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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers!—

We've missed you. It was a long, strange winter, and we think it might be well and truly over, though we're still wearing our wool coats around town, just in case. We nearly missed delivering this, our Spring Issue, to you on May Day, so much time did we spend (but not waste) dancing around our flowered poles and protesting our working conditions; but here we squeak in under the wire, reminding ourselves that the dancing and the protesting are year-round activities, and can wait until tomorrow.

After a series of engaged discussions around our Rhino Fest Flash Issue this January, we at *Chicago Arts Journal* found ourselves questioning what we want out of this project, and what we hope it will offer to and make room for in our community. Do we judge? Do we report? Do we question? It's an ongoing conversation among our staff and readers, and it hasn't been settled in any resounding way — which pleases us — but we did all agree on the major tenet of the *CAJ* philosophy: the primacy of the writer. We invite fiction writers and poets and critics to commit words to our pages because we want to know what they'll say, without much input (and certainly without censorship) from us as editors. (Carine may change a comma or ten, but you can take that up with her.) To that end, we've engaged a slew of our favorite writers and thinkers to say things about what they're seeing around town lately and, more generally, what they're thinking about.

And, too, we've been experimenting with the form our journal takes. You will find this issue divided into three sections: *View*, containing two works of personal history and two of fiction; *Review*, talk and reactions around performance events; and *Interview*, five series of question-and-answers with Chicago arts people we know and admire. The interviews were a last-minute addition, an effort to reshuffle the issue's contents after a few hoped-for articles fell back on the schedule or disappeared. But we've been truly delighted, both by our subjects' willingness to answer prying questions about their art-lives, and by the dazzling array of views they offered as responses. We hope that you'll like all these pieces too, and that you'll find the three-part schema to be an interesting organizing principle — but if you don't, well, fear not: it'll probably change next time anyway. We are a capricious lot, ready to throw our garments to the wind with the change of season. (Though we're left wondering, as Ray Rehayem sagely asks in the last pages of this issue, "Is there a season?")

Please do let us know what you think about the season, the layout, or any other thing you're pondering lately, by writing to johann.artsjournal@gmail.com. Take care, friends. Nice to see you again.

—*The Editors*

The front cover image was captured by CAJ co-editor Dietrich. The back cover, an illustrated overview of the Curious Theatre Branch's "Magnus in Play," is by Sue Cargill, and is excerpted on pages 13, 33, and 46.

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View:
Fiction and Essay

Green Space

by Cecile Goding

She was in Apartment 3-B and I was in 2-B. She lived all by herself.

I had never lived all by myself in my life. At first, of course, I lived with my parents and my sister and my two brothers in Apartment 4-A across the green space. Then I lived with my sister and her husband, and for a while, my brothers after they came back from the wars. Then my first man Samuel came along, also back from the wars, and we lived together in Apartment 6-A. Along with his mother. And his dog.

Somewhere, maybe just across this green space, lives that man and his mother. And the dog. But I never see them. Samuel? It got to where he didn't need me. Maybe he never did need me, the way I needed him to.

By the time I met her, the woman in Apartment 3-B, I was living in 2-B with my fourth man Amir, the one from Khartoum, and his two little children and his brothers and sisters. And their baba. From Khartoum. They are all trying to make a new place for themselves, but as yet they have no place except 2-B. The brothers and sisters are waiting for some children to join them; I can't remember now whose children, but it doesn't matter, they will be in 2-B very soon.

I was curious. Understand this, that even though she lived in Apartment 3-B and I was in 2-B, I only ever saw her when I went to get the mail. We met in summer, I remember, it was always summer then, and the mailboxes in the green space were

threatened by the kudzu, you understand. Understand that our complex was carved out of the swamp, wrenched by our fathers, or their fathers, out of the swamp, where every inch of earth is full to bursting with wisteria and bindweed, with every creeping thing that lives upon the earth. Understand that the swamp is always striving, striving, striving to reclaim, to cover the space our kind carved out for things like mailboxes in green spaces.

Oh, she accepted my help right enough, you understand. "Here, use these." Those were the first words I spoke to her, as I held out my kitchen shears so she could cut the kudzu away from her mailbox the way I had cut it off mine. Or theirs, I should say, as all the mail destined for Apartment 2-B comes from Khartoum, and everybody I know from Khartoum is in Apartment 2-B already.

She said, because I asked, that she lived alone, as if I didn't know. I had never been alone, I told her. And I had never met a woman who lived alone. "How is it?" I wanted to know. She told me, because I asked, that she liked it fine. She didn't need anybody else, never had.

But don't they need you? I wanted to ask but didn't; I didn't have to. She said that she didn't go out looking for people. She didn't go out at all, you understand, except to the mailbox, and when we cut away enough of the swamp to open her mailbox, there was nothing inside.

We began to meet at the mailboxes every afternoon. Pretty soon, she was asking to use my kitchen shears almost every day. She would cut away just a little kudzu very slowly, as she tried to make me understand why she lived alone, all alone in her spaces. Her spaces, she said, not her place, as I and my man Amir and his brothers and sisters, and their baba, would have said.

Then she began to watch for me out of her space, all that space in Apartment 3-B. She began to wait for me to step out of 2-B, so we could walk together to the mailboxes. She would come out in a hurry, as if she were afraid I would make the trip alone. She began to ask me all about the people I lived with and the people who would soon arrive and keep coming.

Something from myself, it seems, had crept out and reached into her, making her lonely. When before, you understand, she had only been alone. As if she had swallowed one of my seeds, one of my tiny guilt seeds, or a seed of my desire, the desire to be useful by giving up the one thing left, the only thing left to fight over.

That's when I stopped going out to get the mail. You understand. How her loneliness grew to be so thick, I couldn't see my way out of it.

I sent the children instead. Oh, how they fought over who got to go out into the green space. They never took turns. The strongest child would get to go, and I would watch him go. I knew that she, from Apartment 3-B, would come out then, and walk with the child to the mailboxes. And as they walked, she would move closer and closer to him. She would offer him her new shears. And the child, instinctively, but politely, would decline. He would keep some distance between them.

Understand that I could feel the boy, even from inside our apartment. I could feel that push and pull inside, as my little boy from Khartoum, conditioned to be polite and welcoming to strangers, fought against his new New World desire — his growing desire to keep the big beautiful desperate Okefenokee swamp of the world at arm's length.

Seeing as how you're here, you understand.

The Moth-Eaten Silver Screen

by Jeff Flodin

Before my eyesight started to go, back when retinitis pigmentosa was only a foreign phrase, I liked to hang out at the movies. That was where I spent my summer vacations as a high school social worker. This was out in Phoenix, where summers run hot. And we all know it's cool inside the movie house.

How I first figured something was wrong was that my eyes didn't adjust from the light outside to the dark inside. I took to standing stock still at the back of the theatre waiting for the house lights to illuminate my path. When they didn't, and when my legs got tired, I made my way ever so cautiously toward a seat.

The house was usually empty, save for overpopulated families out to catch *E.T.* for a buck a head. And I'll be darned if I didn't plop my six-foot frame right in front of the shortest among the pint-sized brood. As soon as my fanny hit the seat, those obstructed hrumphed and clucked until I mumbled apologies and slunk away. Though I like to bedevil children, I simply could not see who was sitting where. No matter that blocking a child's view would have been payback to a generation of kids for kicking the back of my seat, I'd still have been flagged as the culprit by the assistant manager had it come to that.

On the rare occasion I brought a date to a matinee, a fresh set of challenges arose. Keeping us fed and watered through *Lawrence of Arabia* required multiple trips to the concession stand. These dark and lonely forays taxed my navigation skills. I tried counting the rows up the aisle, then counting the same number back down the aisle. But if the Arabian sun set during my

excursion, I'd lose sight of the rows and all sense of place. Too self-conscious to call her name, I'd stroll the aisle all the way to the screen, hoping she would summon me to her side. If nobody claimed me, I'd backtrack up the aisle, projecting nonchalance amid panic. Once I just plopped down in a seat and started eating. More than one of Cupid's mismatches ended when my date chose solitude over Junior Mints and simply allowed me to drift off like the untethered astronaut into a space odyssey.

As more retinal rods and cones crapped out, I lost the ability to take in the entire screen in my visual field. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when Harrison Ford (screen left) traded bon mots with Karen Allen (screen right), my eyes, and my entire head, followed the conversation like a dog at a tennis match. Steamy scenes in *Risky Business* amounted to peering at a person who sounded like Tom Cruise grappling with, well, grappling with whom? Where have you gone, Rebecca de Mornay?

The last movie I can say I saw for sure was *The Untouchables*. It had great visuals. The scene on the train station steps. Frank Nitty getting thrown off the roof. But my true watershed was seeing a balding man (Sean Connery) remaining virile. I took this to heart, a thirtysomething man with a receding hairline. Whether I have come to resemble Sean Connery is in the eye of the beholder, not in mine. I have seen neither a movie screen nor my reflection in the mirror in a dozen years or more. Hope sustains me.

I've pretty much stopped going to the movies. Sure, some theatres have those earphones with a voice that describes the action, but to me it just isn't the same as seeing it. Now and then, my wife and I go to a real talkie, like Frost Nixon, Lincoln or W, the film about George Bush Junior. Keep the cast at four or so

and I can follow along reasonably well. A few years back, we went to *Mama Mia*, where it didn't matter who said what because the music was the whole movie anyway. Between songs, my wife described the Mediterranean colors and textures for me. While I appreciated her sensory enhancement, cheap thrills fall short. Blockbuster adventure flicks with awesome stunts and special effects do absolutely nothing for me except make me mad about not being able to see what the hell everybody else is "Ooohing" and "Ahhhhing" about. Ditto for spy movies.

Losing my eyesight robbed me of a whole generation of screen sirens turned pop icons. I can't tell Jennifer Lopez from Nicole Kidman or Scarlet Johansson from Renée Zellweger. The only thing I know about Catherine Zeta Jones is that she married Michael Douglas and then he got real sick but he's better now. I haven't seen a single wife of Tom Cruise's, and, for that, I feel cheated. My last pair of screen gems was Meg Ryan (blonde) and Julia Roberts (brunette), whom I last viewed in *When Harry Met Sally* and *Pretty Woman* respectively. I know, kids, that dates me.

In my career as an avid, sighted moviegoer, I felt confident picking the Oscar winners. I'd seen all the movies up for awards, right down to the documentaries. I could debate whether the cinematography of Ingmar Bergman or Federico Fellini added more to the mood and tone of either's body of work. I remain one of only two people (my girlfriend at the time being the other) who saw the tension Marcello Mastroianni and Laura Antonella expressed only with their eyes during the film *Wifemistress*. Catch that one? Didn't think so. And was there ever a more beautiful movie than *Days of Heaven*?

Things are different today. The time I used to spend watching movies I now spend listening to audio books and writing

my own stuff. Just think — in the time it's taken to write this little number, I could have watched *Risky Business* for the 83rd and 84th times. No matter. I have it all in my head — Joel dancing in his Jockey shorts, Lana snug in her little green dress. All the tag lines from start to finish, from "Looks like University of Illinois" to "Princeton can use a guy like Joel." So, I can call up a scene at will. Let's see now. How about when the kid puts his father's Porsche into Lake Michigan? OK then, lights, camera, and... action!

How Do I Do It?

by Anna O. Leary

I went down to the hardware store and I got a bunch of the stuff I'm going to use on myself. Ropes and chains and stuff, screws with weird kinds of heads, small hand tools. I need all this stuff done to me because I am so stupid. I went to an S-M club downtown to see if they would do the stuff to me, and I explained to them how I am so stupid and what kind of stuff I am looking to have done to me, and they said, "You need help, man." That is just how they said it! Why did they say it that way! I am clearly not a man! Not at all. But that's okay. I don't need them to do the stuff to me, and anyway they looked for a minute (before they decided against it) like they were going to get excited about it when they did the stuff to me, and that is not what I am looking for. Let's be real here. I am very stupid and I just need the screws and the chains and the ropes to be done to me because I am stupid and I don't learn. So I'll learn.

And the lady at the hardware store, yes it was a lady, ringing me up, she says, "What's all this for," and I said, "I'm throwing a party, ha ha," and she didn't look like she thought that was funny. She looked at my stupid face like she was looking right into me, and in that moment we both knew I was very stupid, and then I asked her if she knew how to put in drywall, because that sounded like a thing I would not say if I was so stupid, even though we both knew I was, but also to throw her off the scent a little. I knew *she* wasn't about to do any stuff to me, she didn't look like the type to do that to a person. She had bored eyes, lazy,

so I thought I'd better not tip her off. Somebody will do the stuff, but not her.

What it's come to now is that I don't know who will do the stuff to me. I have gone through all of my contacts on my phone and all of them seem like people who either would get excited about doing it, which as I said is not the thing I am looking for here, or they have children and are too busy for this kind of stuff. So, I'm tying myself in. I read online about the knots you do, they're tight but I leave enough room for wrist movement. While I'm doing the stuff, I don't want my self to become frightened and run away, the body of it, so I'll make the knots tight enough it can't get away but loose enough I can still have wrist action to do the stuff I have to do. It's a difficult balance.

