles in the train car with the old codger in *A Hard Day's Night*. "I protested the war for your sort!" "I bet you're sorry you won." Abbie Hoffman died for somebody's sins, but not mine.)

I don't know if it's the result of being part of the very-late-Boomer/Gen X/perpetually resentful demographic or some personal mental peccadillo, but it has always been difficult for me to feel as if I have the right to stake an authoritative cultural claim — odd thing, perhaps, for someone who makes a semi-living as a critic. This sometimes spills over to marveling how others in my age bracket manage to pull it off. I still have trouble figuring out how someone only three years older than me became president of the United States, for example.

But Oobleck showed the world (if one defines “the world” as Chicago storefront theater — and why not?) that even the old-new companies like Steppenwolf and Organic had no permanent claim to being the vanguard of “Chicago-style” theater. They did so while challenging traditional hierarchies of theater and reinvestigating the inherent power dynamics between playwright and performer by eliminating the director. You can read about the “no director” philosophy at their website (<http://theateroobleck.com/soapbox/>) if you wish — at this point, it no longer feels like the most important thing about Oobleck to me, though it certainly got attention early on.

And everyone got in free if they were broke — God or no.

In some ways, though, Oobleck’s history does reflect some of the same background as Steppenwolf. They too were incubated by high school friends -- Jeffrey Dorchon and Danny Thompson, who originally formed the idea for what was then called Streetlight Theater Company, without actually doing any plays. They took shape through shared artistic sensibilities at college in the Midwest—in Oobleck’s case, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where they were first called Streetlight. And they too eventually ended up in Chicago in 1988, though to my knowledge Oobleck’s creation myth, unlike the early fabled days of Steppenwolf a decade-and-a-half earlier, does not involve a secular Nativity in a suburban church basement. And yeah – Oobleck, like Steppenwolf, looked decidedly like a boys’ club. More on that later.

At a conference on Chicago theater at Columbia College Chicago in 2011, I was part of a panel on “established alternatives” — theater companies that had somehow defied the odds and the ravages of time, creative dissent, and impecunious circumstance and

survived for decades making work the way they wanted. The companies under discussion — Oobleck, Prop, the Neo-Futurists, Curious Theatre Branch, and Annoyance — all had their own aesthetic (or perhaps anti-aesthetic in the case of Annoyance). Yet they all had created work that, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, served notice that not everybody in storefront theater wanted to be “the next Steppenwolf.”

One recurring motif that day was that so much of the original work created by these groups had never been collected in printed form. The memory of so many productions remained housed mainly in the fading cerebral matter of fans and the digital archives of newspapers. More accurately — one paper: the *Chicago Reader*, which under the theater editorship of first Tony Adler (who did the honors for Oobleck at the panel) and then Albert (or “Bill” as he’s known away from bylines) Williams (who organized the conference) quickly became the most important and consistent source of cultural commentary for smaller arts companies. Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Tribune*, who gets a lot of deserved credit for his early support of Steppenwolf, wasn’t really covering the storefront upstarts of the Bush-the-Elder era. But if a show opened in the late 1980s in Chicago and the *Reader* didn’t cover it, it probably hadn’t really opened.

That archival gap has been partly addressed with the publication last year by the indispensable local outfit Hope and Nonthings of *More If You’ve Got It*, which collects five plays from Theater Oobleck’s first 25 years. (By contrast, Steppenwolf’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1999 was marked by the publication of a gorgeous coffee-table book featuring reminiscences from notables —

including Christiansen — and black-and-white photos of the ensemble by Victor Skrebneski.)

The selected plays (the title reflects Oobleck's signature admissions policy of "\$X — more if you've got it, free if you're broke") range from Jeffrey Dorchen's *Ugly's First World* (1989) in which the title zombie/demon from an overcrowded hell returns to a world where T.S. Eliot has given up poetry in favor of carving cadavers, to Mickie Maher's 2011 *There Is a Happiness That Morning Is*, which sets two William Blake scholars and lovers loose in intertwined lectures on mortality and sex through the Songs of Innocence and Experience.

As a sign of some of the changes wrought in the company by time and age and distance, Dorchen himself played the title role in *Ugly's First World*, but Maher, in a rare departure from Oobleck rules (one established in conjunction with the "no director" rule), didn't perform in *Happiness*. As a sign of how intertwined (or incestuous, if you prefer) the established alternatives have become, the rose-crossed lovers in Maher's play were embodied by Colm O'Reilly, who before joining Oobleck began performing as a teenager in Maestro Subgum and the Whole and Curious Theatre Branch with his father, Maestro and Curious co-founder Beau O'Reilly, and Diana Slickman, who performed with the Neo-Futurists before joining Oobleck.

The 22 years between those works are represented between the covers by Danny Thompson's *Necessity* (1998), in which Thomas Edison is revealed as a sociopath and murderer of — among others — Helen Keller; 2002's *Innocence and Other Vices*, in which Dave Buchen (who frequently wrote under goofy pseudonyms and who has lived in Puerto Rico for many years)

reimagined real-life Puerto Rican siblings Luis and Isolina Ferré — an industrialist and a nun — for the Enron era; and David Isaacs's *Letter Purloined* (2006), which took a cue from the Neo-Futurists by creating a mash-up of scenes inspired by *Othello*, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Serbian war criminal/former psychiatrist Radovan Karadzic, to be performed in random order each night.

Not a gritty diner filled with urban misfits nor a well-appointed upper-middle-class living room seething with family secrets to be found anywhere in the bunch. What kinda way is THAT to build an all-American theater empire?

I have seen all but one of these plays in production — *Necessity* happened while I was living in San Francisco in the 1990s and greatly missing the fertile theatrical soil of my fringe salad days in Chicago. So it was with both joy and trepidation that I opened up my collection of these scripts.

Paula Killen, another stalwart of that scene in those days, once did a show called *Music Kills a Memory* (which is memorable to me in part because the person I saw it with broke up with me right afterward). I feared that the memory and images of seeing these Oobleck shows the first time would interfere with hearing the music in the writing afresh.

A play is not just the words on the page. This is always true, and especially so for anyone who can, so many years later, still hear Dorchen's Ugly telling a story about the ice rink at the center of hell, where skaters get run over by Mephistopheles "on dat fucked Zamboni of his."

Or one who can forget the tall Buchen's voracious capitalist (is there any other kind?) in *Innocence and Other Vices* bobbing around like one of those bendy men outside a carwash because his

feet had just been nailed to the ground – part of his atheist nun sister’s plan to keep him from ruining her mission to the poor by giving away his fortune and thus eliminating the poverty-and-philanthropy sector. In what feels like a cunning combination homage/sardonic retort to the agit-prop of an earlier time, Buchen’s industrialist has the same name as the villainous captain of industry in Marc Blitzstein’s 1937 pro-union musical *The Cradle Will Rock* — Mr. Mr.

Yes, Oobleck writers often focused on “political” themes. But I have learned to avoid labeling them as “political” playwrights, inasmuch as “political” plays in America that become widely produced too often tend to be of two kinds.

There is the obvious social uplift message play — “we are oppressed but we have a voice!” It is of course understandable for communities and individuals that have in fact been silenced and brutalized to stake their claim to the public square. *The Exonerated*, for example, gives moving witness to the horrible injustices of the death penalty and the American penal system as a whole. Only an ogre would disagree with its conclusions – and one doubts many such ogres find their way to the theater. Still, the choir needs spiritual balm from time to time and one can appreciate why shows like this exist.

More problematic are those plays that pretend to scold the well-heeled patrons about their unexamined privilege at \$50-and-up tickets before sending them on their way. I think of such plays as the theatrical equivalent of the dominatrix playing bondage-and-paddling games with the politician or judge for a thousand dollars a session — before the latter run off to resume their everyday seats of

power. Bruce Norris, for all his pungent gifts, often gives the impression that he writes his plays while fingering a toy riding crop.

And then there’s the swaggering, “I don’t give a shit about political correctness so give me a cookie” posturing of latter-day David Mamet... but no.

What stands out in Oobleck’s work — and what *More If You’ve Got It* allows one to absorb as a reader, away from the bundled memories and late-night bar discussions and reviews of past performances — is that no one is absolved. There is darkness in us. We are the good people who too often do nothing – or who simply have no idea, in a world gone mad from its own complex political and economic machines (to say nothing of our own too-swift physical decay) just what the hell we should be doing.

That sense of despair and literal randomness is present in Isaacson’s *Letter Purloined*, which presents the greatest challenges and possibilities for the reader of *More If You’ve Got It*. One can read through the 26 scenes (labeled A through Z) in the order they are presented, but to capture the experience fully, one should clip out the letters of the alphabet and then pull the letters for the scenes out of a hat in random order.

It’s like reading Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* on speed. And really — when trying to get a grip on the atrocities in Bosnia and the sick joke of a psychiatrist (“Navodar” in Isaacson’s telling) pulling the genocidal strings, that may be the right mindset. It makes as much sense as, say, Othello doubting his wife’s virtue on the basis of a stolen hanky.

