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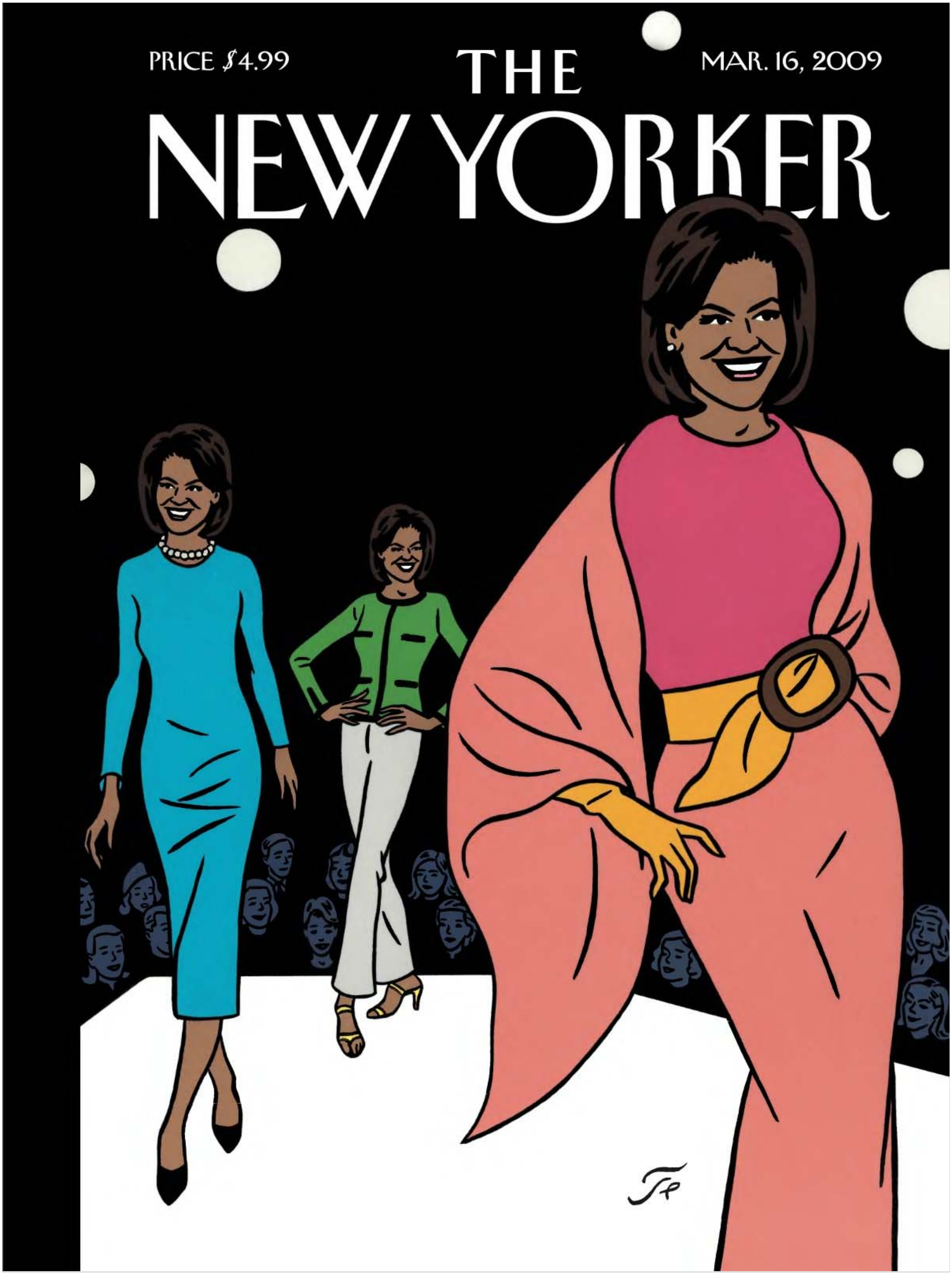

CITY STORIES

What drew me to Los Angeles is that I'm not completely at ease there. However, the city has been really fertile ground for me to kind of go up into my head a little bit and just be alone with my thoughts and figure out how to express them musically. *For more city stories, downloads and special offers, visit bananarepublic.com/citystories*

SARA BAREILLES
SINGER & SONGWRITER

BANANA REPUBLIC

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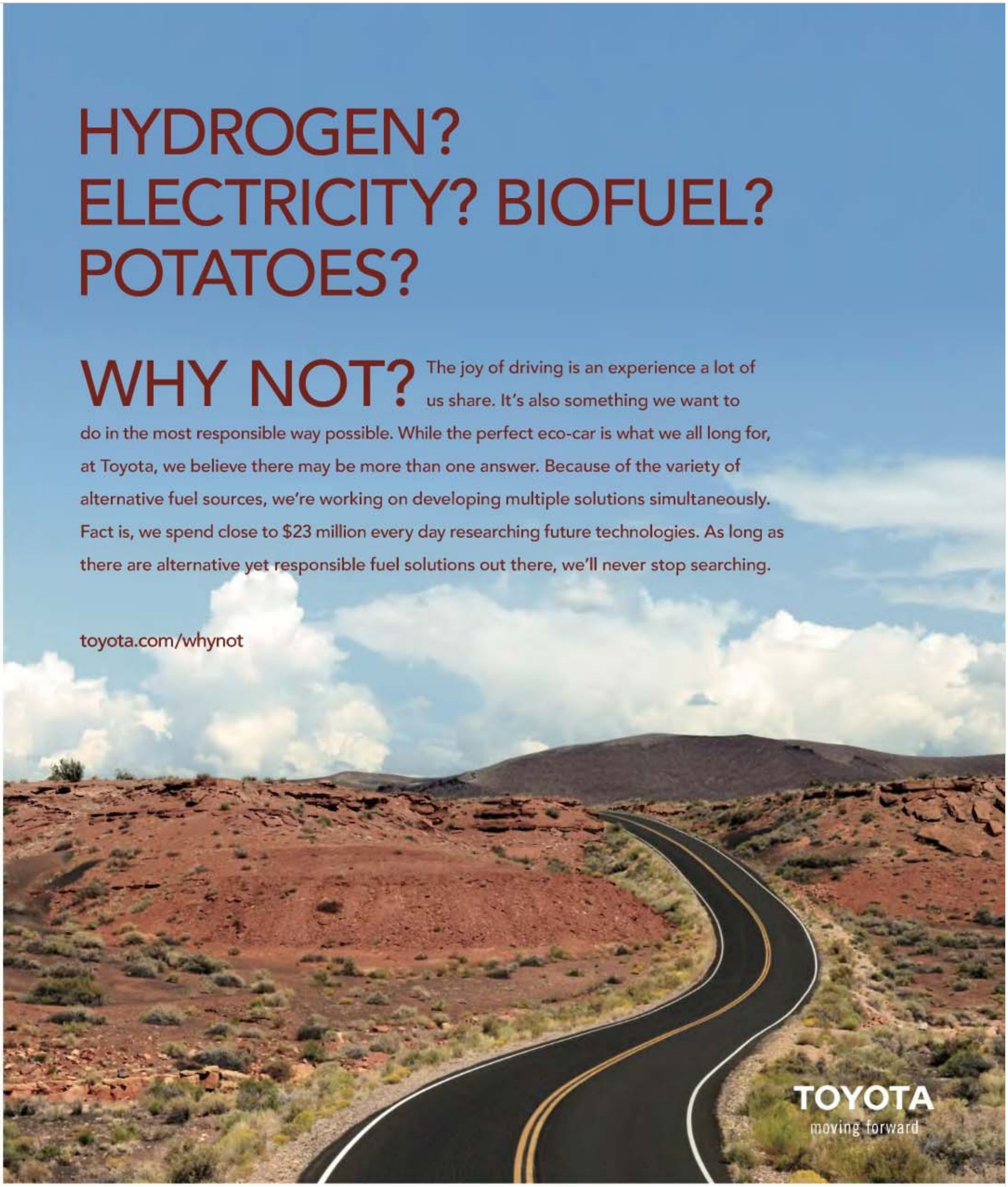

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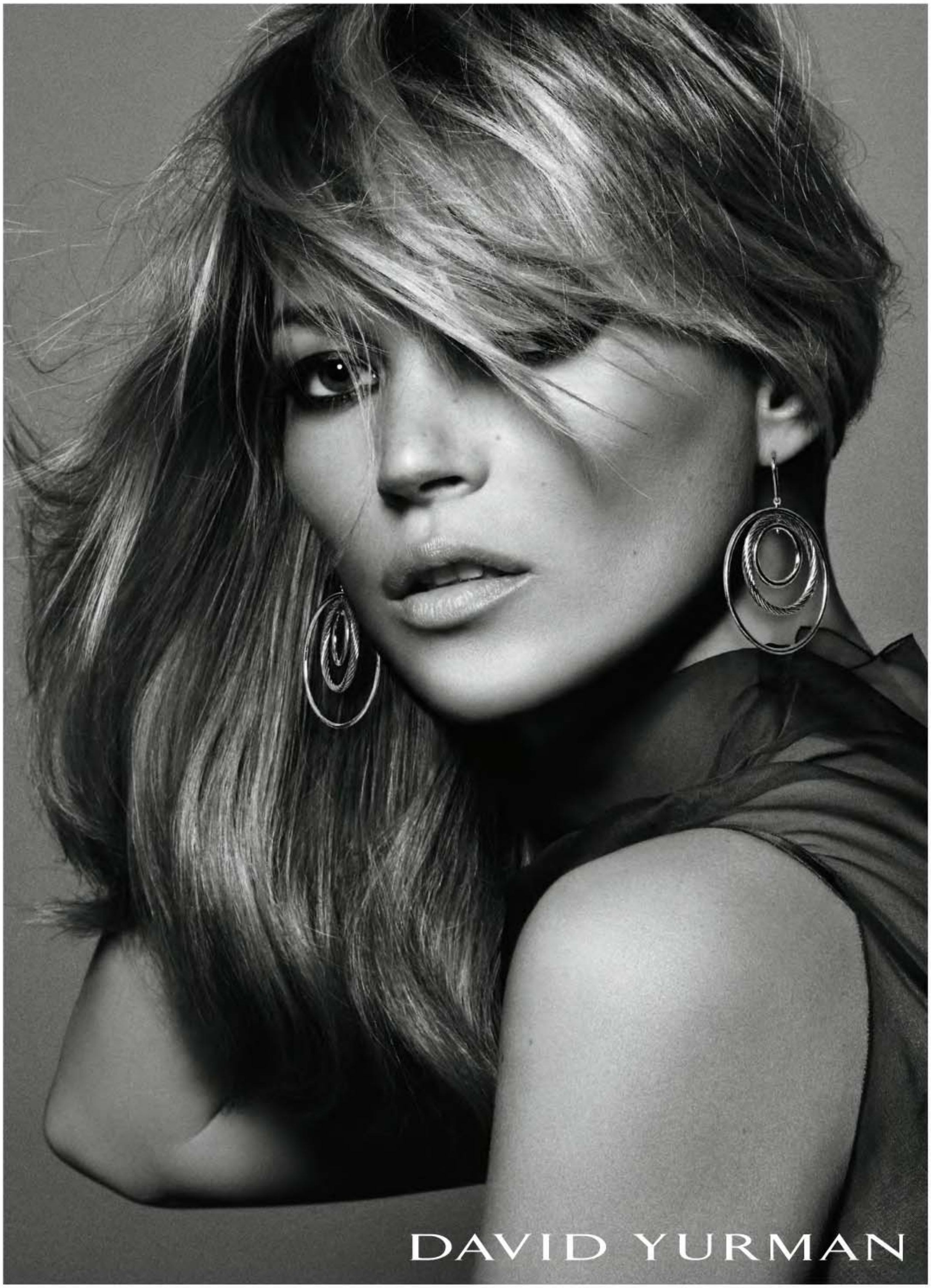