I think it'll be my ribs first. Did you ever notice how many ribs I have? I have so many ribs. Does everybody have this many ribs? Do I need them all? That is beside the point, isn't it. But I'll do them first. One thing I got at the hardware store is a little hammer, ball peen, and then also a sort of funnel or awl or metal cone, what is the word, I'm not good with this construction stuff, ha ha, but I think I will get going with that on the ribs. Ping ping, saw saw, I'll begin that way and see what goes. If I weren't so stupid none of this would be necessary, but I am, so it is. Sad to say but true. My brother came over just when I got home. He said, "I'm worried about you," but then for a minute he got distracted by my magazines on the magazine stand. He was looking at them, focusing all his eye-attention on them, while he was talking about this worry he had about me and I thought: Is he really worried? He is looking at magazines. And I said to him, "Are you really worried? You are looking at magazines." And he looked up from the magazines and his face was red like someone had thrown hot

water on it — I know what that looks like — and I knew he was useless to what I have to do, so I asked him to leave, and he did. He has kids. He could never be capable of doing the stuff. Even when we were kids. He didn't see it as important.

I am here, waiting for most of the blood to drain out of my arms to make this easier. I have done the knots, they were a little botched the first time I tried, they wouldn't lay flat like in the picture on the web site, but I got them right. I would take a picture to show you if I could, ha ha, but now my arms are going white, right from the tips of the fingers to the wrist elbow humerus and the round shoulders, which already were white, weren't they, the round white shoulders just like the name of the perfume says. I am nearly ready.

If only I weren't so stupid. I could sit on the couch and watch a movie. None of this would be necessary at all. But it is. The ribs went well. Arms next. What's on the agenda? Where do I go from here? What do I do? I should've made more of a plan! I am no expert in how to proceed, that's for sure. Very stupid.

Oh, No

by Jim Joyce

I once woke up talking to the wall. Came speaking right out of a dream. But not just talking words, I spoke Catholic prayers specifically. I woke up praying.

The fiction of my prayer dream is like this: I'm in a rehearsal space — the Music Garage right by Kinzie and Noble — I was just restringing a guitar. I could smell the fresh strings, an incredible smell if you know it, like sunflowers and clean silverware. Once I manage to wind the fat E string in place, I see ghosts at the end of the hallway. They're talking to each other. They're holding copies of *New City* or *The Sun Times*. Then they're looking at me. There are bad ways of being looked at. I am alone in the rehearsal space.

My bandmates. Where are they? Gone, having a smoke in the loading dock or talking about a party I missed by going to bed too early, another nightmare.

I yell, "Ben/Amanda/Curtis/help!" and I know in my dream-way that the ghosts have already gotten my friends and this is how I will die. I look up from an instrument I'm struggling to restring, like I'm not even a musician yet, and I see ghosts and I say "Oh, Jesus" and the mob of ghosts spill their papers and rush me, howling like Geiger counters.

To postpone the spiritual attack, my reaction in the dream-tense is to pray. I put down the guitar and place my hands in a pyramid shape then murmur some prayer standards, the Our Father and the Hail Mary: the rosary gang from 12 years and

change of Catholic school. Prayers with phrasings like “Deliver us, Lord, from evil.”

Before the ghosts can touch me I’m awake in the dull wonder of my bed.

My eyes open and I’m on my left side praying to the drywall audience of my bedroom. Light morning sun warms my filthy mattress while the “Our Father” issues from my mouth until I can hear myself talking, at which point my voice downshifts, like the slow speak of a record player just unplugged from the wall. I’m stopping my holy-talk to ask myself, “What was that? What was it — was I just praying?”

■ ■ ■

Between D.C. and Bloomington, two friends and I stop for gas at a 24-hour truck stop. All this happens last summer on a zine tour. Collin and I wander in the highway-lit parking lot. Under the mega-wattage, all customers look like parts of things that’ve floated up from the Atlantic and been spewed onto beach.

It is a leaving the movies type of feeling. Matt is staring into the truck’s grill at the gruesome insect detritus the drive has collected, his other hand cigarette-fishing a jean pocket. Having filled the cavernous gas tank of the Navigator, our bald-tired adventure vehicle, we climb back inside the truck and reassemble the baggage. Long-armed staplers and grocery bags filled with unassembled zines, the ones America has not been waiting for. And there are CDs. Two readings ago we took many discs from a free pile in Richmond. We have Van Morrison and the The Doors, double-albums, best ofs. They’re shedding brittle plastic casing all over.

But we’re leaning toward talk radio. I would like to hear Coast-to-Coast AM. We keep phasing through stations on the highway, so the only way of hearing Coast-to-Coast AM is by electronic subscription via phone, which we’ve amplified by tiny speakers bought from a Radio Shack in West Virginia. They only work if placed upside down.

Back on the air, host George Noory asks the Ghost Investigative Society all manner of questions about their recent ghost recordings.

What type of microphones were you using? (RCA’s digital recorders.)

How long did you wait for ghosts? (Sometimes they came right away; sometimes we got the wrong address.)

Are you sure these voices are not manifestations of your own displaced psychic energy? (Well, it could be that, or it would seem, would be to seem— if our receivers were checked, ah—)

Did temperature change at time of contact? (We believe so.)

These ghost voices do not grind or rasp as they do in horror movies. Instead, they chirp like crickets under dusty boxes in your garage or like the PA speaker crackling in ancient CPS hallways. The first voice I hear is a child’s words squeezing out of a power plant’s radiator. Then an old woman susurrates from behind a cypress tree nearby burial grounds. Then some muttering emits from the closet on a docked cruise ship in California.

Noory shares the voice clips and his rambling swerves inward. He talks about years ago when his departed father returned in spirit form as a brown bat staring from a sun patch on his patio. He talks about his wife, who refuses to listen to any ghost footage.

What is Mrs. Noory doing right now? Why not give her a call? Mrs. Noory answers on the third ring, like it’s nothing.

“Oh, hello!”

George Noory asks her one of these oily Dave Letterman questions. It lets you know she’s a patient woman, but is she a believer? “Why won’t you ever come on the show and listen to supernatural footage?”

“Well,” she says, “a lot of people will agree with me on this. If I listen to too many of those confrontations, it’ll open a psychic floodgate.”

“And what would that be like,” asks George, and we’re all silent in the car, like *Yes, Mrs. Noory*, tell us.

“Then I’ll start hearing spirits at home,” she continues. “Those recorded spirits can bring us into contact with unknown ghosts in our lives.” And cut. We are back to the Ghost Investigative Society.

When I hear Noory and his wife talking shop on Coast-to-Coast radio, I imagine that maybe with practice I could develop a nose for ghosts, too. I’d like to know the spiritual presence I lack in my material life of haircuts, bike locks, hangovers and fro-yo. Still, I don’t practice seeking out apparitional shit, unless listening to paranormal radio is practice. Or dreaming. Or having nightmares.

■ ■ ■

At home, the closest I come to belief is hearing clutter fall in my apartment: a shoebox tumbles behind me, or the light in the living room turns off at its will. Wood creaks when it wants to. If it is day time, I think: Boy, this place, *it is so dumpy*.

If it happens that I wake up at night to hear sounds, I pant my mortal frame into anxieties about ghostly visitations. I reach for the enormous bike lock behind my bed and stalk the house for whatever lurks.

When I see no actual spiritual presence, I can still get casually haunted by implications of death. Then of regrets, forgone goals, things to do in “my life” before I die and go to the hell God made for tightrope walkers like me, like at death I’ll be presented with a notepad of shit I should’ve found more time to do. Why should I care about that? And why do I fall back on God — I don’t even think I like God. How can I like someone who always evaluates my quality of friendship? Though I know it is not actually a friendship.

And before I know it I start praying. Resentfully. Passionately. When I finish and have calmed down I sanitize myself with swear words. Shit. What the fuck am I praying for. Goddammit.

■ ■ ■

Since I need meaning so badly I look out my window at the frame it makes around my neighborhood. If it’s too dark to see then I read. After the tour last summer and hours of spooky radio, I wasn’t ready for holy texts yet, but I did take to the quick high of maxims. Like the Greek guys Herakleitos and Diogenes, the latter of which has a name so fun to say I murmur it all day, DIOGENES. He says things like, “I have come to debase the coinage,” and Herakleitos says things like “One cannot step into the same river twice, for the water into which you have stepped has flowed on,” and closing out Skylark on a paradisaical August night, I will write silly maxim remixes like “The glass is only alive when it’s spilling” and for the Halsted bus or Blue Line I’ll pen “the puke in which you stepped is not the puke in which you stand,” and soon I can only remember my silly revisions and I see I have missed the point of the maxim in the first place.

Then one of my friends talked about the time Jesus came to him in a vision before a play he was not ready for in some way, and Jesus said to my friend “Just read the lines, just read one line at a time; you’ll be fine,” and recalling the story, my friend said, “It’s odd, because I don’t like Jesus that much, but I don’t dislike him enough to warrant a visit either.”

Then Jesus popped up everywhere, as is his liking, and I saw him in the poems of Sandburg and Brooks, and I thought, all right: I get it, I’ll read some Jesus maxims, fine, if that’s where things are headed. Turns out the best-rated translations appear in a tiny purple book called *The Logia of Yeshua*, fancy titling for “The Sayings of Jesus.” It’s a readable translation of crinkly old scrolls. I ordered it by mail.

At first reading, he sounds like a Greek philosopher is what I thought. But my friend Arlyn, a pastor out in Omaha, says the similarity is just surface. Greeks divide the material from the spiritual. And Hebrew prophets, they see spirit and matter as components joining to make a humming unity. I say, OK, and write it down.

And are you still with me right now? Don’t quit on me just because it’s Jesus who is insisting a presence — last year it was Dee Dee Ramone as far as the eye could see, his awful novel and his perfect memoir, the mystery of the world hiding under his swishing bangs, etc. People get captivated, and so what I found was that Jesus says excellent things in balanced phrasing. He speaks about vanity and anger. He speaks about swearing. And I mean, which, who doesn’t love swearing? So I spent some bus and coffee time with the tiny book. I learned that Jesus is never far from warning about taking the Lord’s name in vain, or using him in oaths; as if he, too, is wary of his friendship with God.

“Do not swear by the heavens,” says Jesus, and “Do not swear by the earth. Do not swear at all,” he clarifies. “Let your yes be your yes, and your no your no.”

I goddamn things all week. I curse and take the world in vain. When I sit in front of a jammed printer I say “What the Christ is this nonsense?” and shame and defiance blast through my blood. Using God in oaths makes me feel momentarily satisfied, powerful, smiting the idiocy of my Catholic school past, but I also feel vaguely doomed, like an employee, low-waged and stuck in a job he could not choose but to work.

And with all my God stomping and cursing you’d think I’d drive my spirituality away. But then I auto-pray in bed, too, so I know there is some denial here. A misunderstanding of where I am spiritually.

I am not an atheist. I am a man who is deeply resentful of higher powers, frightened by them. I am some kind of very, very bad believer. My spirit is a stranger to me and takes to things that I don’t understand. Like when I can potentially cleave away my vanity and humble myself to make contact with powers outside my material world, I think maybe I flinch, or I leave too early to see something, or I am disappointed in myself.

And if I listen I can tell the church bell arriving to me over the neighborhood sounds. It communicates east and loses voice to the expressway traffic at its elbow; it sounds west through a pay window of Maxwell St. Hot Dogs and cooks with chopped onions and mixes with sport peppers and sticky cans of grape pop. It rides the roofs of houses I used to live in, it floods a pausing CTA bus through the rear exit, comes out the front a block later, sends Cheetos bags flying, allays believers, it breathes at the front door of my building and glides around the broken key in the lock. It finds

me in my kitchen, 4pm, Saturday, trying to decide between a cup of coffee and a glass of beer. Then I hear the bell ring and I think — the church. And I think, oh, have the coffee first, then a beer.

When I'm really hard up and not pinging around seeking novelty, I get grim, get serious, get "existential" or as I prefer to call it, white boy worried. My easy world is quaked by my actual smallness in the big scheme and I'm not just filled by night anxiety like hunting for whatever made that noise in my evening apartment but daytime worries, too. That's when I reread the books around my secular no-candle and oil-less house to see what I underlined and thought was important last year and the year before that. I pick up a junky pamphlet of Xeroxes. I read a page of Neruda who says in his anti-spiritualist way that "It is well, at certain hours, to look closely at the world of objects at rest [...] The reality of the world should not be underprized."

I open a cinderblock size Norton anthology and consult some Emerson. Not the poems, the essays. He says the truest prayer is the "farmer kneeling in his field to weed," or "the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar."

When I think about prayer I'm trapped in physical comparisons. Is it like this/is it like that? As a kid, I could yell across hundreds of feet of pond at my brother as sound moves so well over water; is that how prayer works? Choosing the right space? Is it a matter of uncommon voice, like the whistle language of Spain's La Gomera Island? They're audible for two miles, improved because of simplification. Is it like how Heinrich Hertz felt when he knew radio waves streaked in and out of him silently. Have I been praying all along.

One more. Guy Davenport has this short story thing called "And" that's in his *Reader*. It is a page long. It is all ending and

ambiguity and I'm choosing to plagiarize it as a close. The star of the story is a papyrus fragment that can only sort of be read, it's so crumbly. The papyrus's text sets Jesus beside the Jordan River. There are crowds and crowds of people watching him. But the narrator isn't sure what the story is expressing because so many letters are missing from the fragment.