Or, as Bianca in Isaacson’s play puts it, “Perhaps these scrambled letters touch the very matter which must remain the foremost object of my every action — the Slaughter of the

Innocents. For every misdemeanor leaves a paper trail. The excess — the excessiveness of any crime — finds its remainder in writing, which is itself excessive, like crime. Like love.”

Ah yes. Love. That brings us to Maher and *There Is a Happiness That Morning Is*, which not only dispenses with the Oobleck tradition of building plays around characters from history, literature, and current fucked-up events by using academics at a down-at-heels New England private college as its players, but also focuses unapologetically on what it means to love and to die — never as well as we should in the case of the former, and always sooner than expected in the case of the latter.

It is both the most recent play in Oobleck’s history in the book, and the one I’ve seen the most. Five times by my count, versus one apiece for *Innocence* and *Letter Purloined* and two or three times for *Ugly’s First World*, which I saw several nights in a row in its improbable remount at the old Goodman Studio Theater in 1990.

As noted, I didn’t see *Necessity*, so someone should remount that soon because it is scabrous and sly and hilarious — and its vision of Edison proudly bragging of his patent for the electric chair that is about to claim his own life is about as nifty a portrait of the oroboros-like nature of America’s rapacious race to the top of hell as you’re likely to see. Unless it’s a Speaker of the House trying to explain why tossing battery acid in the country’s face will actually improve its complexion.

Maher has been building a body of work involving the lecture/debate/panel discussion formats over the past several years, including *The Hunchback Variations* in which Quasimodo and Beethoven dissect a fruitless collaboration on a sound cue from

Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* (later turned into a chamber opera with a score by Mark Messing) and *The Strangerer*, which created a corrosive collision between Albert Camus’ novel and the 2004 presidential debates between a sleepwalking John Kerry (played by Maher) and Guy Massey’s homicidal George W. Bush, who is bent on killing moderator Jim Lehrer.

Along the way, he has also become the one Oobleck playwright whose work has been consistently performed in recent years outside of his home company. He’s hot in Houston, among other places.

But even though Maher, as noted earlier, didn’t appear in *Happiness*, it paradoxically feels like the one thing I never expected to find in an Oobleck show — a small, personal piece (written in verse, no less). Yet in reading it on the page, it becomes even richer and wiser in its impact. It is about practically anonymous souls with no real interest in either exploiting the madness of the political maelstrom for personal gain or resisting it.

The story of Bernard, a naifish type who proclaims that William Blake’s “Infant Joy” is about “a talking baby” and his dying lover, Ellen, who finds her poetic grim double in “The Sick Rose,” provides its own oddly soothing manifesto for we early Oobleck fans, who have grown from resentful upstarts to restive middle age with all the heavy grief of loss added to the early baggage of our cultural and generational uncertainty.

I mentioned earlier that Oobleck’s writers have tended to be a boys’ club — early work by Terri Kapsalis (who penned the introduction for *More If You’ve Got It*) and Robin Harutunian and Rachel X. Weissman remains unpublished as far as I know. And that is a shame — but I will not presume to speak for the women



who have worked with Oobleck as to why authorship of the plays over the years has remained a largely male enterprise. It would, however, be good to hear more from the women of Oobleck.

Yet I cannot imagine a richer role for a woman than Maher's Ellen, beautifully and indelibly played by Diana Slickman. The dying Donne scholar in Margaret Edson's *Wit* may come close, but the fullness of love, rage, impotence, and the small brave gesture of connecting with another (up to and including fucking in public) embodied in Ellen make her one of the greatest characters I've ever wept over — onstage or off.

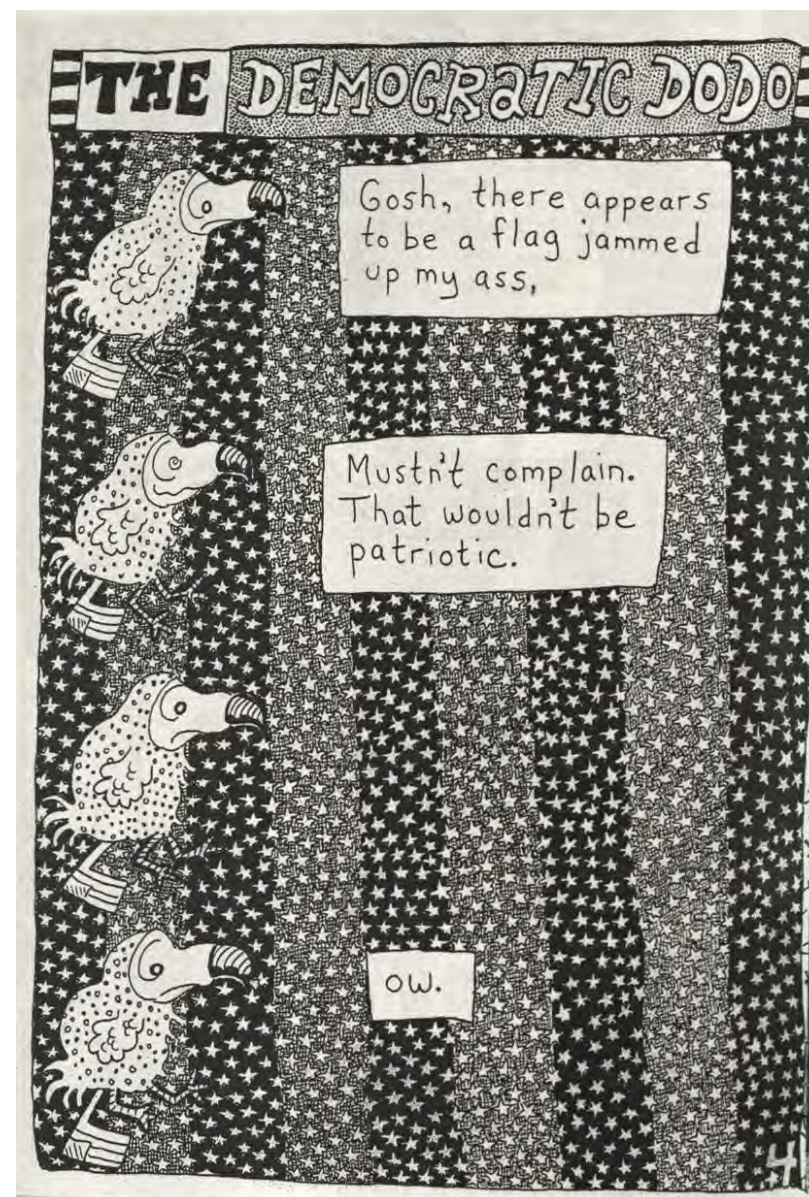
In a moment of unbearable anguish, Ellen tells Bernard "I've got one thing to hold to now, it's this: That we were almost not nothing."

In the fleeting and heartbreaking ephemeral world of small theater, it is so easy to feel as if one has created nothing of lasting value. But with *More If You've Got It*, Theater Oobleck stakes a small claim to posterity in print.

It is so much more than nothing. Read this collection. Pass it along. Produce these plays. Please.

Who knows? You may find it a religious experience. But also remember the advice given by Dorchen in his playwright's note for *Ugly's First World*: "Succumb to its dumbness. Handle it as you would a silly thing."

*More If You've Got It* (Hope and Nonthings) is available for purchase online at <http://theateroobleck.com/> and at Theater Oobleck shows.





## Thanksgiving

By Charlotte Hamilton

Ever since I entered my thirties, it seems that people love to set me up on dates. My mother's friends are the worst offenders. My mom is Chinese, born in Taiwan. Her Chinese friends are the ones who are always trying to introduce me to the one single man they know, regardless of traditional signs of compatibility, such as living within a 400 mile radius of me. My mother likes to call me up and tell me about these prospects, even when they don't sound the least bit enticing. *Especially* when they don't sound enticing.

Some of the potentials include the man who was divorced, with two kids, who lived in his parents' basement, and didn't have a job. But he was single! Oh, he also lived in Colorado.

Another prospect was an ER doctor in New York City. Supposedly this doctor was good-looking and quite a catch.

My mom, who always screens these prospects, asked the obvious question, "Why is he single?"

"He says he's too busy for a girlfriend," said my mom's friend.

"Then why would he have time to date my daughter, who lives in Chicago?" my mom asked.

My mother is such a good screener that I have yet to meet a single one of these men.



Thanksgiving, 2012, my brother and I fly to my parents' home in Southern California. My parents moved there a few years ago, to a small cottage that's part of a retirement community for people aged 50 and older. They chose it because my mother has

friends in the area. I haven't met all of them, but that doesn't stop them from trying to set me up.

On the drive back from the airport, my mother can hardly wait to tell me about the latest setup opportunity.

She says, "You know my friend who moved to Roswell with her husband who's into UFOs?"

"Yes, I know that friend."

"She wants to set you up with a man in Minnesota she knows through her church. I said my daughter's not religious, I don't think she'd be interested. And she said, no, no, he's not a Christian *yet*, I'm just trying to *convert* him to Christianity."

"Oh," I say.