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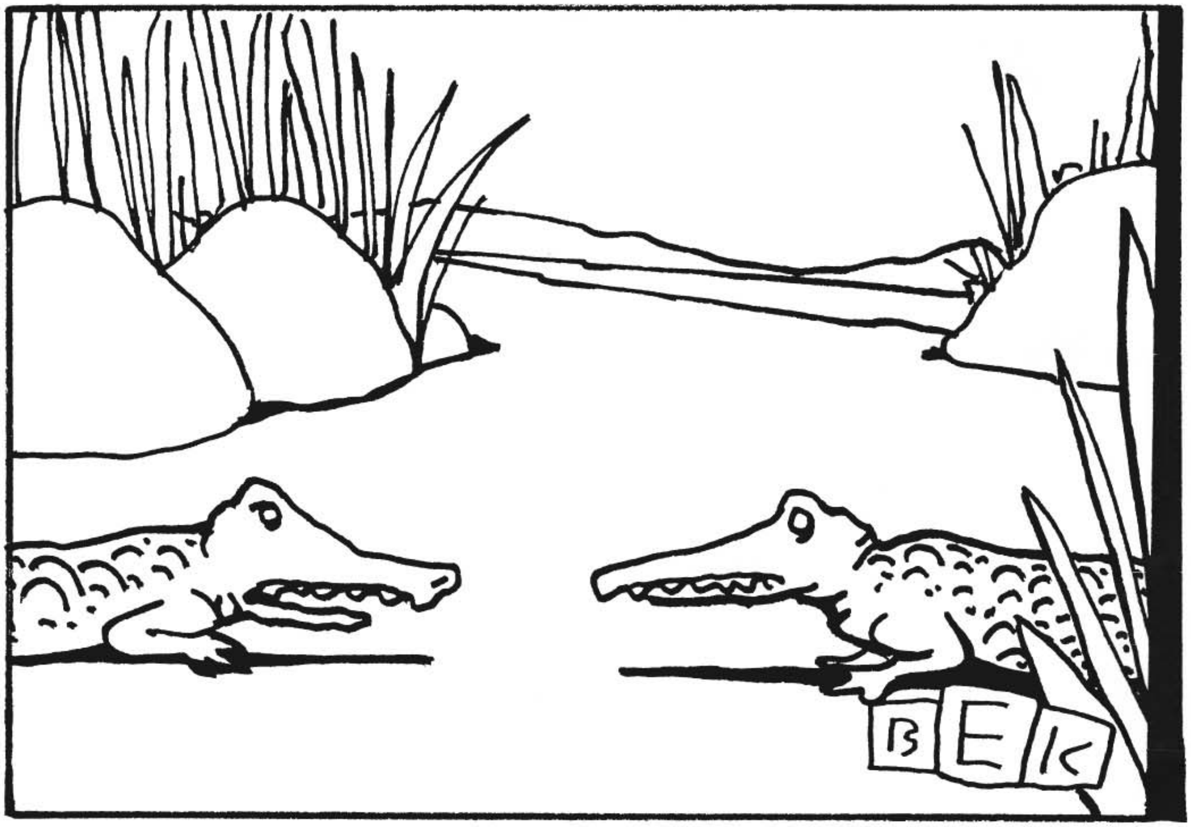
SPOTS *Benoît van Innis*



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CONTRIBUTORS

John Cassidy (Comment, p. 41), the author of "Dot.Con: How America Lost Its Mind and Money in the Internet Era," is working on a book about the financial crisis.

Lauren Collins ("Man on the Street," p. 50) is a staff writer.

Calvin Tomkins (The Talk of the Town, p. 43) has written more than a dozen books, including "Lives of the Artists," which came out in October.

James Surowiecki (The Financial Page, p. 45) writes about economics, business, and finance for the magazine. He is the author of "The Wisdom of Crowds."

Paul Rudnick (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 56) has a new book, "I Shudder," a collection of stories and essays, coming out in the fall.

Aleš Šteger (Poem, p. 66) lives in Slovenia and England. A collection of his poems, "The Book of Things," is due out next year.

Ariel Levy ("Ladies' Man," p. 72) is a staff writer.

Floc'h (Cover), an illustrator, lives and works in Paris. This is his seventh cover for the magazine.

Judith Thurman ("Nowhere Woman," p. 58) is the author of, most recently, "Cleopatra's Nose: 39 Varieties of Desire," a collection of her *New Yorker* essays, which is out in paperback.

Patricia Marx ("Made in U.S.A.," p. 64) published a children's book, "Dot in Larryland," with illustrations by Roz Chast, in December.

D. T. Max ("Twister," p. 82) is the author of "The Family That Couldn't Sleep: A Medical Mystery," which is available in paperback.

Max Vadukul (Portfolio, p. 88) is a filmmaker and photographer. His portrait photography has also appeared in *Rolling Stone*. Robin Givhan is a staff writer at the Washington *Post*, where she covers the fashion industry and writes a weekly column on culture.

John Updike (Poems, p. 92), a poet, critic, novelist, and short-story writer, died in January. A posthumous collection of poems, "Endpoint and Other Poems," is due out next month.

Joan Acocella (A Critic at Large, p. 101) writes about books and dance for the magazine. "Twenty-eight Artists and Two Saints," a book of essays, is available in paperback.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

Audio slide show: *Ariel Levy* on Alber Elbaz. / Audio: *Joan Acocella* on vampires. / The Political Scene, a weekly conversation with *Dorothy Wickenden*. / *Joyce Carol Oates* reads a Eudora Welty story on the fiction podcast. / *Susan Morrison* takes readers' questions about the Style Issue. / The book club reads "Revolutionary Road." / *Steve Coll* examines the stimulus bill, the Front Row looks at mumblecore, plus the Book Bench, the Cartoon Lounge, and posts by *Hendrik Hertzberg, George Packer,* and *Evan Osnos*. / A complete archive of every issue, back to 1925. / Animated cartoons and the caption contest.

THE NEW YORKER ONLINE

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LETTER FROM CHINA
Dispatches by Evan Osnos

HENDRIK HERTZBERG
Notes on politics, mostly

INTERESTING TIMES
George Packer, abroad and at home

THE BALANCE SHEET
James Surowiecki on the economy

THINK TANK
Steve Coll on public policy

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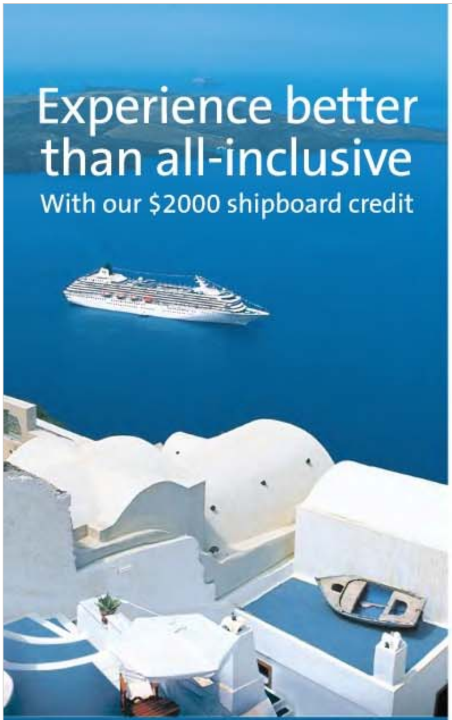
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THE MAIL

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

George Packer, in his article on the housing crisis in Florida, describes Belmont Heights as "a mostly black slum" ("The Ponzi State," February 9th & 16th). Belmont Heights is a mixed-income housing development designed in a Southern Craftsman style and built to replace the crime-ridden, deteriorating public housing of the past. I live at the edge of the development, and walk my dog there daily, because Belmont Heights's streets are better maintained than the rest in the neighborhood. The area around Belmont Heights and the neighborhood's business district have been neglected by the City of Tampa and the State of Florida. Long before the inverted pyramid schemes and corrupt lending practices of recent times, the construction of I-4 in the nineteen-sixties redefined the general area of Ybor City, and consequently left generations of native Floridians, mostly African-Americans, on the wrong side of the highway. With the quintessential Floridian fetish for façade, the state built a useless and now nonfunctioning $1.3-million fountain near the overpass. A few blocks north, empty lots lie fallow and overgrown, mattresses and other discarded trash pile up on street corners, sidewalks abruptly end, and streets are in continual disrepair.

Julie Weitz
Tampa, Fla.

IN THE OPPOSITION

Hendrik Hertzberg's Comment on bipartisanship provided much to ponder (The Talk of the Town, February 23rd). If it weren't so appalling, it would be fascinating to compare the behavior of Republican and Democratic congressional legislators when confronted by an Administration of the opposite party. I watched in dismay as Republican leaders arrogantly obstructed efforts to address the growing economic crisis as millions of families contemplate poverty. Their vindictive, mean-spirited posturing adds nothing to clarify and improve the legislation; all effort goes to ridicule and defamation. On the other hand, the Democrats during the Bush years paid obsequious deference to the President and supported a litany of Administrative debacles. The Iraq war, the Patriot Act, and a no-strings bailout are just three that continue to haunt us. Neither party has served us well. Where is the loyal opposition and respect for conscientious discourse?

Ruth Zweifler
Ann Arbor, Mich.