"We catch some words," says the narrator. Reading this, I'm not clear on whether the narrator is speaking from the papyrus or if he's actually dictating at the river in the throng of people. Then Jesus says something about "weighing things that are weightless." Many people in the crowd cannot hear him.

Someone says they can see Jesus throwing a handful of something into the river. Are they seeds? Are there now trees growing out of the river? Are they flowing away? Are they gone? "We follow a while in our imagination" says the narrator. Then it's over.

Review:
Writings about Shows



Words Made Flesh: A Month of Performance in Chicago

by Ira S. Murfin

It is probably less an indication of an idiosyncratic cultural moment in the Chicago performance landscape than of my own particular predilections that I found March's performances to be, among other things, frequently engaged with negotiating the protean materiality of language as both tangible and impermanent. My theatrical experiences this past month have been united by systems of signification coming against their own limits and possibilities. I have seen words, and their alternate realizations as images, even as gesture, scrolling slowly and minutely by, projected onto screens two stories high, embedded in furniture and actors' flesh, floating invisibly in the air, maddeningly close, still just beyond reach. Language did more than its duty this month, it made itself known as an excess, something that could be broken, interrupted, handled, lost or found. Language lived many lives, as record, as existential inquiry, as incantation, as lyric. Though we imagine language to be a component of most theatrical experiences, the varied and inventive forms and formats language took over the course of the month, and the non-standard but still central role it played, most marked my time in the theatre these past weeks.

Joe Frank, *Murdered by the Mind*

Steppenwolf Theater, March 1st

If Joe Frank constitutes the most conventional approach to dramatic language I encountered over the course of March, I must have been having an especially interesting month as an audience member. Frank returned to Steppenwolf for his third one night stand there in recent years with *Murdered by the Mind*, under the direction of Steppenwolf co-founder Terry Kinney. Though Steppenwolf is known for an iconoclastic, rock and roll inspired take on theatrical realism honed in the 1970s, it has long since become an established mainstream institution. So the collection of familiar faces from Chicago's theatrical and literary fringe in the audience would have alerted me that this was an "off night" even if I weren't there for Frank already. Frank has been delivering odd and troubling monologues, just as likely to be gut wrenching personal confessions as surreal high-concept genre pastiche, from a broadcast studio by the sea since before most of us had even heard of public radio. Chicago Public Radio still plays an eclectic mix of reruns from the various series he produced at KCRW in Santa Monica, California late Sunday nights. But to catch Frank in action these days is a rare thing.

"Action" is a bit of an abstract concept for Frank, who seems to live life mostly from behind a microphone, deep within his own consciousness. As the title of his piece suggests, he is at as much risk from his memories and fantasies as from any mortal threat out there in the world. Even when his friends come on his show, as they often do, they are safely at the other end of a phone line, with Frank listening silently to their woes. His performances at Steppenwolf have all involved him sitting absolutely still at a

small desk in a warm pool of light center stage, thumbing his way through a thick stack of index cards that constitute his idiosyncratic, nearly hallucinatory, stream-of-consciousness monologues, while a combination of live and recorded music provides a low, driving backup score. These are essentially live versions of his radio monologues, which make up one distinct vein of his work; his program also encompasses radio drama, found sound, and quasi-documentary conversations.

Though over the radio, late at night, these monologues already evoke a dark and intricate imaginary landscape, they are made oddly stranger by his physical presence, which is unemphatic, nearly inert, even as his resonant gravel voice twists electrically in the air with the sense memory of a midnight drive at top speed down an abandoned expressway. The text seems to be reading him more than the other way around; he is just present enough to give voice to the language and to authenticate its liveness, but in contrast to the oldest saw of narrative art, what he is telling us supersedes what he is showing us every time.

The piece itself characteristically meditated on sex and death and their proximity to one another. Frank rehearsed the end of his relationship with Kate and its aftermath, a well-mined and painful period that he returns to regularly. The details of their troubled break up, in fact, were so fresh and immediate that when Frank revealed that all of this happened twenty years ago, it came as something of a surprise. While this only emphasized his obsession with his time with Kate, it slightly tempered my judgment about the affair he was having at the same time with a much younger woman, whose affections he was taking advantage of while keeping her at what he thought of as a safe emotional distance. More depressingly, though, his morbid preoccupation

with death, understandable for a man in his 70s, clearly began long before he neared old age.

Frank's equation of virility with vitality, his reliance on sex to frame the motivations and power dynamics of all human relationships, and his exaggerated fear of death are the familiar tropes of the modern male literary voice, post-Freud. It is easy to find fault with his self-aggrandizing neuroses and his detached descriptions of others, women especially, in pain. But Frank also tries to ensure that he is an anti-heroic figure, never emerging victorious and always ultimately preferring the report after the fact to taking action in the moment. Relating how Kate, in terrible distress, vandalized his house when he refused to speak to her after their break-up, how his philandering friend Jeff had to give himself penile injections to keep up with his sordid and athletic sex life, and how his cold and castrating mother humiliated him during his childhood, Frank milks these miseries for melancholy laughs, with more than a hint of misogyny. But he also interrogates himself, ultimately wondering why he has been dining out on these painful memories all these years for the amusement of others, finally concluding that he is ashamed of himself. In light of the rest of the show, this may smack of having his cake and eating it too, but rather than congratulating the audience for seeing the seriousness in what some might consider the frivolous pursuit of sex and self-involved fear of death, he concludes that his neurotic preoccupation with pleasure and loss is actually the trivial mire in which he has lost the last 20-odd years of his life, now nearly over for real.

Theater Oobleck, *Elevation: Baudelaire in a Box Episode 6*
Links Hall, March 5th

Not so many days later I found myself at the new Links Hall at Constellation for Episode Six of *Baudelaire in a Box*, Theater Oobleck's ongoing project to translate all 120 poems in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* to cantastoria pieces — spoken or, usually, sung versions of the poems accompanied by images on paper or fabric scrolling or flipping by. The theme of Episode Six was "Elevation," and Dave Buchen's multiple hand-painted scrolls, moving drowsily in tandem in the various windows of his enormous purpose-built wooden frame, rose grimly upward. The often dour and worn figures, physically and emotionally isolated, tumbled and floated through blank space, in a lost and lonely vision of elevation, drug induced, delusional, far from life on the ground. These weightless pictographic thought bubbles lyrically, sometimes wittily, distilled the poems' images, marrying word to picture and finding, in meandering and continuous motion, a visual corollary for song.

The poems have been adapted to song by Adelind Horan, Kate Douglas, Amalea Tshilds, and Amy Warren (whose compositions were sung in the Links Hall shows by Nora O'Connor.) The work of these four songwriters was uniformly strong, and aesthetically consistent. Previous episodes of *Baudelaire in a Box*, all of which have involved Buchen's paintings and most of which have featured the songwriting of the project's co-founder Chris Schoen, sometimes with guest musicians and other songwriters joining in, have played something like mini-concerts or an evening of cabaret, with a diverse, mosaic quality. The musicians in this episode, though, thanks to Amy Warren's

curation and some well-rehearsed blending of voices, integrated their compositions in performance into a continuous whole that made for a unique evening of chamber musical theatre. Earnest, intimate, and gentle, even where dark and regretful, this was an all too rare example of theatrical "right sizing" in which the particular qualities of the performance relied upon its limited scale. Were it to be transplanted to a larger context, its most endearing charms might dissipate. *Elevation* was perfect right where it was.

Elevator Repair Service (ERS), *Arguendo*
Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago, March 14th

An example of scale taken to another extreme was the big road show on my March calendar — *Arguendo*, by the New York company Elevator Repair Service. The work restages recordings of the oral arguments in a Supreme Court case that considered first amendment protections for nude dancing. In an exaggerated, *trompe l'oeil* courtroom projected two stories tall across the upstage wall, the original arguments were replayed verbatim by actors who shifted their identities between key players, relying on studied gestural shorthand to differentiate their deft character changes. Behind them, both figuratively and literally, the entire body of Supreme Court case law zoomed by on the back wall projections, overwhelming in both physical size and sheer volume.

As a legal precedent would be referenced in argument, the onscreen text raced through years of rulings to zoom in on the relevant passage. The courtroom exchange relied on years of decisions being equally available to all the participants at a moment's notice in order for them to even talk to each other —

the validity of their points and counterpoints supported by the taut net of past legal arguments, without which their exchange could not remain coherent. It is not reason, ERS's staging suggests, but shared context that makes the court's power possible.

Against this background of the court's deeply intertextual understanding, and quite remote from its native sphere of language, the nature of dance was at issue in the case. In particular, the court was tasked with determining the degree to which dance is innately expressive. The argument endeavored to equate expression with meaning or message, and wrestled with what a somatic form like dance could possibly be "saying." This proved especially difficult in trying to distinguish the expressive possibilities of one form of dance from another (what is usually called "concert dance" from what is euphemistically referred to as "exotic dance,") or to quantify the meaning contained in a very small costume (pasties and g-string, that is).

The justices and the lawyers ended up asking some of the same questions that the postmodern avant-garde has been exploring for decades, about the limits of dance as a category and the necessity for art to contain a discernible and exportable message in order to justify its existence. Just like arts connoisseurs, the lawyers and justices are experts in a certain discourse around expression, but despite their expertise in one very powerful sphere, they had to fall back on simplistic generalities about categories of art and performance in order to shape their argument. It was precisely the absence of experiential knowledge that made their discussion of meaning and message in dance available to ERS director John Collins's ironic treatment. Far from excavating the ideology of performance, they were ultimately arguing, as the Latin legal term of the title suggests, "for the sake of argument." In some

ways this is not so far from how they might characterize what a dancer does — dancing for the sake of dance.

In formal discourse, whether legal or aesthetic, one can only see as far as the rhetorical frame, beyond which meaning collapses, as it eventually did here. The argument became almost purely formal, and the representation of the court proceedings a kind of high modernist experiment in legal language, with the actors of Elevator Repair Service memorizing every stutter and stumble with dancerly precision, taking the oral argument as irreducible found choreography rather than logical discourse that could be summarized or glossed. Hardly passive, though, in their presentation of this found material, ERS intervened with purely theatrical strategies, kinetic, visual, somatic, and sonic disruptions that ran parallel to, then overwhelmed, the language of the original argument. Within the fictional parameters of *Arguendo*, the terms of the real Supreme Court oral argument shifted from a legal to a dance vocabulary. Rather than continuing to discuss the expressive qualities of dance, the actors eventually turned to dance in place of argument, and instead of interrogating the meaning of nudity, one of the actors finally just took off all of his clothes.

Even as the studied reenactment gave way to the embodied spectacle of chaotic movement and extra-linguistic noise, ERS found a somewhat more hopeful symmetry in a coda sourced from outside the Supreme Court proper. In a moment borrowed from a TV documentary about the court, Susie Sokol as Ruth Bader Ginsburg related a story about how she and Sandra Day O'Connor chose to costume themselves with lace collars on their robes, and how Chief Justice William Rehnquist (Vin Knight) responded by putting military stripes on the sleeves of his own robes, a theatrical citation from Gilbert and Sullivan. Though the logic of irreducible

visual and performed experience may be beyond the reach of the courts' oral arguments, it is not beyond the innate understanding of the justices themselves.

Curious Theatre Branch, *60 Story Animal & Go*
Links Hall, March 22nd

Back at Links Hall, the Curious Theatre Branch put on its own program of borrowed texts. Though Curious is generally dedicated to original productions of new material by members of its ensemble, the double bill of *60 Story Animal* and *Go* amounted to an experiment in what would be considered standard operating procedure for other theatre companies — revival and repertoire. Perhaps no playwright is more closely aligned with Curious's house style than Samuel Beckett, whose influence is palpable in the work of Curious's founding playwrights, Beau O'Reilly and Jenny Magnus. Both artists employ versions of Beckett's spare, circular language games, his grim embrace of absurdity, and his deployment of vaudeville format for more philosophical and aesthetically complex purposes. This influence has been solidified by occasional Curious productions of Beckett's plays themselves, including an all-Beckett season a few years back.

Here, O'Reilly and Judith Harding staged three short, lesser-known Beckett works, two from the last decade of his life. Aging seemed to be on the table, all three pieces addressed the ravages of time in one way or another, and the production itself may obliquely mark a personal milestone for O'Reilly. He has been doing "Story Animal" performances for a few years now, usually preceded by a number tallying himself and the number of guests he

invites to perform their own work along with him. But here *60* seemed to reference O'Reilly's current age, as well as the impressive pile-up of work he has produced in his decades as a playwright and storyteller, perhaps. O'Reilly himself, and not the show, may be the "60 Story Animal," in more ways than one.

Though O'Reilly and Harding collaborated on these stagings, with Magnus providing the integral sound design, Harding was ultimately the star of the show onstage. O'Reilly only appeared in the middle piece, Beckett's 1960 play "The Old Tune," an adaptation of French playwright Robert Pinget's "La Manivelle," set in Dublin. In it, two old friends, in Beckett's familiar bowler hats, meet and argue over the past. Hopelessly separated from one another by the gulf between their distorted memories, they are also frightened and disoriented by the encroachment of modernity, which literally threatens to drown them out. Hardly the quaint and nostalgic archetypes they appear at first to be, they are caught between an irretrievable past and an indecipherable future.