She continues, "Well, she sent me his picture, but said he's gained some weight since the picture was taken. And lost some hair."

"Alright, so how did he look?" I ask.

My mom says, "By Chinese standards, he was ok. Many people are worse-looking than him. But don't worry, I told her no thanks — you can find plenty of men to date in Chicago."

I ask her what the deal is with all of her friends trying to set me up. She tells me the Chinese are relentless matchmakers, so much so that they're notorious for it — among other Chinese people. My mom says there's a superstition that if you successfully set up three couples (where success equals marriage, of course), you'll have good luck in your next life. Or in your current marriage. She can't remember which.

When we get to the house, I look online to find out. This is a hard thing to Google. I type in "Chinese marriage superstitions." I find out it's bad luck to wear black, gray, or blue to a wedding, and that if a groom stands or sits in front of his wife during the ceremony, he'll be henpecked his entire marriage. But I do not find anything about matchmaking.

Then I Google “why are Chinese people always trying to set me up?” The auto search results that come up when you start typing show that way more people are wondering “why are Chinese people so rude,” and “why are Chinese people always late?” However, *not* why they’re always trying to set me up with their single acquaintances.

My mother is not rude, though she is, indeed, always late. She first flew to this country 35 years ago, from Taipei, Taiwan, to Denton, Texas. She arrived in Denton, late one evening, with a 50-dollar bill in her pocket and no place to stay. Even though she knew she’d be attending grad school at North Texas State, she didn’t think about where she’d sleep the first night she arrived. Somehow, she met an undergrad who let my mom stay on her dorm room floor. The next day, she got herself a place and signed up for classes.

Soon after settling in, she met my dad—a skinny, blond-haired, blue-eyed guitar player, who was getting his masters degree in computer science. She agreed to go out with him because she thought it would be a good chance to practice her English. For their first date, he took her to Bonanza, a fast food restaurant, and then to the student union to play pool. That must have been enough to win her over, because all thoughts of using him for ESL purposes had left her head. She knew this was the man for her.



The day after arriving at my parents’ house in California, I wake up at an ungodly hour. 8am. I’ve agreed to go with my mother to Tai Chi. In the courtyard of the recreation building, at least thirty men and women over the age of 50 twist and contort their bodies at a glacially slow pace. My mother is to my right. She is my size, with short, gray-black hair, and a childlike bounce to her movements.

After the class, I show my mother a picture of a guy I’m interested in. She says, “oh, ok,” and doesn’t say anything else.

“Well, what do you think?” I ask.

She says, “He looks nice. But for some reason, I always pictured you ending up with a European man. Someone from France.”

“I don’t speak French and I’ve never been to France.” I say.

My mom pauses, “Hmm. Maybe it’s because *I* always wanted to marry a French man.”

I tell her, “Now I’m definitely not bringing home a French man. You’ll probably try to steal him.”

My mom laughs. “I would never do that. I have your father now. He took French in high school.”



If you’re single in your thirties, parents start to get a bad reputation. They’re always like, “hey, when are you going to get married?” And, “I’m bored, how about some grandkids?”

Asian parents especially get a bad rap. They’re all, “if you don’t become a doctor, you can become a lawyer, but I’ll love you less, ok? Unless you make up for it by marrying a doctor. Or a classical violinist.”

My mother has never said any of these things. (Neither has my father, but this story’s not really about him.) But I’d been hearing more and more about my mom’s friends’ matchmaking plans. I wondered if she was trying to tell me something without coming out and saying it.

Could it be she’d finally become the stereotypical mom who was dying for me to settle down and have kids? Did she fear that my ownership of two cats was the first sign of a slow decay into spinsterhood? (For the record, everybody knows that three cats is

the first sign. If I get to three, I'll go out with that basement man in Colorado.)

Finally, I ask my mom if she worries that there's something wrong with me being single. If she wishes I were married.

And she says, "I want you to find someone, yes. Things are better when you have somebody on your side. I've been happy with your dad, and I want you to have that, too. But I trust you to find someone for yourself. You don't need our help."



Since moving to California, my parents have become good friends with a Chinese, lesbian couple in their thirties, Tina and Jae. They do couple activities together, like hiking, wine tasting, trying new restaurants. When I say something about Tina and Jae being guests at the house for Thanksgiving dinner, my mom says, "they're not guests, they're like family."

I ask my parents the obvious question.

"I don't want this to come across the wrong way, but Tina and Jae *want* to hang out with you?"

That question does, in fact, come out wrong, but I explain that it's the generation gap I don't understand, not my parents' likeability.

They tell me and my brother the story. My mother met Tina through a friend several years ago. Tina and Jae were already living together at the time. Jae's family knew and accepted that she was a lesbian. Tina's family didn't know at first. When she finally told them, they didn't handle it well. Tina's mother wouldn't let her tell anyone besides immediate family, for fear that it would bring them shame. Every time Tina's mother called her to talk, it was all about the shame, the shame.

In a way, my parents have become surrogate parents to Tina and Jae. My mom listens to Tina when she cries about the things her

mother has said to her, when her mother has begged her not to bring her girlfriend to a family wedding because it will ruin them. My mom doesn't know what to say to make things better, so she listens, and simply lets Tina know that she's ok the way she is.

I realize how lucky I was to grow up with this kind of easy acceptance. I've been given the chance to make my own mistakes (like, *a lot* of mistakes), without the pressure to fit a rigid mold my parents made for me. I grew up never knowing that my mother secretly hoped I'd marry a French man. For that I am grateful.



Thanksgiving day, we cook dinner at my parents' house for me, my brother, my parents, my uncle on my mom's side, his wife from Vera Cruz, Mexico, Tina, Jae, their Chinese friend, her Vietnamese husband, and his Vietnamese mother. Eleven of us squeeze around a table that seats eight, while volleying back and forth no fewer than four languages and lots of hand signals. Exactly as the Pilgrims imagined it.

As we clear the table after dinner, Tina and Jae tell me about a friend of theirs they want me to meet.

My mom shouts from the kitchen, "It's a man!"

Tina says, "He's good-looking, rich, smart, and every woman we introduce him to gets married soon after meeting him. Just not to him."

"He's like a marriage good luck charm," says Jae.

"Well," I say, "I kind of like my life right now, I don't know if I'm ready to get married. But what the hell. Introduce me anyway."

As with all the other setups, I don't end up meeting him. Instead, my family and I spend the rest of that visit eating pumpkin pie, drinking amber ales, and walking the rocks of Laguna Beach.

Maybe I'll meet the marriage charm next time. Or maybe I'll book a trip to France first.

## *Here I'll Stay*

Justin Hayford (LML Music, 2012)

Reviewed by Dietrich

If it's raining and you are home alone and there is just no good reason to go out; or, if you're out and you're drinking alone and that wasn't the plan — just no one showed up, or everyone's already left, and you're not sure why you stayed — this is the record to play. It will ease you through the night, get you thinking and tapping your foot. And maybe, just maybe, your mood will shift for the better. The songs — some old, some new — all have fine melodies, consciously written lyrics. One of the pleasures of these songs is how intentional they are, how careful with words. Here are some funny thoughts; here, some word play; here, some love. You know what you are hearing at a Justin Hayford concert, and you can leave the head-scratching to other nights, other artists. Hayford's records are organized very much like a good Hayford concert set. Songs you've never heard before but should have, funny songs that you can whistle as you walk home, unapologetic love songs that put some blush in the room. Justin Hayford has developed a fine, clean, accompanist style on the piano. His rhythmic sense is good: he plays well off the bass and drums, never rushing the tempo, swinging rather than driving. His solos are modest, deceptively simple. He has a great ear for songs that suit his relaxed vocal presentation; the man knows how to use his sometimes limited voice. It's a light baritone that he lets sing tenor, stretching the higher tones without strain, always landing the

melody well. As a singer he will rarely surprise you, but he never disappoints. Among the highlights of this record is "The Best Thing for You (Would Be Me)," by Irving Berlin. Hayford's Berlin is always swinging a little, always done with a smile and a wink, Justin and the drummer playing gamely off each other. "The best thing for you would be me" is the kind of tag line both Berlin and Hayford delight in. "Blame It on My Youth" is a gem from the catalogue of Oscar Levant, and the band plays it straight. Hayford's phrasing here is superb. Also included is Johnny Burke's "My Very Good Friend the Milkman," a tune that has recently been everywhere: Paul McCartney and Eric Clapton both recorded it last year and had fun with it, and Hayford's trio has fun with it, too. The bass plays a tuba line, the singer whistles away, and the milkman's advice rings with a New Orleans strut. "Like I Used to Do" is a country song, written by Tim O'Brien and Pat Alger, recorded here with rhythm acoustic guitar and nice piano fills. The song feels like a departure for Hayford — it's pretty sentimental, but again the song is carried by Hayford's straight vocal read and a complementary harmony part. "Blah, Blah, Blah" is a silly song from George and Ira Gershwin, and works better in live performance, where Hayford plays it cheeky and deadpan, an interesting balance to strike. It's a song he often does live, and the laughter of the audience lifts the song. "Poor You" is a fine song by E.Y. Harburg and Burton Lane. "Poor you, 'cause you don't get to love yourself the way I love you" is a pretty sweet sentiment, and Hayford lets it play. "Everything Happens to Me" is the first great song on the record. It's by Matt Dennis and Tom Adair — Dennis is a particular favorite of Hayford's, and the trio rises to the song, playing it full out. It's great. "Dreamer," the Antonio Jobim and Gene Lees song, is next,

and the trio finds the sweet tango just as tasty, Hayford coming in with a cool little solo on the piano, and the bass really making the song dance on cat feet. Mike and Jan Dowling's "Nothing Could Be Better" is a more recent song. It features the hot-cool of guitarist Brad Hayford, and that man can play. "It Never Fails" is a Ron Sexsmith song that Hayford plays alone, delivering his best vocal of the album, particularly on the first verse. "Here I'll Stay" is a beautiful melody and arrangement from Kurt Weill; the lyrics, by Alan Lerner, don't quite measure up to the melody, but the song's closing lines are tailor-made for Hayford, and end this album beautifully:

"For that land is a sandy illusion  
It's the theme of a dream gone astray

And the world others woo  
I can find loving you  
And so here I'll stay"

*Here I'll Stay* features Justin Hayford (vocals, piano), Jim Cox (bass), Phil Gratteau (drums), Brad Hayford (guitar), and Mike Lapchick (guitar). The album is available for name-your-price download at <http://justinhayford.bandcamp.com/album/here-ill-stay>. Proceeds from sales go to AIDS Legal Counsel of Chicago.

## *Robin Hood, Artful Dodger*

By John Starrs

That's why I *hate* radio! I try to tell you how I was when I started playing baseball as a kid. But I gotta stop — to tell you how big I was. Hell! I mean if this was television, you could see how big I am *now*, and you could figure I must have been even back then. I mean, look at me. But you can't.

I am in front of a very tall microphone because I am very tall! In fact, I'm a giant — at least for my time, which I won't go into. That would be stupid! I am six-foot-five and weigh two hundred and eighty pounds! When I was in sixth grade, I was five-foot-eleven, was perfect weight for my height and age, and had six-pack abs! Seventh grade, eight-pack; eighth grade, twelve-pack... and so on up. And I was tough! I could beat up anybody — and I did! And all the little babies went home crying — *taught them a lesson* — don't fuck with me, Charlie, don't fuck with me!

What? That's what I *hate* about radio! The other day, some little asshole in the booth over there cut off my mic! What the fuck, I said, and rushed over there and punched the glass! Fucked up my hand! But the lesson those kids learned? I learned an even better one! If you're big and tough — you win! Look at Dick Cheney! Look at Dick Rumsfeld! Huh? That's his brother! He got way farther ahead than the other one, and with much less effort! Huh? No, not the Dicks I beat up — the Janes! I beat up the Janes!

I played short... No, I played catcher! Can you imagine trying to crash through me to get to home? Sad, right? Dumb fuck!

Sometimes I pitched, I wound up and threw the ball, *swoosh*, a steaming 120 miles an hour! And that was my knuckleball! I was the only pitcher (and the only catcher for that matter!) to hit consistently over .300! I played center field. I was always snatching their home-run balls from them! Taking them away from them every time! Shit! And those thumb-suckers crying for their homers — claiming I stole ‘em! Well I did. I stole ‘em. And I’d steal ‘em again!

What d’ya mean, the minors? I was the pride of the Yankees, the song of the Cardinals, the twinkle-toes of the White Sox, the ingrown toenail of the Red Sox, the filibuster of the Senators! I played first base! Nothin’ ever got by me; the only way a ball ever got into the first base stands or in the dugout was if somebody hit a foul ball! I played third base. I’d scoop up a ground ball and rifle it over to first before the hitter ever even got away from the plate! I always batted clean-up. I beat Ruth’s home-run record more than once before we got outta June!

Sixth grade? I told ya — look at me! Before I kick you in the teeth! We played sandlot ball back then. Pepper and Timmy were the captains. Pepper threw the bat to Timmy, who caught it just above the fat of the bat. Pepper walked over to Timmy and thrust his two fingers above Timmy’s two fingers on the bat. Timmy then above Pepper, Pepper back above Timmy and this way they climbed to the tip-top of the bat, which Pepper ended up dangling. Timmy kicked it away and his was the first choice. I got chosen last. I got right. Huh? Yeah, they picked me for right field. Yeah, they needed their best player in right field. I snagged a line drive first and second bases and up against the wall about two feet off the ground, with

one bare hand! Look, we played sixteen-inch softball in sixth grade! And seventh and eighth. That was a great catch!

I remember one day in particular: ninth inning, men on first and second, two outs, we’re up by two, and some idiot hits a high, long ball out to right that just seemed to hang there after a long while. The ball looked bigger than the building behind it. How could I miss? It was a piece of angel food cake! But what if I did? I couldn’t, but what if I did? The ball continued to hang there, and I continued to think about what it’d be like if I missed! They were all watching me. They were all watching me with little smiles on their pasty little faces. They hated me! They hated me because I was so good!

The ball began to come down. Plenty of time. Too much time! All of a sudden I was sure I would miss it. It would suddenly drop out of the sky and I wouldn’t be able to hang on to it! They’d all laugh at me, they’d call me “butterfingers,” just keep laughing at me. I’d never live it down. They’d never let me live it down. “Johnny Boy Drop-the-Ball!” “Ain’t got no sight, leave ‘im in right!” Pretty soon they’d just settle on “asshole” or “jag-off!”

The ball came billowing down, slowly tipping, caught in the wind — an easy fly-ball, gonna drop into my waiting hands. The ball dropped faster, then even faster! Dropped... right through my outstretched fingers. It dropped! I dropped it. I dropped it! I couldn’t believe it! I just stood there. So relaxed my whole body opened. Stood there. Amazed! I had the damn thing right there in my hands! Then it just fell out! The world stopped. Everything that moved was still. I just looked down at that big ball at my feet. I didn’t look around, but everyone was looking at me. Everybody!

I still didn't move, still. After about five minutes, I bent down and picked up the ball. Runners on base had long since crossed home plate. Our lead had been neatly wiped out. And after the red rage had slowly whitened out, the laughter rose like a thousand kites, just rose and rose...

Alright... My world refused to end.

I was a spray hitter. I'd back 'em up with an occasional long ball, then I'd spray the shallow outfield with base hits. Only, now, they didn't back up! They played me short and dared me to hit the ball over their heads! The bastards! I hate that! I told 'em I wouldn't play anymore! I told 'em I'd take my bat and ball and go home! That'd show 'em! Fuck 'em! I hate that! And I did! I went home.

So what's all this got to do with how I became an incredible professional (well... semi-pro... well... you know) softball player? How did all this lead to "my greatest day in sports"?

I signaled our ringer from the West Side with the peace sign. Slung the ball under my left knee on the second pitch — and picked off the runner at first. Kept the O'Roark's cleat-shod, know-it-all team down to 14 runs — against our own sloppy, pick-up team from the Lincoln Avenue bars, sponsored by the Wise Fool Pub. Damn it, we almost beat them! What's that mean? A lot!

Right field didn't quite fit me. But as a pitcher, I could develop a spinning ball like a discus throw, to keep everyone off balance. I didn't have to field high fly balls. There was no pressure to hit .300 or to smash the long ball. Pitching fit me to a "T." I was and am the Artful Dodger, leading our motley Robin Hood, wise-fool team and keeping the proud ones guessing all the time! And now for the tacky tack-on ending — the moral of our Robin Hood-Artful Dodger story:

May we keep a step and a half ahead of the Sheriff, and may I snatch your wallet without ringing your bells!

## *Edmund and Carine Go to the Theater*

*Chicago Arts Journal* contributors Edmund St. Bury and Carine Loewi recently attended a performance of Tennessee Williams' *The Two-Character Play*, staged by Citizens' Relief (Simone Jubyna and Mike Driscoll) at Angel Island (735 W. Sheridan Road). Afterward, they went to the Golden Something and shared their impressions of the piece over a late-night breakfast platter.