NOT VERMONT

Ben McGrath's article on those who predict economic collapse left me with a cringing feeling ("The Dystopians," January 26th). It is always difficult for me to listen to such people, probably because I'm so gullible, and there is a sort of déjà vu in this. Didn't we go through all this ten years ago with Y2K? It took me a few years to eat up all the tuna fish I had stored from that one. Now what am I supposed to do? That the article ended with a play-by-play of a meeting that took place here in Vermont added insult to injury. Vermont has long been a haven for urban refugees, and each influx seems to wish to close the gate behind them. It's been something of a miracle that the Vermonters with a longer generational heritage have tolerated it all. But to think that secession is an answer is simply to ask those of us who happen to live here to accept a sort of feudalism as a replacement for globalism. Globalism has its faults and certainly its attendant anxieties, but at least it offers us freedom from ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

Andy Voda
Dummerston, Vt.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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Labelle, at the renovated Beacon Theatre. Photograph by Landon Nordeman.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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15	16	17	11	12	13	14

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
MONARCH MASHUP

The Wooster Group's "La Didone" blends the seventeenth-century opera by Francesco Cavalli and Francesco Busenello (itself based on Virgil's Aeneid) with Mario Bava's sci-fi movie from 1965, "Terrore Nello Spazio." The show has its U.S. première at St. Ann's Warehouse. (See page 16.)

NIGHT LIFE
SHINY HAPPY PEOPLE

Nearly thirty years ago, R.E.M. rattled the American music industry with a powerful début single, "Radio Free Europe," before going on to define alternative rock and to dominate the mainstream. Rock legends like Patti Smith and Tommy James join younger acts like Ingrid Michaelson, Rhett Miller, and Glenn Hansard to pay tribute at Carnegie Hall. (See page 20.)

ART
WORD PROCESSOR

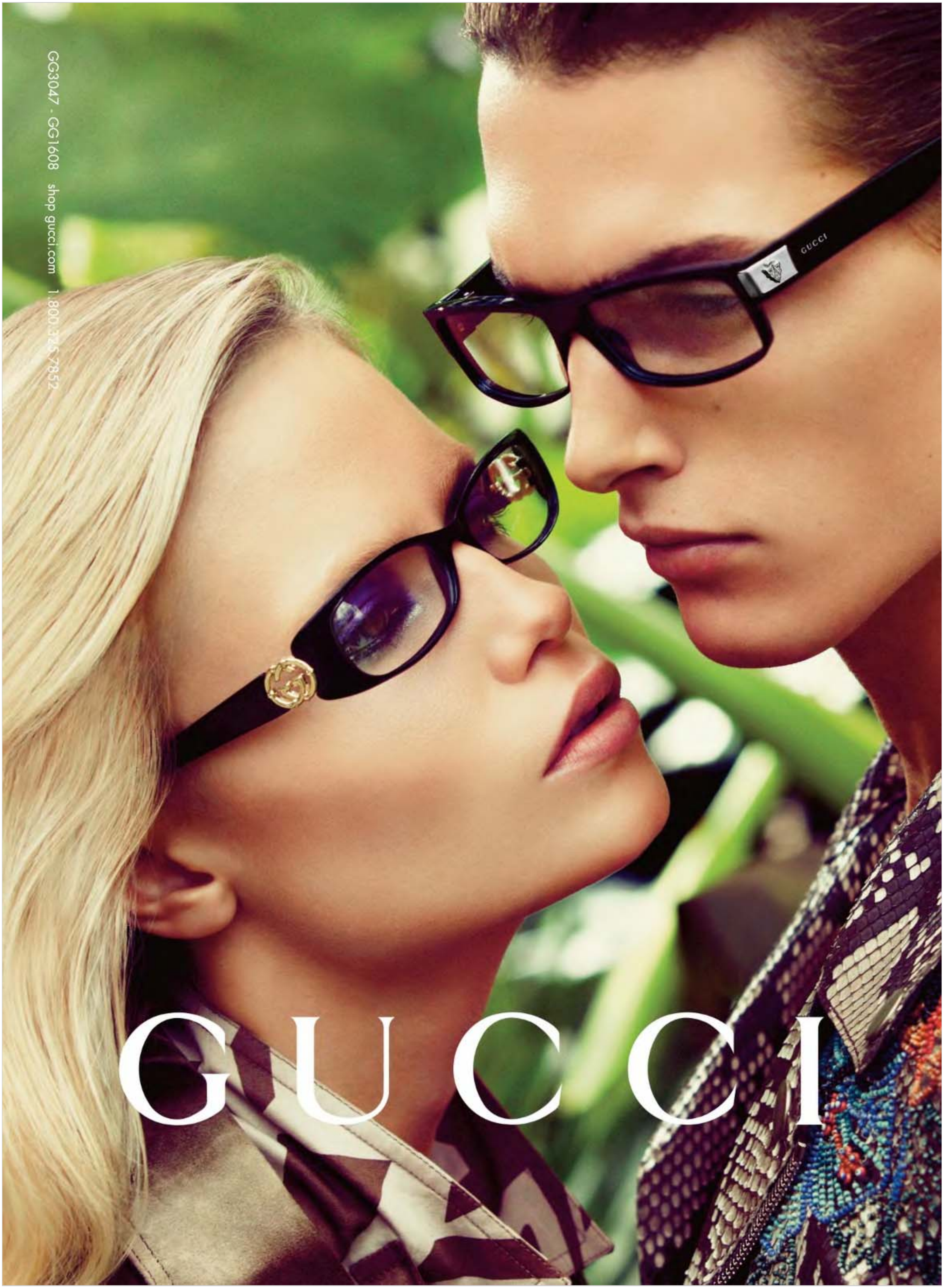
Using language as her primary medium, Jenny Holzer reflects on knotty themes of violence, love, and survival. "Protect Protect," at the Whitney, features Holzer's signature L.E.D. sculptures, as well as selections from her recent "Redaction" series, which consists of canvases silk-screened with text from declassified government documents. (See page 24.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
ACCENT ON YOUTH

Two promising young composers, Nico Muhly and Arlene Sierra, are given big platforms this week in performances by the soprano Jessica Rivera (at Weill Recital Hall) and the International Contemporary Ensemble (at Miller Theatre), respectively. (See pages 31 and 32.)

MOVIES
THE ONE AND ONLY

Joan of Arc was burned at the stake at age nineteen. Maria Falconetti was thirty-five in 1927, when she acted in Carl Theodor Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc," but aided by Dreyer's ecstatic visual compositions, she gives one of the greatest movie performances ever, blending the militant saint's celestial calling and earthbound torments. The film kicks off the Dreyer retrospective at BAM. (See page 37.)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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

PRETTY PERVERSITY

"That Pretty Pretty; or, the Rape Play," at the Rattlestick, gives you plenty of rape and nothing pretty. I'm not sure what the play is about, but, then, it seems, neither is the author, Sheila Callaghan, a talented writer new to me. The evening is a submersion in the anarchy of ambivalence: variously a rant, a riff, a rumble—about our notions of naturalism, objectification, perversity, and beauty. "My pretty is, like, profound," a guy says, as he gets into an evening dress. "I am so pretty I drain all the ugly off you and wear it like a swimsuit." Hyperbole is served up with thrilled barbarity—slaughter (cleaver, sledgehammer), shock (peeing the bed, necrophilia), voyeurism. Meanwhile, Jane Fonda (Annie McNamara) drifts through, toning her body and her perfection. There's sass and sarcasm in Callaghan's high-energy punk writing, which feels like early Sam Shepard in the way that it dumps the author's zany inner world in the audience's lap. Whether it will ever turn into anything but the sound of its own mocking voice, only time will tell.

—*John Lahr*

THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

BLITHE SPIRIT
Angela Lansbury, Jayne Atkinson, Christine Ebersole, Simon Jones, Deborah Rush, and Rupert Everett star in Noël Coward's comedy from 1945. Michael Blakemore directs. In previews. Opens March 15. (Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

LA DIDONE
The U.S. première of the Wooster Group's production of Francesco Cavalli's opera, with a libretto by Francesco Busenello, which tells the story of Aeneas and Dido, with a sci-fi slant. Elizabeth LeCompte directs. Opens March 17. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St. 718-254-8779.)

EXIT THE KING
Geoffrey Rush (in his Broadway début), Susan Sarandon, Lauren Ambrose, and Andrea Martin star in the Eugène Ionesco comedy, about a king who refuses to relinquish control of his kingdom. Translated and directed by Neil Armfield. In previews. (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

GOD OF CARNAGE
The latest play by Yasmina Reza ("Art"), which opened in London last year, directed by Matthew Warchus, about two sets of parents who convene to discuss the bad behavior of their children. James Gandolfini, Jeff Daniels, Hope Davis, and Marcia Gay Harden star. In previews. (Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE GOOD NEGRO
Tracey Scott Wilson wrote this play, about black leaders in the American civil-rights movement in the sixties. Liesl Tommy directs, at the Public. In previews. Opens March 16. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

GREEK HOLIDAY
At Abingdon, the New York première of a black comedy by Mayo Simon, directed by Stephen Hollis, about a couple who try to reconcile after the husband's infidelity. In previews. (312 W. 36th St. 212-868-4444.)

HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL
The Shakespeare in the Park production moves to Broadway. Diane Paulus directs a cast of twenty-seven, including Gavin Creel and Will Swenson. In previews. (Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

HAMLET
Theatre for a New Audience presents Shakespeare's tragedy, starring Christian Camargo, Alvin Epstein, Jennifer Ikeda, and Patrick Page. David Esbjornson directs. Previews begin March 15. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

HAPPINESS
A musical directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman, with a book by John Weidman, music by Scott Frankel, and lyrics by Michael Korie, about New Yorkers trapped on a subway train. In previews. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

IMPRESSIONISM
Jeremy Irons and Joan Allen star in this new play by Michael Jacobs, about the relationship between a photojournalist and a gallery owner. Jack O'Brien directs. In previews. Opens March 12. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

INCIDENT AT VICHY
The Actors Company Theatre presents Arthur Miller's 1964 drama, about a group of men awaiting interrogation in Vichy, France, during the Second World War. Scott Alan Evans directs. In previews. Opens March 16. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

INKED BABY
The world première of a new play by Christina Anderson, about an infertile woman who asks her sister to carry a baby, while the world is plagued by an unnamed contamination. The cast includes LaChanze; Kate Whoriskey directs. In previews. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

IRENA'S VOW
Tovah Feldshuh stars in a new play by Dan Gordon, about Irena Gut Opdyke, who worked as a housekeeper for a Nazi major and went on to shelter Jewish refugees. In previews. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

1984
Godlight Theatre Company presents Alan Lyddiard's adaptation of George Orwell's novel. Previews begin March 13. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

REASONS TO BE PRETTY
Neil LaBute's comic drama, in which a man's comments about a co-worker's pretty face get back to his girlfriend, moves to Broadway. Marin Ireland, Steven Pasquale, Piper Perabo, and Thomas Sadoski star; Terry Kinney directs. Previews begin March 13. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROCK OF AGES
The eighties-era rock musical, written by Chris D'Arienzo, about an ambitious young rocker and a small-town girl who meet at a failing Hollywood rock club, moves to Broadway. Kristin Hanggi directs. Previews begin March 17. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

ROOMS A ROCK ROMANCE
A musical about two Scottish musicians who fall in love and go on tour together in the nineteen-seventies. Paul Scott Goodman wrote the music and lyrics, Goodman and Miriam Gordon wrote the book, and Scott Schwartz directs. In previews. Opens March 16. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