Harding appeared alone in the other two pieces, which both depict a lone figure seemingly nearing the end of life. "What Is the Word" was one of the last things Beckett wrote, originally as a poem for the theatre director Joseph Chaikin, who was suffering from stroke-induced aphasia. Here Harding, standing awkwardly crooked in the middle of an empty room, grasped physically in the air for a missing word, swatting at the language, just out of her reach. In "Rockaby" she was even further gone, crumpled in a rocking chair, able to do nothing but cry out for "more" as a recording of her own voice, perhaps her own still-active mind, recited a repetitive litany detailing the excruciating process of slowly letting go of hope for connection with another and,

eventually, of the will to live. The piece, numbing in its monotone repetition, became a simulacrum of what slipping into oblivion might be like. Time dilated as everything grew dimmer, smaller, and Harding shrank imperceptibly lower in her chair until it was finally all over in an anti-climatic instant, just one more slight slip downward, and the chair stopped rocking.

The second half of *60 Story Animal's* bill was taken up by Kelly Ann Corcoran's *Go*, directed by Jen Moniz. Corcoran performed monologues by other regulars of Curious's annual Rhinoceros Theater Festival. These included O'Reilly himself, along with Barrie Cole and Diana Slickman. As in her performance of Magnus's one woman show *Room* during Rhinofest this February, Corcoran was able to translate these dark and strange, even surreal, works to her effervescent Midwestern disposition and to give them the sheen of an accomplished regional theatre actor. This shifts the texture of the works from their idiosyncratic dramatic styles and conceptual audacity to the emotional reality of the characters speaking the monologues, even when that character is describing an encounter with a mythological figure on the El train, as in Slickman's "Medusa." Despite her skillful handling of others' words, Corcoran's own autobiographical monologue "Finish," about her father's remarkable life and what he was unable to complete or leave to her after his death, stood out as a work in need of an evening of its own, dedicated to the voice of its first-person author.

Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality (ATOM-r), *The Operature*

The National Museum of Health & Medicine, March 29th

The month ended at the National Museum of Health and Medicine where ATOM-r, Mark Jeffery's and Judd Morrissey's ongoing multimedia collaboration with dance-theatre artists including Justin Deschamps, Sam Hertz, Christopher Knowlton, Blake Russell, and Kevin Stanton, presented the Chicago premiere of *The Operature*. A multimedia meditation on looking, openings, and systems of knowing, *The Operature* encompassed a multimedia installation and a durational performance. The work used the environment, an old social hall, to approximate an operating theatre, with the performers' bodies on literal display. In the evening's most enfleshed interlude, the audience descended on the stripped and splayed, inert bodies of the performers to scan their tattoos using a smart phone app that unlocked an augmented reality interface in the seemingly empty space between bodies.

Like any emerging technology incorporated into performance, this seemed as much about imagining possibilities as about staging an integral encounter, but for me the interaction emphasized embodied reality as much as the augmented kind. Before joining in, I watched from above as the audience swarmed the passive and exposed performers, lying on the floor and draped across tables, to wave electronic gadgets at buttocks and flanks. The spectacle seemed simultaneously a dehumanizing feeding frenzy that enacted a kind of subtle physical threat toward individuals in vulnerable positions, and a deeply human display of interest and engagement in physical presence after the bloodless, deliberate procedural formality of the performance's first half.

On screens overhead and embedded in Bryan Saner's beautifully designed set pieces, electronic text shifted around an inviolable aperture as Morrissey read what he could capture of the changing phrases aloud. These interrupting openings appeared everywhere, private windows in the downstairs installation revealed images of exposed, compromised flesh, disease and rot breaching corporeal continuity to open the body beneath. Both barrier and break, holes disrupted the coherence of every apparent whole, revealing a depth beneath the surface. The enormous tables and other set pieces locked together to confine performers in tight gaps, trapping them while providing a way in and through these formidable obstacles.

Locking together with the show's obscure opening procedures to make a voluminous and coherent whole, the second half of the performance began to make clear one of the work's main sources, the meticulous diaries of Sam Stewart, a university professor who became a tattoo artist and author of erotic novels. Stewart kept detailed and complexly coded records of his sexual encounters in Chicago during the 1950s in what he called a "stud file" chronicling the physical attributes and sexual performance of each of his many conquests. Much as Stewart recorded his messy, personal, passionate encounters with scientific precision, *The Operature* gazed on the surfaces of its texts and bodies with cool detachment, in search of a way through. Whenever an opening was breached, another environment became available through a distinct point of entry, each deepened what was there and welcomed the spectator to probe and penetrate a new portal, even as with each rupture something was also displaced.

Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, *33 rpm and a few seconds*
Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago, April 12th

Though that concluded March, one performance in April thus far so clearly connected with the odd materiality and parallel lives of language in the performances I have described above, that it seems worth mentioning. *33 rpm and a few seconds*, by Lebanese artists Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, used the very public suicide of a young artist and activist in Beirut to create a fictionalized portrayal of the media landscape within which his death resounded. There was no embodied presence in this work, only the remnants of papers, books, and communication technologies left piled on and around the desk of his apartment, which continued to whirl and sound long after his death. It was through these artificial extensions of his life that Mroué and Saneh staged their work. The screen of his still-active laptop was projected onto an enormous onstage screen, creating a shared textual space like the shifting language of *The Operature* or the case law of *Arguendo*, the only sphere in which the deceased young man's presence persisted. With friends and admirers continuing to post on his Facebook page and call his phone, and the news covering his death as a public event, he was portrayed entirely through his media traces.

Performances of direct-address talk often occur from behind a desk, facing an audience. The arrangement of the environment in *33 rpm*, with the desk centered onstage, suggested this form, which often overlaps with both the intimately confessional and public spheres. But here this shared space existed not in the theatre but through and within ubiquitous communication technologies. The absence of a speaking performer, usually the minimal requirement for such a

performance, made the possibility, perhaps the inevitability, of constructing a public self apart from the private under these conditions clear. Without evidence of Diyaa Yamout himself, most particularly the frequently referenced but never seen video of his suicide, he became nothing more than an emergent effect of intersecting media trajectories.

In the disembodied space of Facebook and text messages, I tended to be skeptical about the information I was receiving. I am relatively ignorant about daily life in Lebanon, but I wondered if I should trust the sincerity of his parents who tried to de-politicize his suicide, or of the official academic commentator who called Yamout and his admirers deluded and dangerous on the news. How about the professions of faith lamenting the arrogance of his decision on his Facebook page? Or should I understand these public self-representations at least partly in terms of political expediency? If so, the virtual may be a much preferable place to locate the public sphere in a political climate that requires equivocation in everyday life.

Mroué and Saneh seemed to be pointing to the danger and possibility of a virtual public sphere in this regard. Such a phenomenon depends in part on the ubiquity of media technologies. Facebook's immediacy has stopped seeming intrusive and has instead become merely atmospheric, a silent, pervasive, disembodied public space we all now share. While the formerly ubiquitous older communications technologies onstage — the record player, the TV, the answering machine — felt lyrical, nostalgic, rendered quaint by their physical and technological limitations, their ostentatious sonic and spatial presence, indexing very different, disappearing configurations of the public sphere.

Baudelaire in a Box: Elevation

Reviewed by Carine Loewi

You'll find that our esteemed writer friend Mr. Murfin includes Theater Oobleck's recent entry in their *Baudelaire in a Box* series in his March events writeup, just prior in this issue; co-editor Carine Loewi also attended one of the Baudelaire scroll-and-song performances, and wishes to contribute the following comments to the conversation.

I went to see Theater Oobleck's latest installment of *Baudelaire in a Box* at Links Hall recently, and brought along my brother, Franc, who was visiting from Bern. Maybe you've been to one of these Baudelaire shows before; I think this is the sixth piece. They're the brainchild of Dave Buchen, who stands behind a large and gorgeous cantastoria contraption and turns a series of cranks, seemingly by memory, to make painted scenes sail by on butcher paper, while featured artists perform musicalized renditions of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* poems, in new translations by Chris Schoen. What a cool thing, you might say, and you'd be right.

But you know, it's funny: people see different things. I know this. As we buckled up in the car after the show, just when I was about to turn to Franc and open the comments with "My god, weren't those paintings just distractingly bad?," my brother turned to face me and said, "The paintings were my favorite part!" So I tamped down that thought a little. (Though speaking as the particular person I am, I stand by the thought: the painted faces, and they were mostly faces, often looked pained, strangely proportioned, and just unsettlingly off; my eyes kept drifting

toward their oddity even as I tried to focus on the musicians. But, okay, what do I know from scroll paintings?)

Say something nice, Carine, I can hear our mother saying. And in truth there's plenty of nice to say about Oobleck's Baudelaire series, and this evening among them. I might mention the four uniformly poised and winning brown-haired ladies — Adelind Horan, Kate Douglas, Amalea Tshilds, and Nora O'Connor — seated with or under a bevy of instruments and sound machines, singing the Baudelaire songs they had arranged (with the exception of O'Connor singing songs made by Amy Warren, who was not able to attend); the very tall Buchen, standing atop a stool and wheeling images along on his impressive machine with apparent ease (a performance event in itself); or the wry, melancholy songs wrought by four gifted songwriters. And the chance to hear those poems — florid, grave, distinctly of a gone-away time — sung into the ears of a full room was, as ever, a rare treat.

I mostly didn't follow along with the poem-texts printed in the program, but when I did, I noticed that the formulations didn't quite match up with what I was hearing. The sung lyrics were new Oobleck translations (are they by Chris Schoen? This has always been my impression, but the program is noncommittal), and the printed ones a slightly fustier, scholarly version by William Aggeler; the performed lyrics, necessarily more modern by dint of having been translated in the last five years and not the last fifty, also flowed much more readily by the standards of colloquial speech. More lived-in, less classically dramatic, more fluid and relaxed. They were charming and personable, yet still quite lush. So that was interesting, to observe that difference, though I found myself wishing they'd've printed the Schoen lyrics on the program

instead so I'd've been able to return to them later. Perhaps we can look forward to a special-edition Oobleck chapbook of the *Fleurs du mal* someday? One can hope.

And the space of the performance. A cozy clutch of piano and chairs within the big front room of the new(-ish) Links Hall venue, the big cantastoria machine at audience left marking out the bounds of the Baudelaire universe, with Buchen standing behind it or loping about the room before the show began; red and magenta lights fixed low on the side walls tinted the whole place in a rosy bordello glow. But I had this thought that I've had at several shows at Links recently, and I haven't quite resolved it: it's hard to do intimacy in that space. It's a large room, and that's a nice thing, but one wants to feel embraced by a scene sometimes, and not adrift.

(What keeps coming into my mind, if you'll grant me the digression, is a brief passage in Jenny Magnus' group-performance piece *Still in Play*, which I've been revisiting following the recent release of Magnus' book. It's one of those "The Place We Are in Right Now" sections, describing the space of the performance, and I realize on looking it up now that it refers to the Museum of Contemporary Art stage and not the Links, which would've been the *old* Links anyway, but fuck it, I'm thinking here. Magnus writes of the stage's massive back wall: "It's got its legs open, that wall, and is demanding to be artistically fucked." Which is how I've been feeling about that Links Hall space lately: it's a big, airy affair, good for dancers to flit across, nice-looking when the grey-yellow sunshine splashes in through the high windows, but hard to fill with smaller-scale song and story without the performers seeming dwarfed by a white vacuum. It wants something, that room. I truly think it's worth a try, to make a piece that uses the

room's dimension intentionally, rather than just plunking a pre-fab work into it. Somebody give that space what for, all right? Doesn't have to be you, Oobleck, but somebody. End digression.)

The songs were pretty lovely. To me, many came off as haunted bluegrassy things, sometimes gin-jumpy and sometimes ruminative. Stuff about body parts, inanimate-object soliloquies, weather conditions and spiritual conditions, missed encounters and a woman's heart, torn like a peach's murdered flesh. And sometimes the women onstage even sang harmonies together — mostly in very pretty, well-trod sopranos, but with some lower range creeping in around the fringes. Tshilds was particularly impressive when she canted forward in her seat to control a magic electronic box in her lap — its identity is beyond me — from which issued, amazingly to musical idiots such as myself, pre-recorded harmonic accompaniments and a few rich, medieval-sounding lulls. One of the Amy Warren compositions, on the poem *Le Squelette laboureur*, delighted me especially and is, according to my notes, a “swinging number about flaying.”

So there is, in this Theater Oobleck and this Charles Baudelaire and this Links Hall, much to delight in, and much to wonder over as well. Can I wonder over one more thing, while we're here? Didn't it seem like the Buchen illustrations this time were... different? Don't worry, I'm not going to malign them again. I mean that they seemed to be sampled from other milieux — famous photo faces of the Dust Bowl, LIFE magazine covers, a Miyazake still frame mixed in there somewhere? I was interested in that, and wondered if it meant something in relation to this set of poems, or was only a formal experiment on Buchen's part. Or if it was just my imagination. Which is always possible. But a show

that makes one's imagination run riot in forward and backward directions with multiple media, from very old to very new, is a grand thing to go to, isn't it?