**Edmund:** I've seen these actors perform together four or five times over something like twenty years, and this work was probably the best work that I've seen them do together. It seemed to me to be their signature piece, that perhaps it was the piece that began them, that they premiered the piece in Atlanta—

**Carine:** It says they first performed it in 2000.

**Edmund:** That's a long time ago. And the name of the company comes from the Citizens' Relief mentioned in the play. So I think it's very central to them, Mike and Simone, as artists. It makes me think — since the play is so much about actors making a play, that device — it's something about the two of them, operating on the fringe in such a solitary way... They've worked with other people, they've worked in many other cities, and they always are on the fringe. A closing night of ten people seems not unusual. So it seems

very much like they are in an outsider position themselves, and that reflected for me in the play, and actually I felt very compassionate towards them. I felt in a strange way that the play was about them as a couple. And I don't *know* them as a couple, just what I've seen of them performing together. So that was interesting to me, because I thought there was a real oddness in the play that I had not remembered: of Felice, the brother, and Clare, the sister, having the same names when they are just the brother and sister and when they play the brother and sister in the internal play. That seemed very deliberate on Tennessee Williams' part, that somehow he's commenting on making theater as what they do, but also as who they are, the core people — when they're playing the actors as opposed to when they're playing the characters. And the whole idea of theater as home, that it's the only home they have, seemed to me to be very much about Tennessee Williams, but also about the two of them, the two actors. So, that was my first thought. And there was something very sad about that exercise to me, but I didn't experience the play in a sad way. From her entrance, with that weird scarf over her head, that sort of drunken entrance with the scarf, the whole thing felt... I don't want to say 'celebratory' exactly... It was sort of *defiantly* celebratory. It was, "we're doing it, we are going to do it, it is going to happen, and we know this, and you know it." And I liked particularly her performance, through the whole thing I liked the physical decisions in terms of posture and stance. Like when she would move her right hand and that hand would stay for a longer time, or she would quickly turn to confront him about something, and then run over to the piano... Everything was arch. Everything was turned up, it was never naturalistic, even when they



were playing naturalistic. Everything had this extra turned-out quality to it.

**Carine:** When is it from, exactly? [*They look it up. It is 1973.*] I thought it called back to a time of a different archetype of actors. There was a grandiosity. I couldn't remember who, but her voice, the woman, that kittenish sort of mewl, but very refined, it reminded me of one of those great British actresses now in their seventies, I couldn't tell you which... [*Much later, Carine remembers that she was in fact thinking of Bernadette Peters.*] But I was reminded too of someone like Tallulah Bankhead, every gesture a grand, dramatic gesture — done with a raised eyebrow, an oh-look-what-I'm-doing-now, but also doing that mode of performance very sincerely. I thought the man and woman were physically wonderful together, and there was an oddness to their interactions. I couldn't remember, coming into the play, if the actor-characters were supposed to be brother and sister playing husband and wife, or the other way around, but I guess they were brother and sister the whole time? That question in my mind added something to it, a tension...

**Edmund:** Well, there was a sexual tension between them, certainly, throughout the whole thing. I want to say something about that later, too... But this style of acting that you're referring to — it almost feels that this play could have been written in the forties. There's nothing really that says time frame, and it seems to be operating deliberately outside of time frame. This town New Bethesda they refer to, now they say the South but it's not really the South — it's too cold — there's a lot of false information about

what's happening, and it seems deliberately false. And the actors' touring — by the seventies, that's not how touring would occur... I think he's deliberately writing in an older style, which made me think of the play as very archetypally Tennessee Williams, more so than any of his other plays. The big themes of all his plays are the big themes of this play. It's a brother and sister — it's the great tragic hurt of Williams' life, that his sister was put into the mental hospital and he couldn't stop that from happening, that tragedy always haunted him. And his relationship to homosexuality was always haunted: there's a brooding, a hurt, an obsessiveness about it, there's a need to hide it. And then, his own alcoholism, which he didn't usually find voice for in his women characters, he's doing that again here. Her actions seem very addictively driven. And those things are in all his plays, but in this play it's almost like everything else is burned off, in favor of just that. The melodrama around that, that interested me. Does any of that ring true for you?

**Carine:** Let me say, I don't know Tennessee Williams well. I hear what you're saying, the themes, and I don't know much biographically to add in that direction... But there are some specific elements of the production I'd like to mention. One of the great joys, for me, of watching this piece came early on, after the show has started in this purple, dusky half light — I couldn't make out a damn thing, it was like seeing it through maple syrup. I'm thinking, great, I have no idea what anyone looks like — and then the internal play begins, and the lights come full up... And I don't know of a more politic way to say this, so I'll just say this: to suddenly see her in light, center stage, facing us full on, and to see

the age and detail of her face, was thrilling to me. The revelation, I enjoyed that very much.

**Edmund:** I agree. And I would also think, without knowing, that seeing them do this piece now, the age of the characters, the age of them as performers, was part of my reception of them in the play. If they had been fifteen years younger, as in the first time they performed it... The beauty that has sort of faded — they're both attractive people, but the beauty that they both have is softened and faded and tightened with age. And I think it made it more powerful to me, for that reason. I think I found it more moving. I saw a production of this when I was young, a production Tennessee Williams did in Chicago, near the end of his life. By then he was premiering all his plays here — they'd had enough of him in New York. These performers said this in their notes, and I know this to be true, that he wrote and rewrote this play, kept reworking it... When I saw it then, it was a dinner theater kind of setup. There was a faded glory to the space around it: the designs on the ceiling and walls, that sort of forties art deco, the feeling of the actors being in a theater that's seen better days was very much there. And I didn't really have that in this space, you had to more imagine that, but the simplicity of the black box in Angel Island was good for it, I thought.

**Carine:** I wouldn't want to see this play in a packed house. It was a perfect size audience for the play. *[There had been perhaps ten people.]*

**Edmund:** You could feel the idea, which was part of the play, that the audience might have left... And I want to go back to some physical things. There were a couple of things that made me uncomfortable, though I adjusted to them a little bit. One of one was the decision to do things in mime — the door, the curtain. It gave it this extra layer of "what's real, what's not real" that took it a bit too far, for me. The idea that he couldn't see us, standing there and looking right at us, without peeking through a curtain — I felt like, well if that's the case, then put the damn curtain on the stage, or don't do it. Why peek around the corner? I wanted more reality there. In the time since this play was written, the device of the play beginning with acknowledging we're in the theater, we're doing a play, acknowledging the fourth wall, breaking it open — that device was in play already in the seventies, and by now, that device is played out in theater. Now, when I see theater, I'm longing for someone to put the fourth wall back up once in a while! But when it was written, that still felt like it could be a new idea, a risky idea. *Godot* does that, twenty years before this play... But it's become a very common trope in American theater — in storefront, in fringe theater particularly, because it's so clearly true, that we're right there and so are they. So, I wanted something new in the way they dealt with that, and mime did not work for me.

**Carine:** I agree, in part. I think for the play inside the play, the mime is fine — the door of the house, that's a fiction to all of us — us, literal audience; them, fictional audience; Felice and Clare, actors acting out a play with a door in it. We understand that they're telling the fictional audience, not us, that this is a door here, and so we understand why that fake audience left, because the mime

is a little stupid, it's a placeholder for the props and set that never showed up, which is explained in the outside shell of the play. On that level, that works. And climbing back in through the mime window once they went outside, I was okay with that, again because it's double fiction to us. But the curtain thing, that I agree with you on. Why not run to the actual curtain that separates the black box from the ticket office holding area, make that the outside space you're proposing?

**Edmund:** The other thing I found off, and I didn't know whether I liked or hated it — I'd like to know if it was in the text — was the sound decisions. There were a couple of times when there was recorded sound offstage, maybe three times, and then the other sound was the music coming from the stage. I liked that, when he would turn on the record player on the stage, but the sound offstage, I didn't know why that was there. Did you know?

**Carine:** No, I didn't, but it was something I noted, too. When the internal play begins, and she does that "beginning of a motorcar race" thing, with the scarf, and there was a jungle sound, a screaming monkeys sound in the background... What was that?

**Edmund:** It was very weird. And there was that whole thing about the furry animals, the audience as animals. And the boys that are outside that are frightening to her — I got some connection to that. But the physicalization of that, there were a couple of really weird sequences there, and without looking in the script, it feels to me that they come from Williams, because they're so odd. They seem deliberately to take things in a more surrealistic way.

**Carine:** But it was fairly standalone surrealism, if that's what it was. It didn't recur. It was trying something, but it didn't much follow up.

**Edmund:** And I think both of those things, the mime and those sounds, took me out of the play. I found myself sitting back and thinking about the device, how I felt about it, and so I lost track of the play. But those are small problems for me, in terms of doing a difficult piece like this. I thought the majority of the decisions were really clear, and it seems they're not acknowledging, though I don't know why they would, that no one directed this play. It seems they directed themselves. Or perhaps re-directed, after the original staging. And I felt their hand in it, I felt that it was composed by those actors. There was a lot, for me, a lot being said about ownership of the moment, overlapping ownership in how you decide something, and that was a real theme of the play within the play — that terrific device, which they used really well, of hitting the toy piano for the cuts in the script, which was very funny and also quite disturbing at times, and really seemed to lead to the gun coming out, the one time... And that the two characters had this argument going on about authorship — that we're going to do the play, but I'm going to cut in wherever I feel like it, it doesn't really have an ending written, "when I first read this play I knew it would be his last, I knew he couldn't write something more than this." All that is pretty interesting to me. But how did you do with the story within the story? With the dead parents and all?