TARTUFFE
At the Pearl, Gus Kaikkonen directs the Molière play. Previews begin March 17. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

WEST SIDE STORY
Arthur Laurents directs the 1957 Bernstein-Sondheim-Robbins musical, for which he wrote the libretto. Matt Cavanaugh and Josefina Scaglione star. In previews. (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

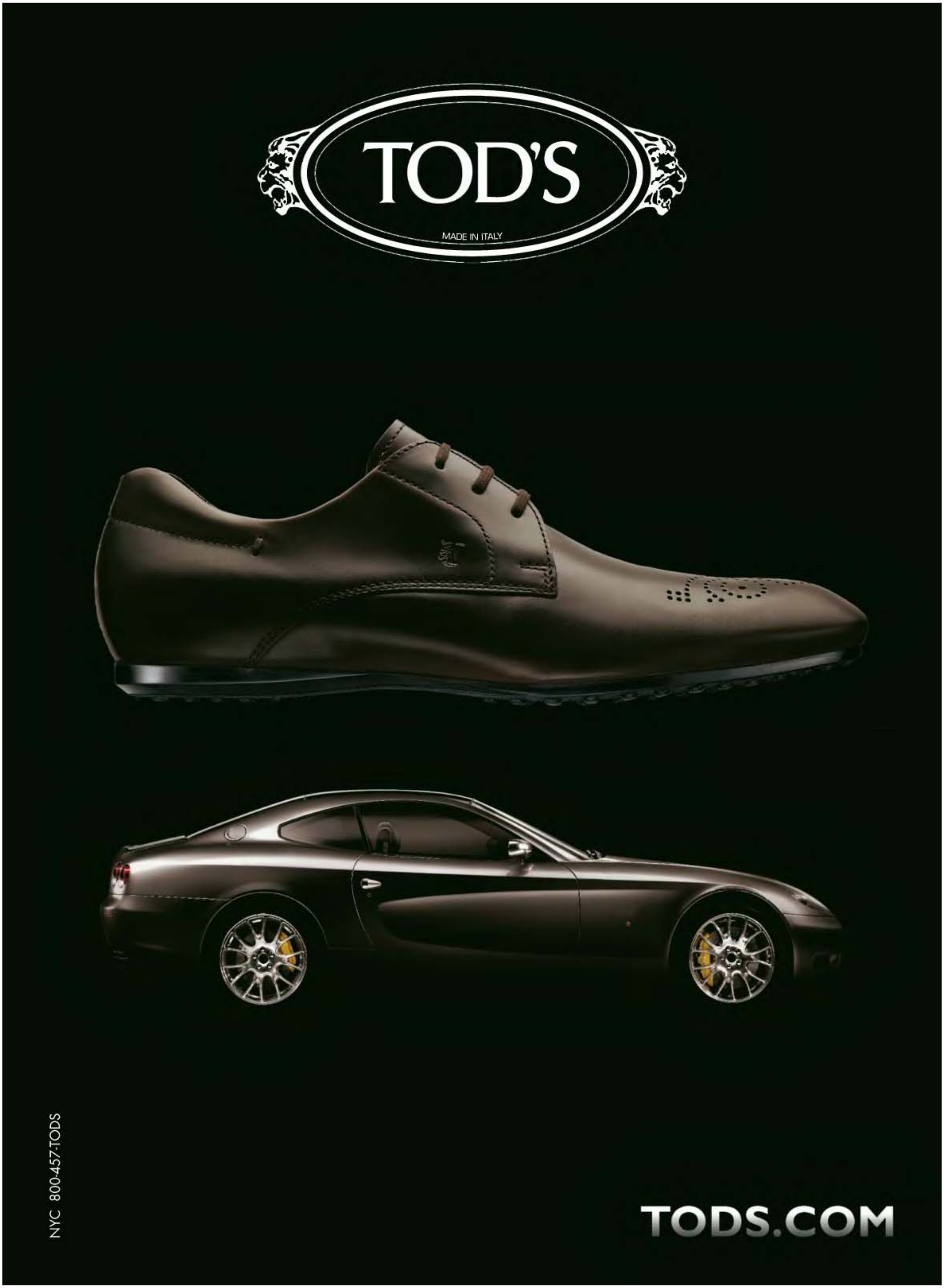
ZOOMAN AND THE SIGN
Signature Theatre Company presents this drama by Charles Fuller ("A Soldier's Play"), about one man who terrorizes a community and another man who tries to defend it. Stephen McKinley Henderson directs. In previews. (555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7329.)

NOW PLAYING

THE AMERICAN PLAN
Richard Greenberg's update of his début play, from 1990 (elegantly directed by David Grindley), set in the nineteen-sixties, opens on a lake in the Catskills. Lili (Lily Rabe), the beautiful but nervy daughter of a wealthy, manipulative German Jewish émigré, Eva (Mercedes Ruehl), meets Nick (Kieran Campion), who swims over from the hotel across the lake. Eva, who claims to have been on the last boat out of Nazi Germany, is a tough piece of work, and Ruehl nails both her sinew and her sadism. Rabe is a cunning actor, blessed with a deep, compelling voice whose authority powerfully registers all the mercurial half notes of acerbity and panic; here she is pitch-perfect and distinguished. With the play's glib exposition, which smacks of romantic comedy, Greenberg reverses our narrative expectations and spins a psychologically astute, compelling study of narcissistic delusion, in which the payoff is not revenge but revelation about the stranglehold of symbiosis. (Reviewed in our issue of 2/2/09.) (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

CHAUTAUQUA!
The utterly original downtown outfit National Theatre of the United States of America is known for its reconstructions of oft-forgotten performance genres, and they've set their latest sights on the historical Chautauqua assemblies, the travelling lecture series and precursor to vaudeville that Theodore Roosevelt once called "the most American thing in America." With a keen eye for design and a penchant for the surprising, the young ensemble miraculously keeps this fusty-sounding project from

PABLO LOBATO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devolving into a simple museum piece. With a standout performance by James P. Stanley and a guest speaker every night, they turn this bizarre footnote in American history into a timely, beautiful meditation on the relationship between the arts, urbanity, community, and economics. (P.S. 122, First Ave. at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Through March 15.)

DISTRACTED

Cynthia Nixon stars in Lisa Loomer's comic drama, about a mother whose son may have attention-deficit disorder. Mark Brokaw directs the Roundabout Theatre Company production. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

FIRE THROWS

Rachel Dickstein's high-tech adaptation of "Antigone" splits its heroine in two: while one Antigone (Laura Butler) enacts the well-worn events of the tragedy, another (Erica Berg) stands out of time, reflecting on the action and revealing a tinge of regret beneath her iron will. This device provides some psychological coloring, but at heart it's still the same old story of autocracy and defiance locked in a shouting match. Dickstein's truer innovation is in the visual language she creates, a striking blend of movement and video projection that conveys a fragmented yet distinctly ancient world. It's an aesthetic that calls out for a more deconstructed "Antigone" than the grandiloquent text allows. (3LD Art & Technology Center, 80 Greenwich St. 212-352-3101.)

GATES OF GOLD

Gabriel, a flamboyant and tortured old actor, is dying at his home in Ireland, and his partner of many years, Conrad, hires a young nurse to care for him. Gabriel and the nurse develop a real tenderness for each other—the only tenderness in the house—and she is allowed to witness the indulgent eccentricity of the family members who come to visit, including Ryan, Gabriel's nephew, who everyone knows is having sex with Conrad for money. With the exception of Kathleen McNenny, playing the nurse, the actors in this otherwise slick production seem unable to find a connection to one another, or meaning in the playwright Frank McGuinness's words. The play, under the direction of Kent Paul, does not hang together. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

GUYS AND DOLLS

Once the director, Des McAnuff ("Jersey Boys"), stops competing with the musical's ingeniousness and settles down to serve the story, all is pretty much well. He nails "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat"; gleeful, rousing, and eye-popping, the staging is McAnuff at his inventive best. Oliver Platt's Nathan Detroit, under pressure from the crapshooters to find a place to gamble and from Adelaide (Lauren Graham) to hand over a ring, sweats and dithers to charming effect. Platt's understated ambivalence is a good match for Graham's emotional full-court press. As the blond and frazzled Adelaide, who suffers from psychosomatic sneezing for lack of a marriage license, Graham makes a terrific Broadway début; her sly sense of humor and clever delivery give her a winning fragility. In the end, "Guys and Dolls" trumps even stage effects; nothing but a four-alarm fire in the theatre would prevent these wonderful characters and memorable songs from coming across. (3/9/09) (Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 212-307-4100.)

HEROES

The Keen Company presents the New York première of Tom Stoppard's translation of this comedy by Gérald Sibleyras, set in 1959, about a group of Frenchmen who served in the First World War and are living in a veterans' home. John Cullum, Jonathan Hogan, and Ron Holgate star. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

HUMOR ABUSE

Manhattan Theatre Club presents a one-man show co-written by and starring Lorenzo Pisoni, about his experience as the youngest member of the Bay Area's Pickle Family Circus. Erica Schmidt, the other co-writer, directs. (City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

KASPAR HAUSER

The legend of Kaspar Hauser—the nineteenth-century wild child who claimed to have grown up in a dungeon before becoming a public curiosity on the streets of Nuremberg—is given a joyfully grotesque outing in Elizabeth Swados and Erin Courtney's light opera. The Bats, the Flea's young resident company, relish each vinegary moment of their melodramatic take on the tale, including the requisite angry-mob scenes. And Preston Martin is captivating in the title role, imbuing his Kaspar with the freaky allure of a German Edward Scissorhands. With its bright period garb and ghoul-faced ensemble, the show could easily inhabit a larger stage; condensed to the modest parameters of the Flea, it glows all the more brightly. (41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

LOVE/STORIES (OR BUT YOU WILL GET USED TO IT)

The Flea presents the world première of five one-act theatre-themed plays by Itamar Moses. Michelle Tattenbaum directs. (41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

OUR TOWN

David Cromer directs the Thornton Wilder classic, at the Barrow Street Theatre. (Reviewed in this issue.) (27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444.)

RED-HAIRED THOMAS

SoHo Think Tank presents a play by Robert Lyons, about a gambler at loose ends who crosses paths with Thomas Jefferson. Oliver Butler directs. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-868-4444.)