The Deer

Reviewed by Beneven Stanciano

In storytelling, a dove is never just a dove. A crow is never just a crow. They're not randomly lingering in the background to provide local color. If they happen to talk, it's doubtful that they would merely provide pragmatic exposition. A dove flies by when armies throw down their gauntlets and hug each other. A crow flies by followed by dark clouds that pour acid rain that ravages the land into apocalypse. In storytelling, animals are not just *there*; they *mean* something. And when an animal *talks*, you bet it means something. Even the term *personification* is grouped with its figurative language compatriots *metaphor* and *simile* in college Intro to Lit classes. If an animal talks, it's often to accentuate an animal-like quality in human beings that people may take for granted. It's not always the most subtle way to convey an idea, but it's generally effective. In live theater, a talking animal will almost always ostensibly be played by a talking human (puppets aside). A super-realist portrayal is next to impossible, so it's a golden opportunity for the actor and director take a broad step away from the kitchen sink and into the alien world of *Verfremdungseffekt*.

The Deer in Brooke Allen's *The Deer* is not the "deer of our hearts" or the "deer of our souls" or a small porcelain statue made from "the stuff that dreams are made of." The deer is actually a deer, represented a young man with soft, delicate features in a hooded sweatshirt. The audience first hears from him as he is pinned to the back of the stage next to Clara (Julie Cowden), the woman who hits him with her car. As the titular talking mammal, Mike Tepeli's wide eyes, gaping mouth, and nymph-like voice make him seem like a frightened and confused child. Though he

resembles someone you might see walking around Wicker Park, Tepeli gives a performance that exudes the pure gentleness and innocence of a faun drinking from a pool of water; the kind that would drive even Ted Nugent away from hunting. It's peculiar yet subtle; affected yet natural.

However, perhaps putting too much emphasis on this character, titular or not, is misleading. Beyond this first scene, "the Deer" is regulated to intermittent tableaux that figuratively comment on the *real* story of the play. Despite a history degree that leads to a bartending career, Clara becomes concerned when her much younger brother Russ (Bryan Bosque) decides to drop out of community college to learn about and experience the world "out West." She is so concerned, in fact, that she even goes to visit his Intro to Lit instructor John Forrester (the reliably excellent Joshua Davis) in a plea for her brother's passing grade, which in only a few exchanges leads to having a drink at a bar, and within a few scenes leads to a full-on relationship. Meanwhile, Russ begins his journey away from the simple life, ironically inspired by this very lit teacher.

While Tepeli's performance is certainly engaging and his dialogue is surprisingly organic, the titular deer unfortunately feels more like a device than a character. He fittingly steps into Clara's metaphysical space to tell a story about pushing away an affectionate doe who tries to eat his berries right after she pushes away the affectionate John. Get it? The parallels make sense, but they are not too far off from the vastly transparent symbol of a scurrying rat at the end of *The Departed* (which Ralph Wiggum in a *Simpsons* parody claims "symbolizes obviousness"). Allen wastes a potentially fascinating character by having him comment on the action rather than really partaking in it. How could this deer have

influenced the relationship between these characters if he were actually part of their story? No one will ever know. Allen makes a similar mistake with two peripheral, eccentric female characters, played by Echaka Agba and Cheryl Snodgrass. Both yield exuberant and winning performances from the two fine actresses, and have some of the play's best dialogue. However, they never seem to provide anything else but more flavor, and almost feel like they are characters in a different (and potentially more interesting) play altogether.

With all the over-long plays that grace the Chicago fringe circuits, *The Deer* has the rare distinction of being too short. In a brisk 70 minutes, relationships between characters seem rushed and inchoate. For instance, Russ is presented as a troubled youth, yet his rebellious nature seems to extend to dropping out of college, tagging a few buildings, and making snarky comments about his mom's dinner party. Clara and John barely have enough time to establish any chemistry to earn any of the tension between them later on. Also, the criminally underused Tepeli, Agba, and Snodgrass judiciously run on and off stage as if they were double parked outside. As a result, the scenes don't have enough room to breathe and the audience doesn't have enough time to think.

Still, Allen's flair for whimsy is ultimately her strongest suit. Russ and Clara's discussion comparing socks to pie is quite charming, and establishes their bond, which is crucial for the rest of the play. Agba's approximation that the "Blues" is more of the "Yellows" definitely creates an interesting image in one's mind. When asked why he ran in the middle of the road, the Deer's response of "Because. . . what's a road?" is one of those so simple yet so revealing lines; those who don't know much about the world end up getting hurt by it. It's easier to get away with selling

language like this in the theater than it is in, say, film or television, so the moments when it really pops are very special. The underlying earnestness that dominates so much of the play makes those moments more refreshing, but why can't this energy carry through from start to finish? The able cast fills in the blanks when they can. Cowden and Davis, for instance, are so natural they don't even really seem like they're acting. However, the genuinely entertaining moments of levity seem to come at the expense of the story.

The Ruckus may be one of the most interesting non-Equity troupes in the city, and excel in finding that crucial balance between the sublime and the genuine. For all of its strengths, *The Deer* never quite finds that balance. A misty stage covered in snow starts the show, and pretty much remains the same. Its role, like everybody else's, does not evolve. This results in constant consideration in what might have been; a show that allows its audience to strap in and take the journey, too. A show where talking animals are allowed to be more than just talking symbols. With all the tedium and excess that are rampant in so much bad theater, *The Deer's* biggest problem is that there is not more of it, which is not the worst problem to have.

Edmund & Carine Go to the Theater

For this installment of our after-the-show conversation feature, our intrepid viewers Edmund St. Bury and Carine Loewi attended a performance of *Assistance* by Leslye Headland, staged by LiveWire Chicago Theatre at the Chicago Cultural Center's Storefront Theater, and discussed their findings for the length of the train ride home. Brown-line conductor announcements and bystander commentary have been redacted from the transcript.

Edmund: So my first big question, before we get into the beginning of the play or anything else, is about the end of the play — or the *ends*. It felt like it just kept ending and ending and ending. Why was that happening?

Carine: I thought that final ending was very strange. It was my favorite part, but I thought, what? That was the actual end?

Edmund: And there was the ending before that, that kiss between the two main characters, on the far side of the stage; and the one before that, where it seemed like Nick (Brian Crawford) was getting fired... It just seemed like it kept reaching these conclusions and then adding more on.

Carine: Yes. As if it didn't know where to land. The whole thing, to me, had a very sitcommy tone. And I don't mean that entirely as an insult, though it can be an insult, and it's not my favorite thing. But the play was doing that vibe, and then we come to the

big kiss ending, and I thought, okay, here's your sitcom ending, there you go. And then it just did some more stuff!

One thing I'm still thinking about — that makes sense to me in an ending — is that toward the end of the play, we come around to the character Justin (Matthew Nerber), who we've only heard talked about so far, and haven't seen, and he's sitting up there on the upper level talking on the phone. And I wondered, "Wait, did that guy from the beginning shave his beard? What's he doing up there? Why is he back?"

Edmund: I thought exactly the same thing!

Carine: So it seems to come full circle, even though they're not the same character. It's this different guy, but he looks exactly like the first guy, and they've ended up in this job purgatory together. This guy, that guy; there they are. No exit.

Edmund: That was pretty remarkable, really, that they pulled that off. Because I actually thought it was the same actor, until the curtain call. And it's not easy for me to be fooled about a transition like that.

Carine: Well, the beard. I thought, does he shave the beard every time? And grow it in the next week? Don't they do several performances a week? How would that work? That would be some fierce bodily dedication to the play, if that were the thing.

Edmund: I thought it was a fake beard, maybe. I was willing to believe that, but then I felt like a fool at the curtain call, because the one actor was quite a bit taller, it clearly wasn't the same guy...

Carine: Anyway, that was a shrewd casting move. And this is neither here nor there, but did you ever watch that show *The IT Crowd*? The one guy, Nick, who was stuck there forever in the job, had a similar feeling to the Irish guy on that show. The trapped-in-the-office feeling of it was strong.

Edmund: It says that this is one in a series of works by this playwright, based on the seven deadly sins. Which one was this?

Carine: Well, there's a thing to talk about. Wasn't it greed? So I kept making notes as it went along, thinking, whose greed are we talking about? The asshole boss guy who we never see, but who is obscenely rich and abusive to his staff? Or these intern kids? Because Justin was saying at the end, "I'm gonna be big, this guy is huge, you just wait." Is that the kind of greed we're reflecting on? The avarice for accomplishment and bigness, or the ugly and mean bigness itself? I don't know.

Edmund: They all had that ambition — that "everything is acceptable as long as it serves my ambition" thing. And ambition is a form of greed, isn't it, really? The "I've got to get some more" motivation?

Carine: I guess. But it seemed like these people had so few of the perks of success or wealth that to call it greed on their part is kind of putting down the downtrodden group here, you know? The lower, working people. I felt a little weird about that. The only person who was very explicit about what we might call the greed on the workers' part was Justin, in that monologue at the end. With everybody else, I just got the sense that they had this entry-

level job, and they were stuck there without much hope of advancement, and this was just their job. I didn't think they really worked on the same ambition — even though the woman, Nora (Lauren Fisher), talked about reading the microfiches and doing research about her boss before coming to work there... The motivation felt a little more idealistic, to me, in all the other characters. I am disinclined to think of it as greedy.

Edmund: I liked very much that the boss character, David, never appeared, so you were left to see him through the assistants' conversations around him, their versions of him. And the fear that he could generate. I really liked, at the beginning, in the first three or four scenes, when the phone conversations with him would shift — from the good-humored joking to some real meanness, real shaming, and it would put this pallor on the character who was receiving it. It was Nick, in one of those early scenes, and that was maybe the first serious moment of the play, seeing that change happen in his mien. That actor was quite good, I thought.

Carine: I was thinking, during one of those scenes — maybe it was with Nora — about the thing that happens when you're on the phone, and you're having an unpleasant conversation... I was thinking about where they were looking, in those scenes. Because on the phone, you obviously can't see the person you're talking to, or being berated by, but your eyes have to go somewhere, unless you just close them, which I don't do. And where your eyes go can affect your feeling about the conversation. I have found that to be true for myself. So, tracking where Nora's gaze fell in that moment, I realized that she was looking right at our feet, the audience's feet. And then the set design seemed ingenious — that

they were recessed into the floor, about at the level of a shoe-shine man. They were always below, and stuck down there.

Edmund: That's very interesting. Speaking of that set, I also liked the two scenes in which the action came up to the first level, where we were. Nick had a little scene there, and then later, at the end, the British lady, Jenny (Hilary Williams), had that long cuss-out scene there. I enjoyed those moments, how present they were and very much in our face. But still, the fourth wall was always present in this play for me, in a good way. Even though it was very intimate and close and you could've touched the actors in those parts, there was still a feeling of separation. Even when the woman playing Jenny cracked a line right toward someone in the audience, it was still there—

Carine: I did think it broke there, the fourth wall. I was a little confused by that, though I found it funny. But everything else, yeah.

Edmund: I wondered if that wasn't an actor decision, rather than a writer decision. And then I wasn't so sure about the other staging decision — although I enjoyed the effort of it — of putting those two speeches by secondary characters up high, on the walkway. The speech where Heather (Krista D'Agostino) is talking on the phone to her mother, after she's lost her job; and then Justin's speech on the phone with his therapist, toward the end. In both of those cases, I felt that they were the most emotional speeches in the whole piece, and yet they were physically the furthest away from us. So I thought that was an odd decision for the director.

Carine: I think I was just glad to be looking somewhere else, and to have the different light and feeling up there. All the tense scenes down in the office-pit got to be a little excruciating after a while, so to look up and breathe and see something happening out “on the streets,” on the catwalk, just anywhere else — that was refreshing to me.

But I'd agree on one level, that I don't know about that as a decision for the play. When we depart from the first guy — the bearded guy, Vince (John Taflan) — at the beginning, he's in his new office, and it's over in one corner of the audience level, on our left. Why couldn't the later Justin scene have played there? It would've made sense, too, with the bookend-like nature of those scenes, with the guys looking so similar.

Edmund: The play had a very odd shape, to me. I liked much about it: I liked the way the dialogue drove the scenes, I liked that it had a cyclical quality to it, that patterns and power dynamics were repeated through different characters. I liked that it shifted the main characters throughout the play, although Nick was probably the real main character. But I thought some decisions were odd. For example, I don't know why we stayed with the bearded Vince after he left for the new job — and even then, only for one brief scene. I don't know what that did for the rest of the story. He had that one speech, which was a pretty scenery-chewy kind of scene, with the sex on the phone with his girlfriend, or whoever that was. I didn't know why that scene was there. I didn't know why that last scene with Jenny was there either, even though I really enjoyed it. I didn't know what it did in terms of the arc of the characters, except that it was a final sort of triumph, one of the workers getting to bust it out. I guess.

Carine: I guess. And yet... that scene was “not real,” right? All the party poppers in the drawers, and the lights shifting, the dreamlike discontinuity of scene — now it’s a nightclub, now it’s the office. That seemed like a fantasy, a sequence of revenge and escape from caring, and yet it’s the final note of the play. So where does that leave us for the character arcs? They’ve left purgatory and now they’re... in... heaven...? I don’t know. But that performer I found especially fun to watch; I was glad whenever she was onstage. She had panache. But then again, it’s a pretty fun role, not quite as fully and realistically shaped as the main two.