**Carine:** I think I followed it. Now that you mention Williams'



Simone Jubyna in *The Two-Character Play*. Photo by Daniel Guidara.

themes, it occurs to me... Maybe it was an outcome of this performance and not the text, but it read to me as a sort of mockery of overly kitchen-tabley melodramas about tortured pasts. A sardonic riff on the playwright's usual themes, then? But I saw the narratives fairly well, the confinement and the "confinement" and how they're related to one another. The sordid details of insurance policies, the Willy Loman aspect of it... This is a non sequitur perhaps, but: that final pose. What is that? The symmetrical, arms-up pose? It's like a Renaissance anatomical drawing, it's like the flayed corpses in Vesalius, acting out something... I've seen it before. It seems like something from commedia, I don't know. I found it kind of enchanting, even not knowing what it was. I found it interesting in the story within a story that for a while the switch between inner and outer fiction was demarcated by their accents, and then it was not. At least, I thought so. I couldn't track it after a while.

**Edmund:** It seemed really deliberate to me. That whole thing of show on top of show, the whole time... I'm not sure that they ever showed real fear or real horror or real violence. That seemed to be very intentional in the way it was stylized. At the one point where he grabs her and holds her and puts a pillow on her face? It didn't feel violent, I didn't fear for her, didn't feel that the characters felt it as violent. They felt everything, even the gun, the horrifying implication of "are they going to shoot or not," it all felt like it was showing the *gesture* of that, rather than showing *that*. I would think that other actors, a different production, would really up the crazy and up the fear. I felt like these people know — I don't mean Mike and Simone, the actors — but I always felt like Felice and Clare

*know* that they're acting all the time, even when it's out of control. So that was surprising, in a way. When I first came into the theater, when it started, and the actor Mike came out, was setting things out on the stage, he spent that long amount of time with the rose, there was that beautiful passage of time where his hand was just stroking the rose. Did you notice this? He was down on his knee on the carpet and he was sort of pulling the rose repeatedly, and his hand was very elongated, it felt like a spider or a creature on the rose, to me. I knew that they play had begun, or I felt like it had begun, and it was kind of underlined to me by the people sitting in front of us, who didn't seem to get that it had begun—

**Carine:** Because their phone was not turning off?

**Edmund:** Yeah, they kept handing that bright screen of the phone back and forth to each other.

**Carine:** That was a play in itself. An annoying play, but a play.

**Edmund:** But the way he was speaking, I thought, "he's going to play everything too big here, this space is too small for this volume level, this bigness." That worried me. But then when Simone came out, she played it just as big, and it started to make sense in that moment, because they were both going to play it just as big. A big vocal presence, they would have a big physical presence. I liked that, I liked them taking charge of those decisions. So, even though there were many things I might have done differently, I liked that they made a decision, committed to it, stuck to it.

**Carine:** Exactly. Their intention was there. Nothing seemed accidental in that production. No unfortunate effects they hadn't seen coming.

**Edmund:** I think that's something to do with them having a history with the play. Other work of theirs I've seen over the years has always seemed very sharp and intentional in that way, too. So even when I didn't like the play they were doing, or didn't feel connected to the play, which sometimes happened, I still felt that these people were very awake to this work, they clearly have sorted this out, it's not an abstraction for its own sake, it's not a physical gesture for its own sake... That, to me, is a bravo.

**Carine:** A barlow?

**Edmund:** A barlow? It could be a barlow, but I don't know what a barlow is. What is a barlow?

**Carine:** I don't know. Is it anything? I was not very taken by the rose-stroking thing in the beginning. I thought, what is that thing in the carpet he is fondling that I can't make out because it is so dark? What is he doing? Where's the woman? But there's my prejudice. I'm always waiting for the woman.

**Edmund:** Whatever it was, it was intentional, and by god, that rose was present to me for the rest of the play, because they spent all that time with it at the top. Throughout the whole thing, I think it's in the text of it, everything is *hyper*. Hyperbolic, melodramatic, it's big, it's gothic. It's not about subtlety with Tennessee Williams, even if

there's beauty in the language, in the actual images, if he takes the time to write them in this beautiful way. It's death, it's bad sex, it's addiction, disappointment, loss, losers, people in decay, people at the end of their vitality — that's always in his plays, even something that is fundamentally innocent like *The Glass Menagerie* has all that. The mother and the son are already lost, the girl isn't but she's crippled, no one will love her, the high point of her sexual life is that the wrong man kisses her because her brother tells him to be nice to her; that's the high point of her life...

**Carine:** It's some bleak shit.

**Edmund:** It's some bleak shit, yes, and it also feels dated in a certain way, too. The view of homosexuality feels dated... But it *is* dated, because people have really changed. It's from a time. And the horror of mental illness, there's a very different take on that now. So it almost calls for a Brechtian turn. Wherein, in the decision about the style, you do a different layer of saying "see, here's the style." These are the ideas of what we're saying, these are the emotions of what we're saying, but "here's the style in which we're showing you, because we want you to *look at* the emotions, not feel the emotions." But Tennessee Williams doesn't operate like that. In my experience, he comes totally from this emotion place. Pathos, hurt, the French thing... [*They examine the program, which begins with the playwright's quote: "It is a cri de coeur, but then all creative work, all life, in a sense is a cri de coeur."*] A cry of the heart. That's a very emotional thing to say, about art and the depiction of people. It's about hurt. And when she does that thing in the play, I think she does it two times, where she stands on the trunk with her back to us

and wails, "Outcry! Human outcry!" Crying out from the abyss. It's very emotional.

**Carine:** I hear that as melodramatics. Actors...

**Edmund:** Well, it plays as melodramatics, now. Williams didn't mean it as melodramatic — I think he meant it as one of the places that breaks through to the real pain of the characters. That was my interpretation when I read that.

**Carine:** Do you think that's reflective, then, of a turn away from attempts at authenticity, or sincerity of emotion, whatever all that means, in theater?

**Edmund:** Maybe, I think, but it's also because of the time the play is being done. That kind of direct statement of "people suffer! isn't it terrible! how we all suffer!" That ain't cool now. You can't get away with saying that now. It's not a time where suffering of the heart is seen as noble. Whereas for Williams, I think he saw it as noble human behavior. Now, we're supposed to fix it, get over it, realize that we all have it... But in his time, or in his world, he was very locked into that type of suffering as a necessity. Because what's the real suffering of the play? If they didn't really kill their parents, which I don't think they did—

**Carine:** Was that implied? I didn't think they did.

**Edmund:** Yes. I don't think that they killed their parents, I think that they are actors, and Felice the brother wrote a play about some

people who killed their parents, and he's obsessed about needing to do this play, because he wants to keep working with his sister, and that's what he has to offer, and that will keep her working, focused, with him. And there's some compulsiveness to their relationship, probably a sexual compulsiveness, but the tragedy is: they have to go do their play, and some random people don't care. That's not a tragedy! It's unfortunate, but it's not a tragedy. But to Williams, it is a tragedy, because it's about human failure. Do you think that's a tragedy? Are they going to die in there? No. The janitor's going to show up, they're going to get out...

**Carine:** They might die in there! It's the frozen tundra! Of the Deep South.

**Edmund:** Their last moment is them going back to the play and facing off about the play. They don't kill each other. They don't die. And they're going to do it again.

**Carine:** They don't die, but there's always tomorrow.

**Edmund:** I think that's one of the things Williams worked on over ten years, was how to end the play. *[They argue at length over who is eating whose carrot cake.]* This reminds me of the wall of sunflowers. I could see a production of this where a wall of sunflowers actually was the curtain, the thing separating them from us. I could see taking it that far. Even though they tell you that all the set pieces didn't show up, you could cheat and do that. If you watch it from behind a row of sunflowers, it really changes it. Oh, and this part really interests me. I loved this line, "Light a Lucifer." That was a

terrific line. He didn't return to it, but I liked that, as a the invitation to light the match, and to see more clearly. It probably was a reference to cigarette smoking, do you think?

**Carine:** I assumed it was a brand of matches, back then. Or, was it a reference to something literary? But, yes, it was a wonderful turn of phrase, a Lucifer to read the telegram by.

**Edmund:** In older writing about the devil, with the flame there would be a sulfur smell when the devil appeared. And when he lit the match, in that space, afterward there was a sulfur smell in the air. I liked that.

**Carine:** That reminds me of when he crumpled the telegram, and threw it, sort of, into the house. I wish he'd thrown more things at us! The pillow, he could have thrown that at us after he smothered her.

**Edmund:** Yes, they could've done more with that, the breaking of the wall and how to do it, but that didn't seem to be the main focus. That might be a directorial decision that somebody outside would've made. And it seems to me, not having acted or directed, so I don't know what I'm talking about, but it seems to me that the limitation of group direction, or self direction — there are a lot of strengths to it, I think they had a lot of strengths, because there was a physical ability to just inhabit beats, that really came from them as actors — but one of the limitations I think is that you don't get that perspective of being out in the house, away from the stage, and watching things like the way the fourth wall or the lack of it

interacts with the room. You don't see that, you only imagine what it's doing.

**Carine:** The booth, over to our left, or somewhere else, could be what they're peeking at, could be the theoretical audience, so it doesn't matter in the same way that we're here...

**Edmund:** But again, they made decisions, and I like that. Also, the play felt much shorter than I expected. That's something I would like to look up later, how long the play actually is, whether it's longer and they cut things. I suspect that they didn't cut. It really felt like a good one-act length, it was an hour fifteen maybe.