RUINED

In Lynn Nottage's drama (under the direction of Kate Whoriskey), set in the present-day civil-war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, Christian (the lovely Russell Gebert Jones), a travelling salesman, persuades Mama Nadi (Saidah Arrika Ekulona), a brothel owner, to take in two young women who have been raped and brutalized by rebel soldiers, Salima (Quincy Tyler Bernstine) and the beautiful Sophie (Condola Rashad). Out of this despair, Nottage draws a unifying dramaturgical force: the humor in horror, especially embodied by the phenomenal Cherise Boothe, who plays a young prostitute named Josephine. The fighting outside escalates, and acts of bravery and desperation follow, as do speeches that are too self-consciously purposeful not to be corny. But at the end, as a couple dances, we are reminded of the many images we've recently seen of that other black couple dancing slowly, their belief in each other having similarly overcome all manner of obstacles, including the hatred of some of their countrymen. (3/2/09) (City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

The Cape Breton fiddler Natalie MacMaster pays a visit to Town Hall.

RACHEL DOMM

THE SAVANNAH DISPUTATION

The New York première of a play by Evan Smith, about a religious Catholic woman who invites a missionary into her home. Marylouise Burke, Dana Ivey, Reed Birney, and Kellie Overbey star; Walter Bobbie directs. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN

Darrell Dennis wrote and stars in this semiautobiographical one-man play, part of the Public Theatre's Public LAB series of developing works. The show opens with a wry montage of Indian clichés ranging from traditional flute music to the Land o' Lakes box, and Dennis, an engaging performer, immediately commands our attention and rewards it with gripping stories and frequent laughs. As he takes us along his character Simon Douglas's journey from the Coyote Lake Reservation to downtown Vancouver, he spares no account of his bad behavior, whether he's hazing a gay friend, disappointing his wise grandmother, or enacting innumerable scenes of drunkenness and destruction. Though bracingly confessional, the narrative is long on messes and short on epiphanies, and its dramatic power is weakened by Dennis's love of shtick—he can't resist making God talk like Jackie Mason and white liberals talk like Urkel. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through March 15.)

THAT PRETTY PRETTY; OR, THE RAPE PLAY

The world première of a play by Sheila Callaghan, about a screenwriter who contemplates including in his screenplay a pair of ex-strippers who murder a right-wing pro-lifer. Kip Fagan directs, at the Rattlestick. (224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444.)

33 VARIATIONS

Jane Fonda, Samantha Mathis, and Colin Hanks star in a new play written and directed by Moisés Kaufman, about a musicologist studying Beethoven's fascination with a waltz. (O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

THIS BEAUTIFUL CITY

The Civilians—that scrappy band of stage documentarians helmed by Steven Cosson—travelled to Colorado Springs in 2006 to observe an evangelical community that, while they were there, was torn apart by sordid accusations against its figurehead, Ted Haggard. With wit and empathy, the group reënacts, splices, and, in inspired instances, musicalizes the interviews they conducted with local residents, from a transgendered woman struggling to reconcile her Christian faith to the God-fearing folks at RHOP—Revolution House of Prayer. Aside from their theatrical panache, the Civilians deserve credit as top-notch journalists,

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creating portraits that are vivid, agenda-free, and marked by a benevolent irony. Their investigation probes not only the absurdity of American dogma but the unquenchable thirst for redemption that propels it. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Through March 15.)

THE WIDOWING OF MRS. HOLROYD

Though married, Lizzie Holroyd (Julia Coffey), respectable and on top of her responsibilities, has begun to pass her evenings at home with her children and Blackmore (Nick Cordileone), a decent young electrician who thinks he may be in love with her. It's hard coal-mining country in England at the turn of the century, and Lizzie's husband (Eric Martin Brown), a drunk and a lout, has grown so brazen about cavorting with unmarried women that he brings two home from the pub late one night. D. H. Lawrence wrote eight plays in his lifetime, and this is the second, written when he was twenty-five. Though the work feels like it's missing its last act, this vivid depiction of the very moment a marriage ends is alive with Lawrence's particular fascination with relationships between men and women. Every performance, including those of the children, is fully realized in this well-oiled production, directed by Stuart Howard. (Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231.)

YOU'RE WELCOME AMERICA. A FINAL NIGHT WITH GEORGE W BUSH

Will Ferrell, whose rise to fame playing cocky half-wits coincided handily with the Presidency of George W. Bush, brings his masterly impersonation to Broadway. "I feel as free as balls in boxers," W. tells us—after expressing good wishes for "the Tiger Woods guy"—then proceeds to reflect on his life, his accomplishments, and his genitals. With the director Adam McKay, Ferrell has deftly fleshed out his "Saturday Night Live" impression into a refined comic character, able to sustain a full evening of yuks. And it's a fine time to satirize our forty-third President; with Bush out of office, the laughter is angst-free, joyful in the knowledge that the only harm he can do now is to the Texas brush. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. Through March 15.)

ZOMBIE

Bill Connington wrote and performs this solo play about a psychopathic serial killer, adapted from the novella by Joyce Carol Oates. (Studio, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

Also Playing

ASTRONOME: A NIGHT AT THE OPERA: Ontological-Hysteric, St. Marks Church, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-352-3101. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BECKY SHAW:** Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. Through March 15. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN:** Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200. Through March 15. **ENTER LAUGHING:** St. Peter's, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 212-935-5820. **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS:** Minetta Lane, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100. **HEDDA GABLER:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4100. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **KRAPP, 39:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **THE LITTLE MERMAID:** Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **SHREK THE MUSICAL:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200. **SLEEPWALK WITH ME:** Bleecker Street Theatre, 45 Bleecker St. 212-239-6200. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **THE 39 STEPS:** Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-239-6200.

TABLES FOR TWO
10 DOWNING FOOD & WINE

10 Downing St. (212-255-0300)—This well-appointed gallery, which opened recently in the Village, conveniently lists its curator right on the menu. Tracy Williams, Ltd., has decorated nearly every inch of 10 Downing Food & Wine with pricey works of contemporary art by people such as Will Cotton and Shamus Clisset. Diners proclaim things like "Oh my God, I'd hang any of these in my apartment," and, fittingly, a yellow-and-black drawing by Matt Mullican incorporates the declaration "I love to work for Truth and Beauty." It seems the owners have flipped an old real-estate trick on its head: it's not sweet smells from the kitchen that make the place more appealing, but rather the beauty of the layout that enhances the food. 10 Downing has quickly attracted a glossy clientele—nightly throngs of big bags, skinny jeans, and suspicious looks up and down. Whitney Port's "The City" has filmed there. It's reservation hell.

Purgatory, meanwhile, is where 10 Downing's chef, Jason Neroni, has found himself lately, looking to expiate the sins of his culinary past. Over the last two years, Neroni has been busted for soliciting votes for a James Beard award via e-mail (pride), been accused by a former boss of petty larceny (avarice, though he says the charges were dismissed), and introduced the world to the pork margarita (gluttony). If some of his cooking here—vaguely pan-European, with prawns *a la plancha,* duck-meatball cassoulet, and gnocchi pocked with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms—comes off seeming restrained, you can't blame him. Still, among recent starters, the smokiness of a delicious sunchoke soup was keenly tempered with a dollop of whipped crème fraîche, while a bowl of roasted Brussels sprouts included a delightful breaded poached egg. The squid-ink *agnolotti* with peekytoe crab was certainly clever, though awfully fishy. A lamb shank, big enough for a Neanderthal, proved somehow tender but not succulent. Both the duck and the rib eye showed up rare, the former infused with flavor, the latter choked in fat.

So many guests choose to endure 10 Downing's sizable wait times that the restaurant's sliver of a bar area often becomes a kind of holding paddock. To pass the time the other night, a young woman took to sketching the row of artisanal-beer taps in front of her. With the right frame, the drawing could have hung on the walls, too. (Open weekdays for dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées $23-$28.)

—*Mike Peed*

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

BARBÈS

376 9th St., Park Slope, Brooklyn (347-422-0248)—March 17: **Robbie Fulks** destroyed any shot at a mainstream Nashville career with the release of the 1997 song "Fuck This Town," and he's an alternative-country hero, wedding pedal-steel-sweet tunes and perfect, elegant lyrics with the best of them. Fulks is also incredibly prolific, having just released "50-vc. Doberman," a fifty-song MP3 download. He recently moved to the Windsor Terrace section of Brooklyn—maybe he'll write a new tune as he walks to this gig.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—March 11: The pianist and vocalist **Leon Russell** came out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, hit L.A., and became part of the legendary Wrecking Crew, Phil Spector's studio band, playing on some of the greatest records of the sixties. His Father Time visage (or was it the Grim Reaper?) became familiar to the rock world when he teamed up with Joe Cocker for the "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" tour, at the end of the decade. Russell's place in the songwriting pantheon is secure, with such contributions as "Delta Lady," "Superstar," and "A Song for You." His band has a rollicking, gospel-tinged momentum, and his raspy voice still goes right through you. March 15: In pop-culture time, it's been eons since **Public Enemy's** furious, funky agitprop was the conscience of hip-hop, but their message remains as potent as ever. March 17: The local Irish rock band **Black 47** has been politically and historically aware since its inception—its name refers to the worst year of the potato famine. Its leader, Larry Kirwan, doesn't confine his work to the past, though. Last year, he brought current events and the battlefield home with a deft touch on his band's release "Iraq."

BEACON THEATRE

Broadway at 74th St. (800-745-3000)—March 9-10, March 12-14, and March 16-17: The **Allman Brothers.** The front end of a fifteen-evening stand with the Southern rockers from Macon, who, when they started out, in 1969, already seemed like a troop of battle-scarred veterans. Despite the periodic feuding, the splinter groups, and the devastating deaths, these grizzled midnight riders can still bring down the house. Through March 28.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—March 11: The **Airborne Toxic Event,** a Los Angeles quintet that takes its name from Don DeLillo's novel "White Noise," has a flair for crisp dance rock. March 12: The **Soundtrack of Our Lives,** from Sweden, plays indie rock that matches the ethereal psychedelia of classic Pink Floyd with the rollicking swagger of Iggy and the Stooges. March 15: **A. C. Newman,** the front man for the New Pornographers, stops by with songs from his latest solo album, "Get Guilty."

BROOKLYN MASONIC TEMPLE

317 Clermont St. (866-468-7619)—March 13: **Les Savy Fav,** who came together some dozen years ago at the Rhode Island School of Design, have been much imitated for their high-energy approach to murky guitar rock.