Edmund: I enjoyed the performances throughout. And often — I’m going to regret saying this, and wish I could say it in a different way — those types of performances grate on me. They’re too theatrical — or, too college-theatrical, too trained-theatrical. But here, I thought that they were not only good performances, but really right for this play. It felt like a slacker-generation of workers, and these guys knew that; they understood how to play that. And maybe they don’t just naturally fall into that, I don’t know, but they knew how to find that in performance, and whoever directed it knew how to find it. I liked the sort of clubby, we’re-all-in-the-same-gang feeling that they had, but often I hate that.

Carine: I found that very annoying. The in-jokeyness, the “let’s make a lot of internet-joke references” thing. That feels very quickly dated to me. I don’t know, but I assume the play is pretty recent—

Edmund: It’s about five years old.

Carine: Huh. It makes me wonder if there’s an instruction in the script, something like “insert up-to-date internet meme reference in this joke.” Because when you make these silly topical references, it necessitates an act of translation, if you want anybody to care or get it in ten years. These things age fast.

Edmund: But the thing I liked about it is that it was annoying. That sort of internal office life takes on a very false reality — we all work together, or we all drink at the same bar, or we all golf at the same club, whatever. Something the same that throws us together, and naturally we might not be together at all, but there’s a sort of chumminess that comes from that constant togetherness. And there was a lot of in-joking in the language, a lot of in-joking in the gestures. The major in-joke was a rather dour one: here’s the boss, who has all this power over us, that we all worship, and we know we will never get out from underneath him, and isn’t that funny, because we already know it? We’re in on the joke of that. So that, when people really wanted to get out, there was a desperation in that, and a mutual understanding of the desperation. I think that really played to the tone of the office.

But there are definitely odd things about the shape of it, and I wonder about those things from Headland as a writer. Where those things are coming from.

Carine: Right, the structure. I could almost sense what she wanted out of that last scene. The manic energy, the “is it real?,” the everything-coming-unraveled. And I think she wanted us to understand it not as a psychotic break for the character, but as the complete unraveling of the play’s reality. And it didn’t quite go

that far, for me. Or at least it seemed isolated to that one character; everybody else was still there. Or still not there.

Edmund: Well, maybe one of the consequences of sharing the lead character — and I'm not sure about this — was that some characters didn't have enough presence for the audience to care about their losses. I felt that Nora and Nick did. They were there the most, and I cared about what was happening to them — or I noticed it, I felt it, which is better than caring. Whereas I wasn't sure with the Jenny character that I knew her enough to buy the chaos of her revolt; the Justin character I didn't think I knew well enough to buy that strange speech of throwing himself at the guy's feet. And I felt similar about the Vince character, at the beginning. So for me, when I don't know a character well enough, my willful suspension of disbelief goes away. I don't know you well enough to really care about you, and you're asking me to go through a lot of stuff right now, is what it feels like. So that seems like a shorthand in the writing: "I think you'll get this, so I can skip some steps."

Carine: Which is kind of a sitcom-ish way of writing, no? Stock characters, stock emotions...

Edmund: Kind of. But in light of all this, I would be interested to know, with the other existing plays in this Deadly Sins series, if characters overlap; if there's a resonance across story lines, if you saw them all together. Never having seen the others, I don't know if any of that happens or not.

But maybe let's go backwards a little bit. When we first got there, and we walked in, we had to walk across the set to sit down — did that do anything for you? Thoughts?

Carine: It was a disorienting shape of a stage. You could see multiple ways of confusion as people entered. People had to make a decision about how to get to their seats. Was it okay to go this way, right through the stage? Which keeps the space alive, I think. A good tension, to experience and to watch.

I also liked the slow easing into the piece by having the characters in place, seemingly doing something onstage before the action began. Although an evolution to that is nice. I don't know: maybe if we'd gotten there a little earlier, we would've seen someone come out and make that pot of coffee that was sitting there the whole time? That kind of thing is nice, a progression, and not just a static "here I am, doing stuff" onstage presence beforehand. It gives a momentum whose natural outcome is the show starting. But it didn't quite do that, the easing into the play. There was a snap up of the lights, wasn't there? Oh, it was that ringing telephone that started it all. And then the intercom-voicemail announcement about turning our phones off. Which was funny. I like it when that stage-business speech gets integrated into a show.

Edmund: I went and saw a Side Project show about a month ago, in which everything was very realized on the set: the lights were just so, the magazines were arranged on the table just so, the cutlery was so; it was all very, very carefully done. And I tend not to gravitate toward work like that — I tend to gravitate toward work that's sparer. But I really enjoyed that design in that play, and I enjoyed it in this one, too. I thought, okay, they've made the world here, and it's pretty well inhabited, and they're going to really be in this world. I enjoyed that.

Carine: Yeah. I think a little bit of realism isn't going to kill you, sometimes. I don't always want compulsively literal decoration, but I thought the faithfulness worked here, because an office is such a particular-looking place. I've worked in offices, and the feeling, the look, the patois, the sound — it's all just so, across regions and industries, even. I thought that worked. And, too, the shifts and differences in their clothing, that piece of realism, that was deftly done. It seemed to me that Nora came in looking very formal, and then she went downhill in the formality — which is not to say she went downhill as a person, but that her attire became more and more casual. A skirt suit, then slacks, then sneakers. It seemed like Nick got more well-dressed as time progressed. Not quite all the way to formal, which wouldn't have been in keeping with his character, but a nod to formality, with the untucked shirt and the tie at the end. I thought that progression of dress in different directions was a good production detail.

There was something interesting also in that British character, Jenny, leaving the strange ending aside. Her comment on the whole situation of the play, and the attitudes of the other workers, felt important. Maybe that's why I found her arresting as a presence: she seemed to take an attitude that, how to say this, made me consider workplace-induced suicide a little bit less than the attitudes of the other workers did. The whole "it's only a job" thing. Which might just be an indication that she comes from a different class and doesn't "need" this job in the same way they do, but I don't know; we don't get much about her, do we? But I thought there was something canny in her being audibly "other" — having that loud, bubbly, very different accent. I don't know if that was the character, or the performer, or both. But that she

pricked the balloon of their whole attitude toward the job, I found that refreshing.

To be honest, and this is just me, I had trouble getting into the play at first, because it was so much that sitcommy, back-and-forth banter... And then I laughed when the characters were named Nick and Nora, because that would seem to be a nod to that same thing, in a different era. So I thought, okay, it's doing a thing here, a style. But it took a while for me to hear much more than clever chit-chat. I had to stick with it for a while. The actors were charming enough.

Edmund: Did it make it? Did it become more than banter to you?

Carine: I don't know. I don't know how deep it was really trying to be.

Edmund: I mean, there were suggestions of something very dark under parts of it, especially those moments of shaming on the phone. Pretty dark, actually. But I had a similar feeling of "I don't know what this is adding up to." I'm experiencing the shift, I'm enjoying the way they're doing the shift as actors, but in terms of the writing, I'm not sure what that's doing for me. And maybe I don't always have to know. But then again, this is not a brand-new play; this is a play that's done and worked on, and this is the way the writer is offering it to other companies to do. So there are decisions there, in that shape, which she's committed to. She's done the show and seen it and said, I want the shape this way, and these characters. So, I think that makes it fair game to judge it on that basis, too. This is your landing place, this is what you want it to be.

Carine: Yes. This is not a workshop; this is it.

Edmund: And then in terms of going to fringe theater in Chicago, I enjoyed seeing this young, different company, who for the most part I didn't know or have any connection to, whom I hadn't seen much of before. They had a freshness and an energy in their performance, which I enjoyed. They seemed to be genuinely enjoying it — it wasn't cynical. I enjoyed that.

Carine: I didn't think they were laughing at the characters. That's good. And that said, I may be a broken record but I'll say it again: it was another production full of thin, young, attractive, white people. Bears noting. But they did well.

Edmund: They were good at being thin, attractive, white people.

Carine: To return to the beginning: when we were entering, and were in that moment of confusion about how to get into the space, when we passed through the waiting room part, was that the Nora woman who was sitting there on the couch, with the magazine, who told us where to go?

Edmund: Yes. And that was the device in the play, that she had been sitting out there waiting for four hours. That was good, that integration of the real and the fabricated, using a theatrical device to help solve what might be seen a problem of the space, that confusion.

At about the middle of the piece, where as an audience member I always start longing for an intermission, it became obvious that we weren't going to get one. It seems to me like it's

implied in the play, not just because of the length of the piece, but considering the attention needed. My ability to focus started to go a little bit. I started thinking, I'm going to want to come back and see this again, in order to see the shift. But I reenergized, I was able to stay with it, and by the end I thought, okay, I've gotten everything I'm going to get out of this play; I don't need to see it again. And I have mixed feelings about that.

Carine: You know, I had my doubts. When we went in and they said it's an hour and forty minutes. I thought, oh god, why? But there's my prejudice: I get a little bored if I have to sit still for more than an hour. But I found that I didn't drop out of the play. I did eventually write the note "Where is this going?" But I wasn't tired — which is surprising (and that says more about me than about the play). And I wasn't bored. I just wanted to know what all this was adding up to. So I thought the energetic flow of the piece worked well, such that I was able to stay in it for as long as it went.

Edmund: Yes. And I knew that my tiredness was about having spent a long day in meetings and talking at length about art already, and feeling mentally chewed-on; it wasn't them. But sometimes that's what the intermission is for: to restore the audience. Not because you're not doing a good job in the performance, but because audiences are coming from their work, or their lives, from long days, and it's helpful to have a pause and some movement. With this production, they probably had some time restriction with the space, because it's a city building. So it probably started early for that reason and had to run straight through.

And, speaking of the space, how nice to go see something in the Loop that didn't cost an arm and a leg.

Carine: Yes! What was it, fifteen dollars? Reasonable, very reasonable. How refreshing.



Interview: Some Questions for Some People

Questions for Jon Hain

Here we speak with Jon Hain, one of the curator-creators behind the Madison music label Uvulittle Records. Hain supports work by some of our favorite folk, rock, electronic and experimental artists, local and regional, and runs Uvulittle as a small business along careful standards, treating artists and collaborators with respect and consideration. He was kind enough to answer a few of our questions on art and work.

Chicago Arts Journal: We know and enjoy Uvulittle's releases of music by Jeff Kowalkowski, Maestro Subgum & the Whole, Jenny Magnus, MiLkBaBY, and guitarist Jim Schwall, among many others. As a company based in Madison, how do you come to produce work by so many Chicago artists?

Jon Hain: I met all these artists in Madison. Maestro Subgum and the Whole played at the Wil-Mar Center in 1993 and absolutely floored me. I got to know them over time, as my band at the time ended up opening for them at some of their Madison shows. Later they booked us into the Lunar Cabaret and I booked them and various members into my cafe in Madison, Mother Fool's. Bob Jacobson (Maestro trumpeter) formed Yid Vicious shortly after moving to Madison. This was Uvulittle's first full-length single band release. Maestro booked into Mother Fool's as a three-piece with Beau O'Reilly, Jenny Magnus and Jeff Kowalkowski. I think that's how I first met Jeff. His band, Jack the Dog (with Carrie Biolo) played Mother Fool's a number of times and that led to the

release of their concept album, *Missa Canibus*. I don't remember if I met Barry Bennett (MiLkBaBY) in Madison or Chicago, but I know he was playing a fair amount in Madison at the time, so it could have been either. Jim Schwall lives in Madison, so I think of him as a Madisonian. The Crooked Mouth has Beau and Jenny from Maestro... All of these artists have been important influences on me, and the great thing about running a tiny little label is it gives me a chance to work with people I love, releasing music that feels important to me.

CAJ: Can you tell us about Uvulittle's business model? We recognize it as similar to many fringe and small operations in publishing and theater, in which being self-sustaining is a high value, larger projects pay for smaller ones, and so on. How does this work for you?

JH: Yes, kind of like that. I tend to think of it as a “boom and bust” business model. The successful releases allow us to release stuff that absolutely doesn't need to be successful in terms of big sales to be “successes.” I focus on keeping expenses low so even low sellers have a good shot at paying for themselves. Ultimately, it is a labor of love. When I have made money I've always put it back into the business in order to finance more releases.

CAJ: In addition to producing, you record as a musician. How does your identity and practice as an artist influence the way you run a label?

JH: One of the side effects of being a performing musician is that you end up seeing lots and lots of other bands on the various bills

you end up on. I also book a small coffeehouse venue where I've seen hundreds of soloists and bands and listened to thousands of demos. Hearing all that music, plus the music I listen to recreationally, has given me a strong sense of what I do and don't like aesthetically — both in performance and production. Even though our catalog is fairly diverse, genre-wise, it makes sense to me because it does tend towards a certain sound and vibe.

CAJ: We hear you release an Uvulittle podcast. Does new media and technology play a big part in your marketing operation?

JH: I actually haven't made a new podcast for a couple of years, and the only excuse is that I've been busy. It is something I want to get back to though, because they are fun to put together and a nice way for people to discover our music. Social media has been helpful for us. We've had a harder and harder time getting traditional print and radio outlets to cover our releases, so things like Facebook, Last.fm, Youtube, et cetera have really helped get the word out. All of our releases are such small niches that it can make a noticeable difference in sales when even a handful of fans post a link to share with their networks.