**Carine:** I didn't want it to be any longer.

**Edmund:** No, I didn't either, it was a good length, but I thought it was going to build more, towards the beat when the decision to shoot or not shoot happens.

**Carine:** I thought it was going to be the end, that moment where she was crouching near the trunk and saying, "I knew this was going to be his last play." That seemed to me like a false ending, a winding downbeat, and then the rest of everything was denouement — even if a dramatic denouement, with the gun.

**Edmund:** That could easily have been the ending.

**Carine:** That might once have been the ending.

**Edmund:** I had this experience, watching — I watched several pieces of theater this week — I was thinking, the biggest issue in most of the work I see is the ending. The endings go on too long, they repeat information we don't need repeated, and they often don't resolve information we do need resolved. There's a spinning of the wheel. To come back to the *Clumsy Sublime* play, Barrie Cole's play—

**Carine:** That's a good play.

**Edmund:** It is a good play. And I think the major flaw in that play is that it keeps ending. Instead of reaching an ending and resolving something and letting it breathe, it's adding a new ending and a new ending, but things don't resolve, they feel like they're spinning on... I felt that in this play, but not as much. The false ending, of "we're just gonna leave," the trunk speech... The brother has left the room, then, I think?

**Carine:** He's going to go find a hotel outside, but he can't get outside. I think the false ending, the dragging on without knowing where it's going, makes more sense with this play, because of that "life keeps on spinning miserably" element of it.

**Edmund:** Wasn't that great, that "confinement" beat? I didn't get the word, I asked you what it was because I couldn't see it, but once I got the word, I thought it was a strong way to do it... One of the physical things that I really loved was where they were both downstage, standing next to each other, very close, and she was standing on the stool, so they were the same height, their faces are at



the same level because he's so much taller... That was a very striking, very powerful picture for me.

**Carine:** And that bit right around there, I had to come back into it, I had missed something, distracted... That bit with the soap bubble? The silver-painted wicker thing, and she's on the stool, and it hovers while she talks, and then just drops? That was great.

**Edmund:** It felt like "this moment has really been played by these people." Which is one of the nice things about seeing a show at the end of a run. They're not still looking for this moment — they've found it, and they're inhabiting it. They played with confidence, and there were a couple periods, because Simone is so striking in it, and she has a colorful character, there were times I thought I would walk away from the play just thinking about her performance and not his, but that did not bear true throughout. He really served her in scenes, as an actor. Without stepping far back, he would step back in a slight way to give her the space to take it, but when he needed to take it back in order to have the play drive, he did it. And I think his is actually the more difficult performance. Hers is the performance to me where it's clearer how you would do that performance. Her character is clearer.

**Carine:** Yes, he's got less to chew on. Felice is somewhat mysterious.

**Edmund:** There are more secrets, hidden things about him. Did he really kill the parents... There's a part of me that wants to think, there's not this play he wrote about people killing their parents, the

*whole thing* is about how they killed their parents, and made up this elaborate thing... I'm not sure if that's true, but the whole thing of what's real and what isn't is really ongoing throughout the play. And he's driving her to do the shooting, it seems like, to end it. But he can't do it, she's got to do it. It's really sadomasochistic, at that point in the play. The play satisfied me, in a deep way, but I think it's a very flawed play, at the same time. And why is it flawed? I guess because... Okay, it's not flawed, it's actually perfect. But I'm disappointed for Tennessee Williams, that he could never just throw this stuff off, and say "My sister got a raw deal, I got a raw deal, life is really difficult for outsiders..."

**Carine:** You've got to buy the biography for that! That would be a different history of the universe. That's not how things were, for him. It's sad, all of it, but we can't revise his life.

**Edmund:** But isn't it a limitation for a playwright if you just keep coming back to the same things in order to write? O'Neill wrote one *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he didn't write twelve.

**Carine:** Come on. People have themes. Don't many people? I don't know all of Tennessee Williams' work, but I've seen it here and there, and I don't feel that I've seen this play before. It's not an entire retread. There are themes, sure. I hear what you say, and I agree that the device, the fourth wall, meta-text, in and out, we're familiar with this now, *that* I have seen, but still, I didn't feel I had seen this all before. He's chewing on the same melodrama, same pain, but he's spitting it out in different ways.

**Edmund:** Well that's good, I think that's a reason to do this play, if it doesn't feel done to someone coming to it for the first time. The majority of people now have not seen this play. It's like *Tiny Alice* for Edward Albee — it's a very significant play that didn't get its proper due when it was out in the first place. People wrote it off. And when people go back and find it now, there's this "whoa," because it's as strong as it is. A lot of Tennessee Williams' plays are flawed — they're incomplete. He wrote a lot of plays. There are still premieres of Tennessee Williams plays every couple of years, from his trunk. He wrote every day, and completed a lot of work that never got produced. But this play was produced a number of times during his lifetime, and this play was always talked about by artists as being very powerful, but not by theatergoers. The critics didn't get it. I'm an advocate of it. If you asked me, "should I read this play, should I go see this play," I'd say sure, but I still think... An artist has themes, yes. But if you watch an artist over years of their work, you see shift, you see resolution, grace notes...

**Carine:** But then the noble pain you talked about, that Williams was an advocate of: how does that lead to resolution and fulfillment, ever?

**Edmund:** It doesn't! That's a problem with it, as a way of experiencing art. [Here, Edmund says a long piece about Otto Rank's theory on the origin of neurosis as the dis-integration of the creative self.] If you watch a writer over time, especially if you care about the writer... Maybe that word *care* is tricky... You don't like that word? You don't agree?

**Carine:** No, I like "care." I'm not sure I know how to care about Tennessee Williams. Does he want us to care about him? I don't mean in his work. I mean, we seem to be speaking biographically. What exactly are we talking about?

**Edmund:** Well, we're talking about his work here, but I think he very much wants people to care. That's that "noble heart." I think he wants you to say, "yes, that is human tragedy, I care about human tragedy." And it's not that I don't care about it — I do — it's just that it is a limitation. It's interesting. I choose to see his work with that as part of the context. I will never go watch a Tennessee Williams play and be surprised when I see alcoholism and addiction and incest. Because it's not a surprise to me, it's what I expect to happen. And it does happen!

**Carine:** The next play out of the trunk could be about happy frogs, living their lives in a pond...

**Edmund:** *Small Craft Warnings* is another play from this period. Everybody's in a diner, it's late at night, and my memory of it is that it's just one big blowjob. Something must've happened onstage, but it's mostly just desired, or recounted, or needed. It's so focused on that particular thing, sexual gratification amongst strangers... It's a very strong play, it's quite funny, but it's partly strong because it has less of the *stuff* in it, the other Williams themes. It has one thing — it's not about his sister, it's not about his alcoholism, it's just about wanting to go out and have sex with somebody you don't know. So, the focus is different.

**Carine:** It's working through something. That's always the thing, isn't it? Art and art therapy. I recall someone very smart saying to me once that while making art can be therapeutic, it shouldn't be used as therapy. Something like that. It's not good for the art. That there is something very... It's not quite indulgent, but it's not always useful to the art to be personally exorcizing something. And yet, if you can make good art while exorcizing something, nobody gets on you too much. So, I don't know where that thought lands.

**Edmund:** I would guess — I haven't read a biography of Tennessee Williams, but I have read his essays, what he says about the writing process — I would guess that Tennessee Williams couldn't care less about that distinction. He was writing to get it out. And he continued to write to get it out, the same thing over and over. Sometimes better writing, more cohesive and powerful versions, sometimes not. But the need to tell a similar story, that goes with him. But getting back to their production! It really seems to me very much that this play would be very fun to do for an actor, and not that it's just pleasurable, but the acting challenge is a real meaty challenge. And if you're an artistic couple, which these two seem to be, it makes a lot of sense to choose this play, because it's about intimate things, and about theater, and there's very strong language, so there's a lot to play, and also if you are middle-aged actors, there's a possibility of depth you can get at with this play that a younger actor couldn't. For that ongoing problem that for the majority of middle-aged women in theater and film, there aren't roles for them to play, this play is an antidote to that. Because this play is perfect for a middle-aged woman who is really powerful and has a lot of experience onstage. It's perfect for her, and Simone

played to all of that, I thought. She was funny, she was alluring, she was powerful, she was attractive, she was wounded, she did all that. And what woman wouldn't rejoice at that possibility!

**Carine:** I don't know their work, these two, but I thought it was a strong choice of play for them. It's clearly a shoe they know how to wear.

## Questions for Rick Paul

We at *Chicago Arts Journal*, and perhaps many of you reading this, are longtime admirers of Rick Paul, veteran theater designer in our city and across the country. Rick kindly indulged our curiosities by sitting down to answer a few questions on his 40 years of work and life in the industry.