CARNEGIE HALL

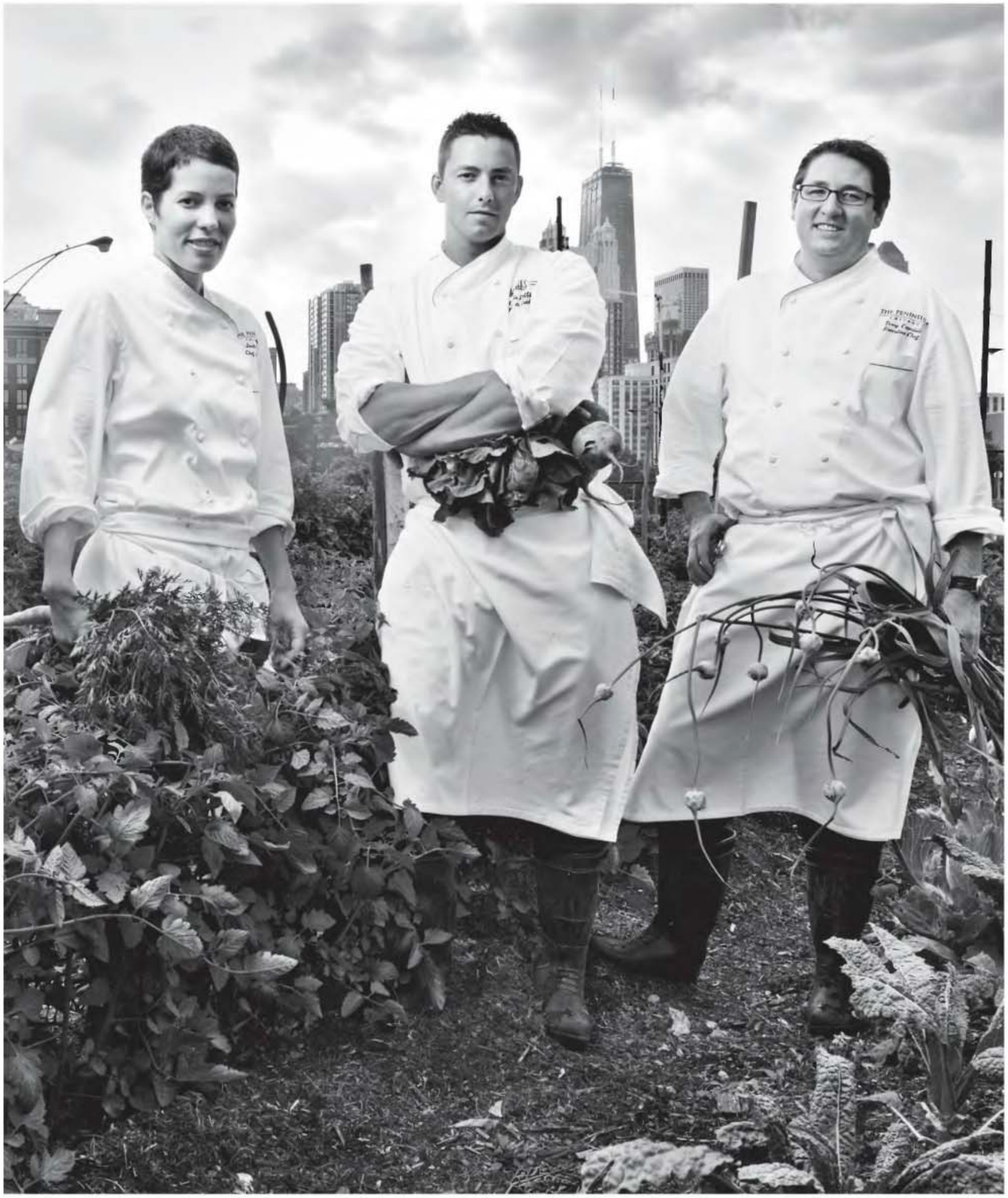
Seventh Ave. at 57th St. (212-247-7800)—March 11: **"The Music of R.E.M."** Some might say that the Athens, Georgia, band's earliest days, during the mid-eighties, were its greatest, when it threw out richly textured, if occasionally indecipherable, albums like "Murmur," "Reckoning," and "Fables of the Reconstruction" at the rate of one a year. Music-industry accountants probably favor the later releases, which charted incessantly. This tribute show, which features **Elf Power, Glen Hansard, Keren Ann, Marshall Crenshaw, Patti Smith, Rhett Miller,** and many other acts, promises to touch on the band's entire wide-ranging catalogue. **Calexico** is the house band. Proceeds from the show will benefit music-education programs.

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—March 12: On **Los Lobos'** latest release, "The Town and

HONORE BROWN

PORTRAITS *of* PENINSULA



A great meal starts with the right ingredients: take these three for example. Chefs Joelle Moles, Curtis Duffy and Terrance Crandall have all won accolades for the freshness of their ideas as well as their cuisine. To learn more about the world's most celebrated hotels, please visit peninsula.com.

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HOTELS

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
DROPPING GEMS

Mica Levi is a twenty-one-year-old woman from Surrey, England. She has a gap between her two front teeth, a low speaking voice, and a mop of curly hair that hides everything but her nose and mouth. On her own, she has composed for

the London Philharmonic and recorded with grime m.c.s. With her band, Micachu and the Shapes, she has made an exuberant, brief, and unapologetically smart album, "Jewellery." Three minutes is long for a Micachu song, and traditional instruments are not exactly the order of the day. Levi's guitar is half-sized and often has something stuck in it. Live, the band makes use of a Hoover vacuum cleaner for extra bass frequencies. The arrangements, too, are hyperkinetic, skipping from static to trumpet samples, from chanting to sugary oohing and aahing. "Jewellery" is a lovable racket, peppered with dozens of tiny, brilliant motifs. Later this month, Micachu and the Shapes play a series of shows at the Cake Shop (March 23), Death by Audio (March 24), and Pianos (March 25).

—Sasha Frere-Jones

the City," the songwriters David Hidalgo and Louie Perez deliver, with a couple of key assists from Cesar Rosas, a first-person song cycle that is one of the major triumphs of the East L.A. band's twenty-five-plus-year career. They draw on blues, Mexican, rockabilly, and jazz forms (among others). In concert, they add considerable showmanship to their impeccable singing and playing. March 15: The **Wailers,** the Jamaican outfit that once backed reggae's greatest ambassador, Bob Marley.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—March 17: **Herman Dune** are folk-pop rockers with the catchy and honest sensibility of Jonathan Richman—if Richman sang with a thick French accent (the slightly nomadic act is from France, though they claim to have roots in Sweden). Now primarily a duo of the brothers David-Ivar and Neman Herman Dune (a Ramones-esque construction; their real names are a closely guarded secret), they are back in the States en route to the "South by Southwest" music festival in Austin, performing songs from their latest album, "Next Year in Zion." With **Toby Goodshank.** The prolific former Moldy Peaches guitarist (he has seventeen solo albums and another on the way) sings associative dreamlike songs that combine the irreverent with the sublime, creating a universe fraught with humor, sadness, and ultimately redemption.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG

66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—March 12: Stalwarts of the American alternative scene from back when it was called "college rock," Boston's **Throwing Muses** crafted endearingly off-kilter music that wobbled between accessible pop and surreal post-punk. Though its co-founder, Tanya Donelly, left the fold ages ago (to form the Breeders and later her own band, Belly), the Muses' mainstay, Kristen Hersh, is still with them. March 14: The Brooklyn act **Crystal Stilts** eschews the neurotic, angular tension that was recently fashionable in favor of a more resonant, dreamy production. On its début album, "Alight of Night," which came out last month, the band delivers a particularly spectral (and extremely rewarding) articulation of garage pop. March 15: At a series of house parties in Manchester, England, Katie White and Jules De Martino put some serious electronics and catchy guitar and vocal riffs in front of a heavy beat and struck gold as the **Ting Tings.** The name comes from the Mandarin word for "bandstand."

NASSAU COLISEUM

1255 Hempstead Turnpike, Uniondale (800-745-3000)—March 13: **Fleetwood Mac,** which still has the original rhythm section of the drummer Mick Fleetwood and the bassist John McVie, was a straight-ahead British blues band when it started out, in the mid-sixties. It added some folk and psychedelic colors, picked up a couple of California free agents in the mid-seventies (the guitarist Lindsey Buckingham and the singer Stevie Nicks, who are also still with the band), and exploded on the pop scene. The group is currently on a hits-heavy tour, promoting the release of a new multimedia version of its 1977 album, "Rumours," which is practically a greatest-hits album all by itself.

(LE) POISSON ROUGE

158 Bleecker St. (212-796-0741)—March 10: **Fast 'n Bulbous,** the Captain Beefheart band led by the former Don Van Vliet cohort Gary Lucas, on guitar, and the Microscopic Septet's Phillip Johnston, on saxophone. March 14: The barroom-seasoned baritone **Joe Hurley** leads a cast of thousands (to indulge in a bit of blarney) in an early all-star St. Patrick's Day celebration.

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

Sixth Ave. at 50th St. (212-247-4777)—March 13-14: **Celtic Woman** delivers glossy versions of traditional Celtic tunes as well as more contemporary fare like Enya's "Orinoco Flow" and the theme from "The Lord of the Rings." The group, which was put together by a "Riverdance" veteran and a few Irish entrepreneurs for a PBS television special a few years ago, has been a smashing success. March 15: **Simply Red,** the British blue-eyed-soul juggernaut (best known in this country for its late-eighties hits "Holding Back the Years" and "If You Don't Know Me by Now" and fronted by the ruby-locked Mick Hucknall), is on a farewell tour. But the smooth, coffee-shop-ready sounds of Simply Red are not about to vanish anytime soon. Last year, Hucknal, who recently become a father and cleaned up his famously debauched life style, cut a tribute album to the gritty blues singer Bobby (Blue) Bland. It's as jazzed-up and polished as anything that came out under the name Simply Red over the last quarter century.

ROSELAND

239 W. 52nd St. (800-745-3000)—March 13-14: The **Pogues.** Given his heroic penchant for imbibing, it's somewhat miraculous that Shane MacGowan is still alive, let alone fronting this iconoclastic band a good twenty-seven years after its rollicking début deftly fused the spirit of punk rock with traditional Irish folk music. MacGowan's stately Joycean lyrics and the band's storied musical chops are highly revered, while its gigs continue to be rife with chaos.

SANTOS PARTY HOUSE

96 Lafayette St. (212-584-5492)—March 14: M.I.A. and Diplo think that they have found the next big import in the South African rockers **BLK JKS.** Their forthcoming EP, "Mystery," emerges as a testament to a global form of cultural exchange; at its best, BLK JKS's jumbling of avant-dub and psychedelic funk makes for a jarring and worthwhile listen.

THE STONE

Avenue C at 2nd St. (No phone)—March 15: The Czech avant-garde vocalist and violinist **Iva Bittová** first came to widespread attention in the early nineties, following the release of "Step Across the Border," a documentary about the British guitarist Fred Frith that featured an outdoor duet between the two musicians. Since then, Bittova has brought her haunting sound, a combination of Eastern European modes, rock, and theatrical improvisation (she calls it "my own folk music") all over the world. She has the ability to sing elaborate phrases while accompanying herself on the violin, creating a riveting and intense spectacle. For this show, she'll be accompanied by her fellow avant-garde visionary **Lisa Moore,** on piano. (For more information, visit www.thestonenyc.com.)

TERMINAL 5

610 W. 56th St. (212-582-6600)—March 15: The awkward and lovable vocals of **Modest Mouse.** The long-running indie-rock group from Seattle became an overnight success in the summer of 2004 when its album "Good News for People Who Love Bad News" delivered a surprise hit single, "Float On." The band's most recent release, "We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank," did even better: it hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts two years ago. Rumors are circulating that the band has an EP in the works.