CAJ: Are there any musicians you have not yet recorded or released whom you'd like to work with?

JH: I just engineered a recording session for Madison band Ladyscissors. Stephanie Rearick (Uvulittle artist and co-owner) is the drummer and one of the vocalists. They have a great sound — kind of lo-fi pop that reminds me of Velvet Underground. The session went great, and I hope it leads to an album — and that

they'd let me help them release it. There is also a huge treasure trove of live material from the same source that the Juicy Johns CD was drawn from. The sound quality is fantastic — listen to any of the tracks from Juicy Johns on our website to hear what I'm talking about. So, we are working (slowly but steadily) towards being able to make more of this material publicly available.

CAJ: What are you excited about lately? Any particular books, people, shows, abstract concepts that get the blood going this season?

JH: Personally, I've gotten really into photography, so I'm seeing the world a little differently. I hope to do more music videos. I was working on one for a Stephanie Rearick Jr. song and want to get back to that. I'm also excited to be living at a time that we are running off the cliff as a society. It adds a certain urgency to daily life that I appreciate. I think a lot about the role that artists play during times like this. The artists who made the huge portraits of kids to lay out in villages in Pakistan really inspire me. Now American drone operators have to look at images of children just like the ones they kill. It is the artists who highlight horrors like this and help us appreciate the beauty and love that is also present. I'm trying to sprout some heirloom white peach pits I got from someone in Iowa. I started the new Thomas Pynchon novel and was really loving it when I got sidetracked. I should have time in June to start again and plow through.

Questions for Ann Filmer

A longtime champion of Chicago's theater scene, Ann Filmer has directed new plays by writers including Brett Neveu, Sarah Ruhl, and Susan Nussbaum, for such institutions as A Red Orchid, Chicago Dramatists, and Steppenwolf's Garage Theater. She is the founder and artistic director of 16th Street Theater in Berwyn, now in its seventh season.

Chicago Arts Journal: Your company, 16th Street Theater, produces several works each season around a designated theme. How did you arrive at this process, and how do you and your cohort choose the themes?

Ann Filmer: I enjoy experiencing plays with context. When building a subscription season, I really loathe the “a little of everything” mix: a musical! a classic! a new play! a comedy! That kind of formula gives me hives. Instead of “Why this play now?” and “Why should anyone care?” I love to confront what are we not talking about but we should be. Or what are we talking around but not talking about. But I actually choose the plays first. I don't come up with a theme and then shove the plays into it. The plays will demand my attention: they make themselves known, they must be heard. Once they have my attention, I then uncover what may link them together. I am fascinated with how they become even more powerful when experienced side by side in one theater season.

CAJ: You often produce new plays, but over the years we've seen you work on a repeat basis with certain playwrights. What makes you want to work with a writer again?

AF: There are so many writers in this town I have yet to produce. I feel like I have barely scratched the surface. So many worthy voices. Russ Tutterow instilled this in me at Chicago Dramatists: we produce playwrights, not just one particular play. It's true: I am interested in the long haul, not the single output. I would love to go back to the trough with every writer I have ever worked with, again and again.

Lookout! Daddy issue alert: my father was a man of great words but a failed writer. On his passport into this country where it says "occupation," something is violently crossed out, and the word WRITER takes its spot.

CAJ: We remember well your work as curator and producer of Estrogen Fest. Any thoughts on a remount of that event?

AF: When Joanie Schultz, Marilyn Campbell and I presented Estrogen Fest from 2000-2007, I could not find any decent roles for females where women weren't in relation to men: mom, wife, whore, spurned girlfriend. And there was not much crossover between dance, theater, performance art, poetry, music. We had a vision to cross-pollinate audiences. To trick theater people into seeing modern dance. To show that performance art could have a sense of humor. And of course to be subversive. Then in 2007, I started 16th Street and have put all my energy into that. And of course Joanie has a busy directing career. But that female fire still

burns in both of us. When the time is right, the estrogen will flow again.

CAJ: What do you view as your particular skills and strengths as a director? How does this view contribute to the pieces you choose to work on?

AF: This question totally stumps me. My task is to approach each play where it lives. Meet it in its world. Beyond that, I don't know what skills I have, as I have to utilize a different set of tools for each piece I take on. All I know is where I've been... I have a degree in dance, started out as a choreographer (all shapes, few words) and then worked with Michael Halberstam as his Associate Artistic Director (all words, small space) and then rejected the classics for writers in the present room.

CAJ: Do you ever build a play or a season around specific performers? If not, generally speaking, how do you build a cast?

AF: 16th Street is a playwrights' theater, so while we have a group of Artistic Associates, they are not a company of actors: they are writers, designers, stage managers, musicians and, yes, actors too. Being a playwrights' theater, we will always cast the "best" actor for the part, whatever that means. Of course when I work with Tony Fitzpatrick the piece is built around him. I will be venturing into "Tony's world" this summer for our fourth collaboration at Steppenwolf Garage with *The Midnight City*.

CAJ: What are you excited about lately? Any particular books, people, shows, abstract concepts that get the blood going this season?

AF: This is going to tell you all you need to know about Filmer... I am moving between three books right now: I am working my way through Morrissey's autobiography and savoring every word. This charming man can turn a phrase. It is delicious. I am also super turned on by Declan Donnellan's book *The Actor and the Target*. Finally, I have never enjoyed reading Shakespeare, but I stumbled upon the graphic novel *Kill Shakespeare* at C2E2 and it rocks. I mean, the title alone...

Questions for Idris Goodwin

For more than ten years we have observed the work of Idris Goodwin, who emerged onto the Chicago fringe scene as a maker of theater, film, spoken word, and hip-hop compositions. He is currently developing new work for Berkley Rep and Steppenwolf, among other venues. More recently, he has relocated to Colorado Springs, where he teaches and continues to produce new work in many forms.

Chicago Arts Journal: We saw a lot of your work in Chicago theater over a period of 15 years, primarily with Hermit Arts, and now we hear you've relocated to Colorado. What is your experience of the creative scene where you are?

Idris Goodwin: Since leaving Chicago in 2008, I have lived in a number of seemingly random cities that're in no way known as hubs of thriving creative commerce. However, in each I've found communities of visual, literary and performance artists. Colorado Springs is no different. I teach at a private liberal arts college where, quite frankly, I am given lots of freedom and support. I have already had a play produced here, given readings all over town, been on the radio, and will be collaborating with the Philharmonic this summer.

CAJ: Your works have been produced in cities across the country. How have you interacted with these productions?

IG: It's been a real blessing. When it comes to world premieres, I am usually quite involved in the early stages, doing workshops and script development in concert with the team. Once the show is locked, however, I mainly just try and come out to see the production. Not always possible. But nice when I can.

CAJ: When you begin a new writing project, what is its initial spark? What attracts you to forms, themes, ideas?

IG: I read a lot of news and current events. So when it comes to plays, I usually pull my ideas from the strange and small stories. I am typically drawn to whatever is off kilter within the mundane and usual. Then the story starts to build itself in my head.

When it comes to my solo work, it's all pulled from the well of experience, from childhood to something I just overheard yesterday.

CAJ: How do you approach writing for solo performance, as a teacher and as a performer yourself?

IG: I started out writing in the "I" voice — as a rapper, then as a spoken word artist, and then as an essayist. It's quite honestly the easiest lane for me to ride in — not to say that everything that comes out is perfect, but it's much easier for me to activate that voice as opposed to a work of fiction. That work is much more about finding the right fit for me to perform/recite it. Much more about how the work sounds when I say it — versus my plays, which are about how I (and presumably others) will hear it.

CAJ: You produce new work at an impressive pace. How do you balance your energies among creation, revision, and production of pieces?

IG: It depends and varies project to project, but it's always about deadline. I try and organize/prioritize based on deadline and the scope of the project. I try to crank out first drafts quickly and allow myself as much time as I can to revise and tweak slowly over time. I let an idea simmer and mutate for a while.

Chicago Arts Journal: What are you excited about lately? Any particular books, people, shows, abstract concepts that get the blood going this season?

IG: Well, nothing is really thrilling me more than usual. I walk around daily in a state of possibility and am often inspired by every little thing on earth. I can say that one of the challenges I have set for myself as a playwright is to continue to write pieces that could only exist on stage. More and more, this era of great TV is starting to influence stage drama. I am trying to really explore what it is I truly love about the live context.

Questions for Guy Massey

Here we investigate one of our favorite Chicago actors, Guy Massey. Beginning in the 1990s, Massey has performed with such diverse ensembles as Theater Oobleck, The Neo-Futurists, A Red Orchid, and Rivendell Theatre Ensemble. He recently appeared, to popular and critical acclaim, in the roles of Footnote, Samuel, and Fetus Two in Noah Haidle's *Smokefall* at the Goodman Theatre.

Chicago Arts Journal: We've seen your work in many venues and with many Chicago theater companies over the years. What attracts you to certain groups or projects?

Guy Massey: What attracts me to certain groups or projects? If I've enjoyed working with someone in the past, I look forward to working with them in the future. I can know next to nothing about a project, but if someone like, say, Seth Bockley, whom I greatly admire and have worked with a number of times, is involved, then that is enough to convince me that it will probably be a ride worth taking.

I'm attracted to collaborators who are steady, even tempered, and who just keep looking for creative answers to problems as they come up. And problems always come up. The boat may be sinking and on fire, so to speak, but if my collaborators just keep plugging away looking for creative solutions, then I want to be working with them.

Yeah, a lot of it is the people involved. I also enjoy new scripts.

CAJ: You've worked in a variety of Chicago theaters, large and small. Are there particular venues you enjoy working in? How does the space in which a performance takes place affect your experience of it?

GM: Size does matter. And venue size raises issues for me. A theater like the Richard Christiansen Theater upstairs at Victory Gardens is so conducive to everyone in the room receiving the same amount and temperature of the performance. You can be in the first row or the back row and you will see and hear everything. I feel that delivering and receiving a performance in large houses can get a bit odd. I don't know how to calibrate a performance so it is delivered with the same fullness in the third row and the fiftieth row. I have heard from others who have taken in a show from the back of a large house and the front of a large house. They will say it is a different show depending on where you sit.

I did a show once with an actor who was about fifty years old. He chose to use make-up to add some age to his character. In about the first four rows, you just saw the make-up. In about the fifth through seventh row, the illusion created by the make-up succeeded. From about the tenth row back, I believe audience members would have said, "what make-up?" You couldn't even tell it was on his face. Something along those lines can happen with a performance in a large space.

CAJ: Many plays you've acted in have been successful, both with audiences and with critics. Are there any gems among them that never quite found their audience?

GM: I was surprised that *Tigers Be Still* at Theater Wit in the summer of 2012 didn't catch on more. I was quite fond of the show and the cast. I had a small part. There were four people in the show, and the other three folks in that show were so good. So rich. So charming. And we played to 14 people night after night.

Actually, I would rephrase the question. There have been shows I've worked on that I didn't think were so special, and they would play to packed houses night after night. Why a show does or does not catch on is kind of a mystery to me. Same thing for reviews. Time and again, I just shake my head and whisper, "I just don't get it." And that can be a reaction to a positive or a negative review.

I've heard folks give every reason for why a show doesn't catch on: Time of year, type of show, temperature outside, what else is going on culturally in the city. I think you can never predict.

CAJ: What does your preparation on the day of a show look like?

GM: I like to get to the theater early. If the call is half an hour, I'll probably be there more like an hour before curtain. I don't like to feel that I have to rush to be ready for curtain. I go through the same routines in the same order, usually. Stretching, warming up a bit physically and vocally. Getting into costume, checking props, maybe running a section of text.

CAJ: Do you have anything in the works now that you're looking forward to performing?

GM: My next show will be the remount of *Smokefall* at the Goodman this fall. We did this show last season in the Owen, and

we will be restaging it for the Albert this fall. I am so fond of the script and all the people involved: the cast, the writer, the director, the stage manager, the designers — the whole gang. I feel that it is a kind of magical piece and I feel so fortunate to have the chance to spend some more time with it.

CAJ: What are you excited about lately? Any particular books, people, shows, abstract concepts that get the blood going this season?

GM: So, I just finished reading *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, page after page, I found myself muttering, "This book is astonishing, and amazing and I don't think I've ever read anything like it." It is funny, thought provoking. I was rooting for characters. It is heartbreaking. It is endlessly amusing and sad and great. And at the same time I knew that I just lucked out in when I happened to pick it up. If I'd started it in another month, in another year, at some other point in my life, I bet I would have gotten about 100 pages in and said, "the hell with this," and walked away from it. Again, you never can tell when or why something will click when it clicks or doesn't when it doesn't.

Questions for Ray Rehayem

We have long admired the various and prodigious creative endeavors of performance poet and musician Ray Rehayem. His associations with fringe fixtures including Jenny Magnus and Barrie Cole go back to the mid-1990s, and now we find him acting as theater reviewer in the pages of *New City*. Here he lets us pick his brain on a few subjects near and far.

Chicago Arts Journal: You've been making work in Chicago performance circles for at least fifteen years (that we know of). How did you start?