*CAJ: You have a long history with Chicago theater, particularly the fringe scene. How did that relationship begin?*

**Rick Paul:** It's hard to believe now, but what came to be called the "off-Loop" theatre movement in 1968 was basically *all* fringe. There were three "dinner" theatres, the Goodman was a school, and Old Town Players and the Hull House theatres were called "community" theatres, even though they did, among the usual 1940s and '50s Broadway rep, off-Broadway and European avant-gardist fare. After a year in London at a film school, I came back to Chicago. I was walking down Wabash when my teacher from Goodman, Uta Olson, greeted me and said I had to go instantly to Wellington Avenue, where June Pyskacek was doing the most interesting new work in Chicago. I did, and designed Jean Claude Van Itallie's *America Hurrah*. It became a huge "counter-culture" hit. At the same time, I became Bill Fosser's assistant up the block at the Ivanhoe Theater right when it threw off its fading T.V. and movie-star status and began doing challenging plays with truly great actors like Luther Adler and Ethel Waters. *America Hurrah* and

what happened shortly after prompted critic Glenna Syse to label the activity "The Off-Loop Theatre Movement," as opposed to the community or "Little Theatre" movement that spread across America in the earlier decades. Pyskacek split with her co-directors Jim Shifflett and Bill Hildreth. She opened the huge Kingston Mines Theatre on Lincoln Avenue and shortly thereafter Shifflett and Hildreth opened the Body Politic down the block, and a scene was born. Stuart Gordon and his Organic Theater came down from Madison and within a few years there were 40 theatre companies. June had another huge hit with the first show at the Mines, another Van Itallie play, *The Serpent*. The rest is history. The early days really tried to develop local playwrights, not just rely on New York and London. That tradition continues. It being the anti-authoritarian Hippie era, the physical explorations of performance by the Open Theater of Joseph Chaiken and the Living Theater had a strong influence. A lot of that free-wheeling spirit has disappeared again as the "well-written play" and standard rep has reasserted itself *except* in the "fringe" theatres.

*CAJ: What are you working on now in the theater, and why is it important to you?*

**RP:** I'm working on adapting and designing a work on Cornell Woolrich and James Barrie and their relationship to their mothers. Also a piece on Wilhelm Reich and his battle with UFOs in the Arizona desert. Also a long project on suicide and sceneographic plays without actors.

Well, I'm getting old, and if not now, when? Out of the 520 productions I've worked on, only about 25 have been really

personally meaningful to me, so these new projects will add a few more to that list.

*CAJ: In recent work of yours for the theater, we have seen you shift from the design side of the work toward directing and adaptation. Could you talk about that transition and why it's happening at this point in your career?*

**RP:** I was a director in high school, college, and as director of Lionheart Gay Theatre Company, which had a fifteen-year run in Chicago. I often directed under a *nom de théâtre*, for no other reason than I can't stand people who stick their names all over programs. Too much ego. Recently Kelly Anchors and Mike McKune asked me to direct and help them adapt Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." We needed one more piece, so I adapted Daphne du Maurier's "Kiss Me Again, Stranger." It was well received, and I found I loved it. With good actors it's so easy, I wish I'd have had the nerve earlier. I have a design and dance background so I found staging to be easy. We then did New Orleans playwright R.J. Tsarov's "Mantuary" and I adapted Cornell (Rear Window) Woolrich's "Hot Water," indulging my love of vaudeville and burlesque, and I was never happier. I would have been happy touring and living hand-to-mouth in the days of vaudeville or commedia — keep those Hellmans and O'Neills! I love the beginnings of things, before they become institutions. That's why I love the fringe, and indie films and the early days of Gay Theatre and the regional ballet boom of the 1970s.

*CAJ: The theater in Chicago has changed over the last 30 years. Can you talk about that change, and how it has affected your work?*

**RP:** A lot has not changed. "Fringe" theatres still are barely covered in the media. Strangely enough, the "fringe" will probably outlast the press that barely recognized its existence.

So much theatre feels homogenized. I work in many other cities and really the same plays are everywhere. Mostly from New York, London, and La Jolla! At least in Chicago local playwrights do get produced. Same with theatre design, and even the theatre buildings. You could be anywhere. It all seems like the same trends and choices and academic programs. Though a lot of site-specific productions are developing that harken back to the Happenings of the '60s and perhaps because of the infusion of art schools' performance explorations rather than just theatre curriculums. I'm an old hippie, I prefer rough-hewn rather than slick or chic, which the grand regional theatres traffic in.

Another thing that remains the same is you see experiments in content and form in fringe theatre and then five or ten years later it shows up in the big-monied theatres and all the press and movers and shakers get all excited and the original risk-takers go unacknowledged.

*CAJ: What has made it difficult, for you, to continue making work for the theater?*

**RP:** I'm completely hands-on. I feel like I'm cheating if I don't build and paint things myself. But really, finding myself on a twenty-foot ladder alone in the theatre at three in the morning is

pushing my luck at 68 years old. So I'm trying to scale down to smaller productions with less and less technology. And I really don't want to be told things. I *love* being my own boss, and pleasing myself and a playwright and hopefully the audience.

*CAJ: What attracts you, as a director or designer, to a project?*

**RP:** I like to escape the mundane world that I'm allergic to, so naturally I'm not attracted to naturalism. Many of the movies I've done have been hyper-naturalistic (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Normal Life*, etc.). Perhaps an antidote to 90-plus musicals I've done.

*CAJ: Who are some of the memorable characters you have seen or known over the years?*

**RP:** I assume you mean in theatre? I could list and tell stories about hundreds of Chicagoans, all memorable. To name a few: Paul Sills, Marji Blank, Uta Olson, Hope Abelson, Stewart and Carolyn Purdy-Gordon, Del Close, June Pyskacek, Lily Monkus, Tom Towles, Jack Wallace, Larry Bommer (the critic, and funniest person I've ever met), Albert Williams, Eugenie Leontovich, Larry Hart, Kate Buddeke, Deanna Dunegan, Beau O'Reilly, Michael Halberstam, Shannon Cochran, Brian Nemtusak, Cecillie Keenan and Carmen Roman and Bill Fosse. On and on. I try not to name-drop celebrities unless there is an anecdote attached, so I'll be coy and "character drop" some truly memorable ones I had the thrill to work with: the original "Blanche DuBois," "Mrs. Molloy," "Gertrude" to Burton and Olivier, "Ado Annie," the original

"Golden Boy," "the Princess Kosmonopolis," "Jimmy Porter," the original "angry young man."\* All glamorous and fascinating. I only wish I hadn't been shy and had asked them questions about the Group Theatre and the Berliner Ensemble. I found most fascinating of all Tennessee Williams. He was kind and helpful and a real worker, not above even sweeping the stage.

*CAJ: Are there any projects you are excited about doing in the future?*

**RP:** I've been involved with three movies that I hope will happen. Christopher Miles' D.H. Lawrence adaptation *The Lost Girl*, Michael DeGaetano's *Boy with a Suitcase*, Jim Sikora's *I'll Die Tomorrow*. All great scripts. My involvement with British director Christopher Miles goes all the way back to the old Arlington Park Theatre, where we did *Skin of Our Teeth*, starring his sister, Sarah Miles.

I'm also searching for Julian Slade's unproduced musical of James Barrie's *Dear Brutus*. One of my favorite plays. My obsession, and I met him at the Garrick Club in London and promised him I'd put it on. He died two weeks later.

\*[As Rick is too polite to name-drop, here's a cheat-sheet.—Eds.] Jessica Tandy; Eileen Brennan; Eileen Herlie; Celeste Holm; we're not sure which "Golden Boy" Rick refers to — William Holden? John Garfield? Sammy Davis, Jr.? Clifford Odets himself, despite his being dead by 1963? Discuss; Geraldine Page, Kenneth Haigh, John Osborne.

## Contributor Notes

Charlotte Hamilton, a native of New Jersey, lives in Chicago, where she works as a hospice social worker. She has been published in McSweeney's Internet Tendency and participates in storytelling events around the city.

Kerry Reid is a freelance theater critic, arts journalist and sometime-playwright based in Chicago. She has been a fan of Theater Oobleck ever since seeing Jeff Dorchon's "The Slow and Painful Death of Sam Shepard" at the original Cafe Voltaire in December 1988.

Edmund St. Bury is an avid theatergoer and lifelong Chicagoan. It really was his carrot cake.

Jim Joyce is a Chicago-based writer, performer, and high school teacher. His zine, *Let it Sink*, is available at Quimby's and other independent bookstores.

Beneven Stanciano is a teacher, actor and critic living in Chicago.

Carine Loewi grew up on the French-Swiss border, putting on house-theater musicals with her sisters which the rest of the family consistently refused to watch. She now lives in Evanston and works in the medical technology field.

John Starrs, a poet and teacher, has been active in Chicago literary and theater circles since the late 1950s, and has read his stories at Curious Theatre Branch's Rhino Fest for several years. Reliable sources report that he is very good at basketball.

Sue Cargill is a playwright and comics creator living in Chicago. Her zines are sold at Chicago Comics, Third Coast Comics, and Quimby's.

Dietrich is a poet and translator from Bonn who lives and works on the North Side. He is currently writing a series of essays on the work and creative legacy of Hans Fallada.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on all this.

We welcome pitches and recommendations.

Do drop us a line.

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*Look out for our winter issue!*

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