TOWN HALL

123 W. 43rd St. (212-840-2824)—March 14: **Natalie MacMaster.** This Cape Breton native has fiddling in her blood—her uncle is Buddy MacMaster, the dean of the windswept island's fiddle culture. But she is not at all provincial. Her work has its share of jigs and reels, but it also includes bluegrass and world-music influences.

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—March 14: **Butch Walker** left his post fronting the chart-grazing modern-rock band Marvelous 3 to produce songs for Avril Lavigne, Simple Plan, the Donnas, and many other artists, but he hasn't lost his taste for the rock-and-roll life. In fact, he glamorizes it to great effect on his 2006 album, "The Rise and Fall of Butch Walker and the Let's-Go-Out-Tonites," which is full of tales of sex and glitter. But his life hasn't been just one big party. In the fall of 2007, the house he was renting in Malibu containing all of his possessions was consumed in a wildfire. His latest solo album, "Sycamore Meadows," is named for the street where that house once stood.

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE

The Institute brings two of São Paulo's most compelling young singers to town for its Brasil Fest. The vocalist **Mariana Aydar** makes her American début on March 13, and **Jair Oliveira,** the son of the legendary samba singer Jair Rodrigues, takes the stage on March 14. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information about both shows, call 212-545-7536.)

JASHAR AWAN

LOSE AND FIND
YOURSELF IN
ONE BITE
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PETIT ÉCOLIER
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JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—March 10-21: Be it a Broadway stage or an intimate cabaret, **Tom Wopat** fills any performance space with a voice that mirrors his large-scale personality.

ALLEN ROOM
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—March 13-14: **Lynda Carter** deflected bullets on television in the seventies as Wonder Woman. Lately, she's mastered an even tougher act: winning over critics as a cabaret artist. She's here with a preview of her forthcoming album, "At Last."

An unattributed photograph from "Valentina: American Couture and the Cult of Celebrity," at the Museum of the City of New York.

COURTESY NINA FRANTZEN/RIZZOLI

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—March 11-14: On the 2007 album "Pastorale," the lauded pianist **Steve Kuhn** and the bassist **Eddie Gomez** displayed their empathetic communication skills. They'll be joined here by the drummer **Al Foster.**

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 12-15: The Philadelphian saxophonist **Odean Pope**—a mainstay of the late Max Roach's bands—convenes his horn-heavy Saxophone Choir, which includes here **James Carter** as a guest soloist.

CAFÉ CARLYLE
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—March 11-28: The British vocalist **Barb Jungr** presents a new show, "The Men I Love," drawing on the work of Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and others.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 10-11: The pianist **Denny Zeitlin,** a West Coast legend, has fashioned an enviable rapport over the past decade with the bassist **Buster Williams** and the drummer **Matt Wilson.** March 12-15: **Phil Woods's** longevity as a major bop-based saxophone stylist is matched by the survival of his longtime quintet, which includes the pianist **Bill Mays** and the trumpeter **Brian Lynch.**

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—March 11-15: Two venerated veteran players—the saxophonist **Frank Wess** and the pianist **Hank Jones**—turn to such composers as Berlin, Porter, and Arlen in their "Salute the Broadway Masters" show. Both men have been drawing on a similar repertoire for the better part of six decades, so there's little to fear and much to expect.

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—March 13-14, in the Rose Theatre: The Cuban-born woodwind virtuoso **Paquito D'Rivera** welcomes the Brazilian singer **Leny Andrade** and the Israeli clarinettist **Anat Cohen** for an excursion into the *choro* and samba music of Brazil.

JAZZ GALLERY
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—March 11: The intrepid alto saxophonist **Lee Konitz** performs duets with the pianist **Dan Tepfer.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—March 12-15: **Mose Allison,** the acerbically brilliant octogenarian pianist, composer, and singer, remains a national treasure. March 17: **The Refuge Trio,** featuring the unusual combination of the vocalist **Theo Bleckmann,** the drummer **John Hollenbeck,** and the keyboardist **Gary Versace,** throws a wide net over the new-music, cabaret, and jazz sectors.

(LE) POISSON ROUGE
158 Bleecker St. (212-796-0741)—March 12: During its late-eighties and early-nineties heyday, the saxophone-heavy **Microscopic Septet** drew on a cache of inspired improvisers and two of the era's most sophisticated and stylistically slippery jazz composers and players—the pianist Joel Forrester and the saxophonist Phillip Johnston. This reunion promises equal parts zaniness and braininess, as heard on the band's recent album, "Lobster Leaps In." They're splitting the bill with **One Ring Zero,** which turns out a literary klezmer-Gypsy-midway-music hybrid using the accordion, the toy piano, various household appliances, and other exotic instruments. The core of the act is Michael Hearst and Joshua Camp, who have been making music together for more than ten years.

SMALLS
183 W. 10th St. (212-252-5091)—March 12: The swing and stride pianist **Ehud Asherie** performs duets with the trumpeter **Jon-Erik Kellso.** Later that night: The pianist **Don Friedman,** a musician's musician of long standing, fronts a trio with the bassist **Martin Wind.** March 13: The Spanish singer **Xavier Casellas** is joined by the guitarist **Ben Monder,** the pianist **Emilio Solla,** and others.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 10-15: No living musician exemplifies the funky side of Blue Note Records' classic era like the irrepressible and highly accomplished alto saxophonist **Lou Donaldson. Pat Bianchi** joins him on the essential Hammond B-3 organ. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Cast in Bronze: French Sculpture from Renaissance to Revolution."** Through May 24. ♦ **"Raphael to Renoir: Drawings from the Collection of Jean Bonna."** Through April 26. ♦ **"Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400-1600."** Through June 21. ♦ **"Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors."** Through April 19. ♦ **"Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard."** Through May 25. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective."** Through May 11. ♦ **"Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Words in Freedom: Futurism at 100."** Through April 6. ♦ **"a shimmer of possibility: Photographs by Paul Graham."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Projects 89: Klara Liden."** Through June 8. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989."** Through April 19. ♦ **"The Hugo Boss Prize 2008: Emily Jacir."** Through April 15. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect."** Through May 31. ♦ **"Elad Lassry: Three Films."** Through April 30. ♦ **"Sites."** Through May 3. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"The Black List Project: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and Elvis Mitchell."** Through March 29. ♦ **"Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection."** Through April 5. ♦ **"Unearthing the Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture."** Through May 10. ♦ **"Hernan Bas: Works from the Rubell Family Collection."** Through May 24. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future."** Through Aug. 19 ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 25. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

AMERICAS SOCIETY
Park Ave. at 68th St. (212-249-8950)—**"Moon Tears: Mapuche Art and Cosmology."** Through April 11. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, noon to 6.)

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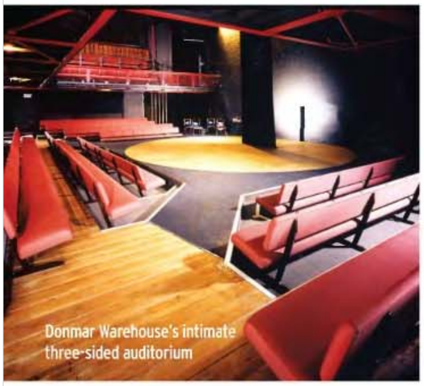

Donmar Warehouse's intimate three-sided auditorium

DONMAR WAREHOUSE

Pushing Theatre's Boundaries

London's Donmar Warehouse is a 250-seat nonprofit theatre with big ambitions: to leverage its reputation for producing award-winning plays into an international theatre brand. Since Michael Grandage became Artistic Director in 2002, Donmar productions have been brought to stages worldwide. In New York, its revival of Friedrich Schiller's "Mary Stuart" opens at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre April 19th.

The Donmar is also in the midst of a yearlong London residency in West End's 800-seat Wyndham's Theatre, an effort to bring its dramatic work to a larger audience while maintaining its affordable prices. Grandage will direct Judi Dench and Rosamund Pike in Yukio Mishima's "Madame de Sade" at the Wyndham's beginning March 13th. In an interview, Grandage spoke about the Donmar's mission.

How does Donmar fit into the landscape of London theatre?

Grandage: When I became Artistic Director, I wanted to introduce different work—the European classical repertoire, authors like Camus, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Pirandello, who hadn't been seen much on the London stage. I wanted to create a theatre where people can be challenged by work that crosses over various centuries and over various authors, and in the mix does musicals and new plays.

How we present the plays is also part of crafting this thing called the Donmar. For instance, we put most of our money into production. So when you come into the theatre it has been completely transformed physically. That adds up to a Donmar house style, an overall aesthetic and vision.

How do you translate that into a theatre brand that produces work for multiple spaces?

Grandage: You can only do it if you're very sure that the brand means something. So when we've come to New York or Australia or toured America or the U.K., it's important that Donmar is doing the kind of work that we do here.

The Wyndham's season has been a completely different experiment, which is about creating work in a bigger space and seeing whether we can transform it in a Donmar way. It was born out of me asking Judi Dench, Kenneth Branagh, Jude Law, and Derek Jacobi, "Would you do a Donmar production in *another* venue so more people can see you?" They all signed up, even when I said it can't be a commercial venture. Our prices are way below the range of those of the West End and Broadway.

How do you make a play relevant to first-time theatregoers, particularly in an era of on-demand entertainment?

Grandage: For all of the on-demand entertainment there is, nothing ever beats the live experience. It's better to go to a gallery than to see a painting online, it's better to go to a music concert than to hear it on a CD, and it's certainly better to go to a play.