Ray Rehayem: My first performances in Chicago were with my DeKalb band, The Beatles. I was the singer. We'd drive into town and play some ill-suited venue. We changed our name to The Mercury Players not long before we moved to this here big city. My fellow former Mercury Players are immensely talented gentlemen and the creative approach we immediately arrived at shuttled us to some particular territory I have ever recognized as ideal to the efficient and inspired generation of both idea and delivery. I am pretty sure that whenever I'm "on" — if I'm singing, making a joke, writing a poem — which are all the same thing anyway — I am "on" the same kinda ride or roll we were on. And when I'm on, I'm good at all that. And when I'm off, maybe all bets are too. But the bet is where it's at, so you gotta let it ride. *[At this moment, Rehayem gets up to get a cup of tea.]* I like tea, but there's no way I ask for a cup of tea at my last meal.

CAJ: We know your work as a poet, a playwright, a writer of fiction — what determines the form when you develop new writing? Do you have different habits and foibles around each?

RR: It's all one poem to me. Or many, or a song. No, I'm stretching; it's all one poem, Names have been changed so it's fiction. Names that never existed too. Names that couldn't be, because there's no one there.

When I'm singing, making up melodies & lyrics, though my detractors (they harken back to the original stiff and dullards, but they are not without insight) wouldn't. Wouldn't call it singing, that is. Regardless, for that I never can "write." I have to make up all that while the band plays. It all has to take place as a song for me to knock out words for one. When I don't have a band, that form's not even considered. And then I suppose honestly a lot of those lyrics are better than most of my poems. Like, some of my lyrics for o.u.r. band, Athletic. I'll read or sing one right now, but the neighbors always worry. Poems I write about the same way, but without musical collaborators, so it's more insular — at times some of those I tweak and revise. That doesn't happen to the lyrics. My fiction is just longer sections of the same poem, generated in same way and never very long, probably for that reason.

Honestly, I have left my creative process largely unexamined. When people distrust me, they suspect it's all based on serendipity. When those same people trust me again and before, they suspect the same. People who just plain trust me, which is most people, never put forth a hypothesis. Thinking of it now, I suspect they're right. But if I were to put forth anyway, I'd say I don't know.

CAJ: We hear you have recently returned to Chicago after a period on the West Coast. What sort of work and/or creative endeavors marked your time there? Any comment on the atmosphere of art-making there, at small or at large?

RR: I had some demoralizing line in my back pocket for ages in case anyone ever asked this, and now you have and I don't recall my reply. That's why I don't think ahead: I'm sure the reply wasn't very good. I didn't do much creatively in Los Angeles for a long time. At first my only creative outlet seemed to be Athletic endeavors during occasional visits back here to the city with shoulders. Outside of any artistic community — I really had no sense on how to tap into one, at least not for quite some time — the only avenue I could see was to write. Just, write. Words. But the solitude of that can be uninviting when you're new to a town that has such potential to isolate you. And even more when you've been there a while. Any town, new or old, can be about the isolation. Very various factors (Very us, verily!) make the Los Angeles variety variably powerful. That's part of the Southern California magic they sell and buy all over the world. Isolation, good and bad. It's just you and the sun. And you have to be on the sun's side. If it's a battle, the sun always wins. It's the most demanding star in a town full of 'em.

Los Angeles is a fascinating place and it's my distinct impression — I witnessed this — that culture there could accelerate very quickly. There's a ton of creative people. There must be. Took me a while to start meeting more than the ones I already knew from Chicago. There's a lot of that too: America goes to California. It's just spread out and once people get connected then what's spreading can get stunning. Ever been there?

Weather's often nice. No fresh water though, and earthquakes. Such conditions could halt all the blooming.

CAJ: We saw and very much enjoyed your recent show, "Barred Poetic Disorder," in the Rhinoceros Theater Festival this winter. Can you tell us something about the development of that piece, both its writing and its performative shape?

RR: I'm awfully glad you enjoyed it, thanks. The bulk of the writing started months earlier, in the spring. They were individual poems which I was writing for their own sake and posting to my blog, and to my social media generality. And I just kept writing them. When the Rhino arose, I thought rather than write a performance piece I would do a poetry reading. I right then thought I shouldn't simply read the poems; it's the Rhino — I should take the work to a sufficiently maximized and theatrically attuned state. So — what? It had to have a woman. It was very obvious this material might be shackled without a female reader. The reader became a character. The other character had to be a man, a reader: me, because this was all an excuse for my poetry reading. I was going to put it into some dialogue form once I found an actress. Shortly before the Rhino I had the good fortune to meet the versatily remarkable Heather Marie Vernon, who is the artist you really should be interviewing. She was very enthused about doing the show, and she is perfect for it. So I wrote the framework for the show and we read it as we performed — because there was no time to memorize all that and besides I wanted it to still be a reading at the same time it was a performance, so memorizing was never the desire. The slim framework was

originally written to delineate the connection between the pieces and the humor throughout.

CAJ: We have also read your work as a theater reviewer. How do you approach responding to and potentially critiquing other people's works, as a maker of work yourself?

RR: I hardly think at all about the work I make when I'm looking at the work I'm reviewing. I approach the reviews generally as someone who is not averse to going to the theater. "Sure, let's see what's in store at the theater tonight." That sort of approach. Because, I have to have a little enthusiasm just to go, right? We all do, for any art. So I look for something in the play that attains a quality I want to write about. Because I'm a writer really, not a critic. I think the best I can do for anyone reading the reviews is just write the best thing I can — make the review worth reading — and put that to the service of communicating if and in what ways the play is worth seeing. It's not the most natural outlet for my writing, but I value it. And also, I approach my reviews without trying to weigh the financial cost to the unknown reader. Theater is expensive. The reviews list the ticket price, and that's important. I recommend shows as reviewer that I don't personally recommend to most people I know — solely because of the cost. I couldn't afford to go to most of these shows,

CAJ: What are you excited about lately? Any particular books, people, shows, abstract concepts that get the blood going this season?

RR: Is there a season? I am particularly interested in the art my friends make, simply because my friends tend to make great art. Just last month Dead Rider put out a new album. Back during the Rhino, there was Barrie Cole's *Elevator Tours*. And the 75th issue of *King Cat Comics and Stories* is forthcoming. Those are three disparate works that achieve a miraculous balance of blood and abstraction.

Communal Sentences

We asked some friends and colleagues to send us a sentence or two — on any subject, fact or fiction — using the word *nervous*, which is how we're feeling lately. (Who knows why? Perhaps you can relate.) Here's a smattering of the responses we got.

1. (Fact) I own nervous.

2. (Fiction) The sensuous armadillo scraped suggestively against the nervous pangolin.

—Sue Cargill, cartoonist and playwright

There's all that nervous scratching
When you wait inside the closet and
The itchy, anxious coats won't wait as calmly as you can.

—Clint Sheffer, playwright

Nervous to come, nervous to go, nervous to take a step this way or that, nervous to breathe too loud or too soft, nervous to leave out the best part, nervous to tell it and it no longer be her own.

—Jayita Bhattacharya, playwright and choreographer

My system to differentiate noise from signal, the nervous one, has come unmoored. Won't you design for me an app, that knows a noise and melts it so it once again annoys enough to let what's left get on my nerves, in time?

—Stefan Brün, director

One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.

—Bertrand Russell, friend of *CAJ*

Expectations make me nervous.

—Jenny Magnus, playwright and musician

Why the grimace, why the grumble under swerves of weather — the now-wind, now-rain-now-sun; the sleet that follows warm; the blooming, petal-dropping trees — what lets them so unnerve us?

—Johann Blumer, editor and cheat

Are you nervous?

No, she said, as she bent down to pick up another dropped bullet.

—Jack Helbig, playwright and critic



This has been the
CHICAGO ARTS JOURNAL

Spring 2014 Issue

Please join us in the summertime for more of this
kind of thing.

Address gibes, gratitude and grievances to
johann.artsjournal@gmail.com

WE THANK YOU FOR READING.

Contributor Notes

Jeff Flodin is the author of the blog “Jalapenos in the Oatmeal: Digesting Vision Loss.” He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Access Fellowship. View his work online at <http://jalapenosintheoatmeal.wordpress.com>.

Jim Joyce is a Chicago-based writer, performer, and high school teacher. His zine, *Let it Sink*, is available at independent bookstores and distributed by Antiquated Future.

Ira S. Murfin is a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Ph.D in Theatre & Drama at Northwestern University. His dissertation examines talk as a performance strategy employed by key artists in the post-1960s American avant-garde. His criticism has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Research International*, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and *Chicago Art Criticism*. He is also Performance Editor for the journal *Required*. Ira makes solo and collaborative performance work as a theatre artist and writer in Chicago.

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

Anna O. Leary is a writer and assets manager from Schaumburg. Her monograph on the charcoal sketches of Cervantes’ sisters is forthcoming from Ratherthan Editions in Spring 2015.

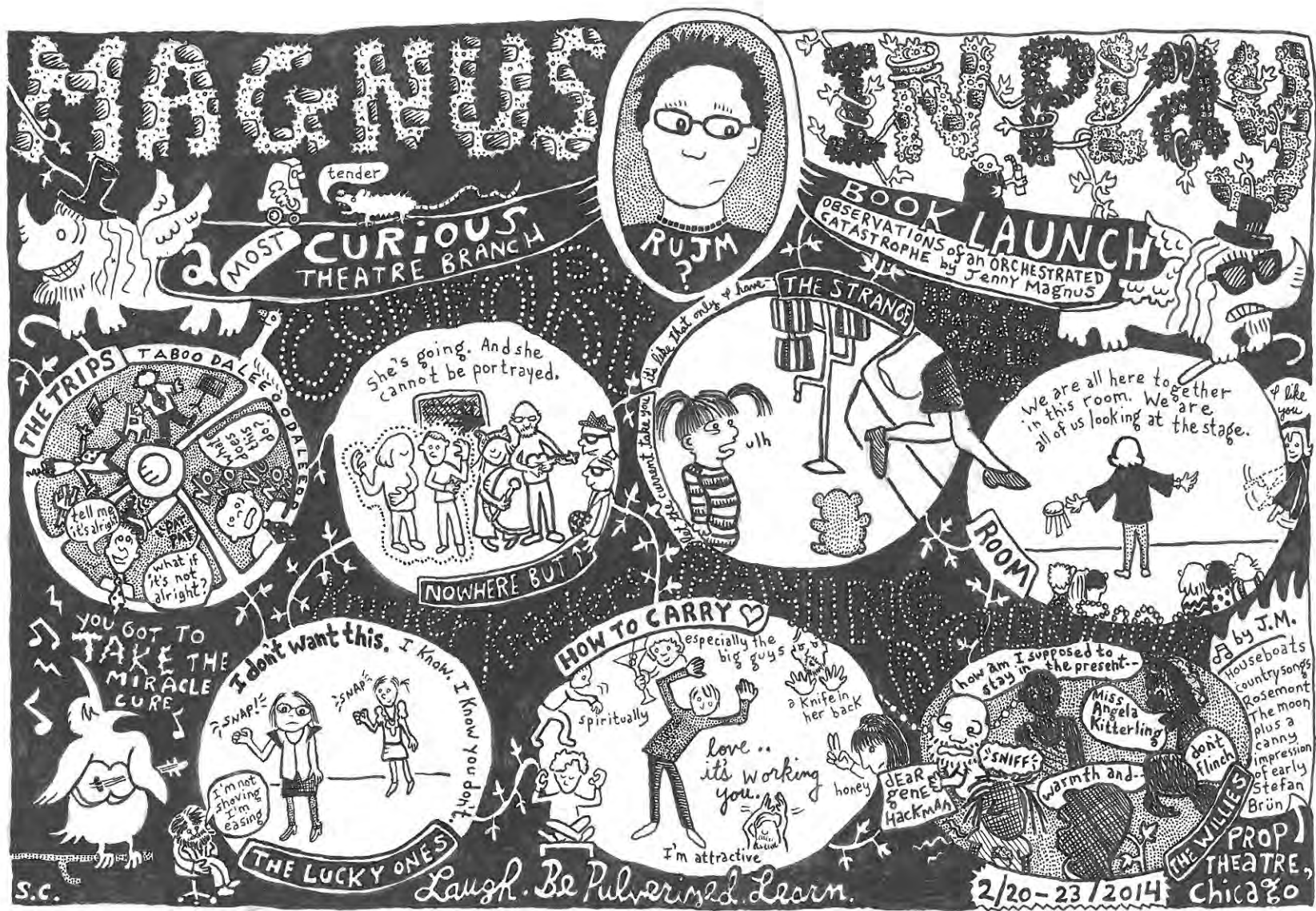
Sue Cargill has left the auto-jewelry business. Drawings from her “Dachsund in Film” series are now on Flickr, under the username awkwardphobic.

Cecile Goding is a writer and teacher from South Carolina. Her latest project, with composer John Lake, is a science-fiction guitar opera, to debut at the University of Iowa this June.

Carine Loewi is a scientist and poet living in Andersonville. When not writing for and editing *Chicago Arts Journal*, she is often found loitering outside the international newspaper shop in Evanston, looking for multilingual patter with passersby.

Edmund St. Bury is a lifelong Chicagoan and avid theatergoer.

CHICAGO ARTS JOURNAL



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