Things happen in an auditorium when people come together to watch an event of any kind. That's part of making theatre and that is what is exciting about it.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DONMAR WAREHOUSE. "OTHELLO" PRODUCTION STILL OF EWAN MCGREGOR AND CHIWETEL EJIOFOR ©JOHAN PERSSON; *BELOW:* JANET MCTEER AS "MARY STUART" ©NEIL LIBBERT

Donmar's "Mary Stuart" comes to New York in April

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COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Fashioning Felt."** Through Sept. 7. ♦ **"Shazia Sikandfer Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection."** Through Sept. 7. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum."** Through May 10. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now."** Through May 3. ♦ **"This Is Not a Fashion Photograph."** Through May 3. ♦ **"Edward Steichen: In High Fashion."** Through May 3. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

JAPAN SOCIETY
333 E. 47th St. (212-752-3015)—**"KRAZY! The Delirious World of Anime, Manga, and Video Games."** Through June 14. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"The Thaw Collection of Master Drawings: Acquisitions Since 2002."** Through May 3. ♦ **"On the Money: Cartoons for The New Yorker."** Through May 24. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"Broken Glass: Photographs of the South Bronx by Ray Mortenson."** Through April 12. ♦ **"Valentina: American Couture and the Cult of Celebrity."** Through May 17. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913."** Through June 29. (Open Thursdays, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

EMMET GOWIN
The reissue of Gowin's first book of photographs prompts this exhibition of images from that 1976 monograph. The prime subject of these small black-and-white prints is Gowin's immediate family and their rural Virginia home, but they're hardly conventional pictures of the wife and kids. Edith Gowin, one of photography's great muses, looks like a Dorothea Lange sharecropper, so her frequent, entirely matter-of-fact nudity is startling. With Edith as a collaborator, Gowin probed family intimacy and its undertow of eroticism as well as the quotidian wonders of country life, inspiring Sally Mann, Andrea Modica, and a host of others. Through March 21. (Pace MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

KORI NEWKIRK
A six-foot, ovoid steel-and-Plexiglas sculpture is billed as a self-portrait (talk about a swelled head). Its shimmering blue panels suggest stained glass, a medium typically used to portray saints. Handsome as Newkirk's sculpture is, it glosses over the underlying issues of constructed identity and self-mythologizing. A trio of drawings, made with bleach on blue paper, which schematize the head as a collection of planar curves, are just as visually appealing, but, once again, the conceptual underpinning—Newkirk is black and his use of bleach, a whitening agent, is loaded—is hinted at rather than fully explored. Through March 20. (The Project, 37 W. 57th St. 212-688-4673.)

"PLACING AVERY: PAINTINGS AND PRINTS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NEUBERGER MUSEUM OF ART"
A more apt title for this show might have been "Pairing Avery," as it matches Milton Avery (1885-1965) with other artists. The effect is illuminating. We learn that Avery's command of color, scrubby dry-brush technique, and simplified approach to pictorial space were both influenced by and crucial to other artists. Among the luminaries from the Neuberger's collection are such American painters as Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, William Baziotes, and Adolph Gottlieb. Braque, Picasso, and Matisse are represented by minor works. Some of the best walls, however, are those in which Avery is shown on his own terms. Through May 1. (UBS Art Gallery, 1285 Sixth Ave., at 51st St. 212-713-2885.)

Short List

DAN GRAHAM: Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through March 28. **RICHARD PHILLIPS:** Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313. Opens March 14. **FRANZ WEST:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through April 25.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

KAMROOZ ARAM
The ingenuously mystical motifs—flowered cliffs flanking the fall of a shattered golden bird, or a whole golden bird on a tor radiating fireworks-like glory—in a show unguardedly titled "Of Flame and Splendour" are so easy to resist that succumbing to them becomes the more interesting tack. The trick is to identify with Aram's gee-whiz crush on paint, which he slathers, drips, and turp-wipes with straining abandon in some works that recall nocturne-period Ross Bleckner (chandelier, minaret, cloud, starburst) in a bouncier vein. Aram essays so much that you're not supposed to get away with that it's a gas. Through April 9. (Rubenstein, 527 W. 23rd St. 212-627-8000.)

LUCA BUVOLI
When the Italian art movement Futurism, which eventually fell prey to Fascism, turned one hundred last month, MOMA celebrated by screening Buvoli's video of stutterers and aphasics reading aloud from F. T. Marinetti's deliriously aggressive "Futurist Manifesto." The artist, who was born in Brescia, describes the piece as a "symbolic critique of the rhetoric of velocity, virility, and violence in our society." The video is on view here, but the centerpiece of the show, an airborne cascade of translucent green panels that fills the main space and conjures a speeding car (the Futurist mascot), reads more like a whimsical homage than an ambivalent reappraisal. Through March 21. (Inglett, 522 W. 24th St. 212-647-9111.)

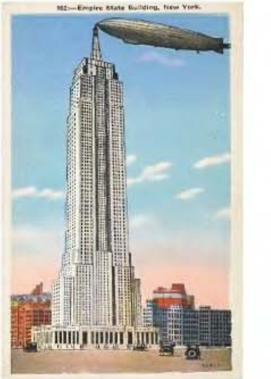
ELGER ESSER
The Dusseldorf-based Esser has a rather more romantic take on the landscape than most contemporary German photographers. His latest show opens with three photographs of shipwrecks appropriated from vintage postcards, blown up to the size of picture windows and hand-colored. The enormous scale tends to undercut the nostalgia, but there's a similar wistfulness in the trio of recent landscapes that follow, all drained of color except for a warm wash of pale yellow and green. A suite of nine views of Proust's Combray completes this remembrance of things past on a more formal note, with black-and-white photoengravings that seem destined for postcards themselves. Through March 21. (Sonnabend, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-627-1018.)

SIMON EVANS
The Berlin-based young Brit shows terrifically charming word works in scrappily drawn and collaged maps, charts, diary pages, CD covers, and what all. The mode is poignant recall. We read, amid myriad texts pasted to a pyramid, "mum and dad drunk on holiday so loving" and "things taste better when you cut them in half." A station on a map of the London Underground seems to have been a site for "using the 60's as an excuse." A distant view of planet Earth occasions musing on "defection, copulation, and murder." Botched romance is anatomized: "saying what I don't fully believe and expecting you to ignore it." A disillusioned CD: "funny won't get us to the moon." Through April 4. (James Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500.)

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
MAIL OF THE SPECIES

Walker Evans, one of the most influential American artists of the last century, had his own influences, and chief among them was the ordinary postcard. Evans began collecting penny postcards as a child and amassed more than nine thousand during his lifetime. Some seven hundred are on view at the Met, in an engrossing show that uses Evans's collection to illuminate his work. Juxtaposed in the galleries, the connection could not be more obvious. Like the anonymous photographers employed by postcard companies, Evans framed the American landscape in an artless, matter-of-fact style suited to his humble subjects: small-town Main Streets, country churches, weathered storefronts. But he was not imitating his inspiration, he was interpreting and refining it. The exhibition includes a number of photographs that Evans cropped and printed in postcard format for an unrealized MOMA project, paring the images down to their elegant essence. Keeping it simple and straightforward, Evans turned pop into art.

—*Vince Aletti*


102—Empire State Building, New York.

WALKER EVANS ARCHIVE/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

GAIL ALBERT HALABAN
Like so many New Yorkers, Halaban can't help staring into her neighbors' windows, but she's made an art of it. Most of her big color photographs are views across streets, alleyways, or airshafts into apartments. A man plays with his dog; a young couple cuddle with their baby; the solitary stand in Hopperesque isolation. The fact that Halaban has staged these moments doesn't make them any less resonant of the contradictory impulses of metropolitan life: the desire to connect and the need to be left alone. Voyeurs will be frustrated by Halaban's polite scenarios, but she's playing the good neighbor. Through March 28. (Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 24th St. 212-989-7600.)

LEON KOSSOFF
Early mature oils, circa 1957-1967, by the British sludge master can't have fully dried very long ago. Their exceedingly thick, clumpy, and striated surfaces memorialize studio frenzies that are curiously at odds with the dispiriting portrait heads and nudes that occasioned them. Colors are arrested in a lemming rush toward terminal mud by residual traces of liverish red, say, or sickish pink. There's often a wistful sense of some specific, intimate, even delicate intention shivering in the storm of expensive pigment. This might compel if you imagine yourself being Leon Kossoff. If you want to. Through March 28. (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St. 212-744-7400.)

ANDREW LORD
Wonderfully, the great ceramics sculptor has departed from vessel forms to model details of landscapes and man-made structures from memories of his childhood in Whitworth, England—cliffs and valleys, dams and bridges, buildings and columnar monuments, a tree branch, a waterfall, a peopled swimming hole, birds, lone figures. The lumpy facture is fast and finger-marked. The lovely glazes alternate among green-gold, charcoal (with the odd silver or gold dribble), and creamy lavender. There's a sense that only clay could enable the artist's urgent efforts to nail misty nostalgias, on the fly, down into corporeal self-evidence. The show is a triumph in and of a medium. Through March 28. (Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300.)

PIERO MANZONI
It's bad-boy season. Kippenberger's at MOMA, and Manzoni, the self-taught Italian who tested the limits of painting and sculpture in his abrupt, influential career (he died in 1963, at the age of twenty-nine), has a museum-worthy show in Chelsea. A simple iron base, inscribed with the upside-down words "Socle du Monde," transforms the earth into a ready-made sculpture; cans labelled "Artist's Shit" mock both the commodification of art and the fetishization of the creative process. Best of all, the show places Manzoni in a wide-ranging context, exhibiting his "achromes"—scruffy canvases encrusted with colorless matter from white clay to cotton balls—alongside works by Yves Klein, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, and others. Through March 21. (Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111.)

ERIK PARKER
Imagine a graduate of the Peter Saul School, Department of Lari Pittmania, at Salvador Dali University, majoring in night-life studies. That's the German-born New Yorker Parker, whose new, big, high-calorie enamel and acrylic paintings of disintegrated heads aggress from the walls. In neon reds and pinks, deep blues, some yellows, and not much green, the jukebox countenances emerge as shaped flurries of toylike wriggles and soft machinery in geometric and arabesque grounds. "Crisis Creation," Parker perhaps anxiously calls a show that feels as belated, suddenly, as a hedge-funder's bonus blown over a caution-to-the-winds weekend in Rio. Through March 28. (Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave. 212-563-4474.)

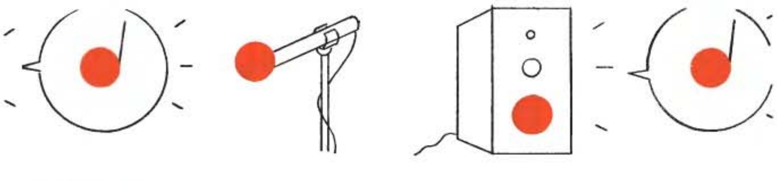
SUSAN ROTHENBERG
New paintings bring Rothenberg's trusty kinesthetic intensity to bear on a rangy variety of one-off, antic, nonchalantly dire images: dismembered marionettes, sad-sack personages. Misleading in reproduction, which scants their marvels of surface and color, the works thrill in person. (Greens as persuasively fleshy flesh colors must be seen to be imagined.) The usual Rothenbergian sense of stubborn psychological imbroglio yields, here and there, to passages of breakthrough mastery, conveying the electric tingle of being a great painter in the best ten minutes of a good day. Through April 11. (Sperone Westwater, 415 W. 13th St. 212-999-7337.)

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
Schneemann earned a spot in art history with her feminist performances in the sixties and seventies. For a tutorial, visit the Nitsch gallery, where photographs document such now iconic pieces as "Interior Scroll," in which a naked Schneemann recited a text that she unfurled from her vagina. Her lesser-known paintings, made between 1957 and 1965, are presented here, densely populated with gestural brushstrokes reminiscent of Joan Mitchell—not to mention the patriarch Willem de Kooning. The show does include several videos and films, but even these, in which Schneemann's nude body is slathered with pigment, underscore the artist's adamant claim: "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter." Through March 28. (P.P.O.W, 511 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)

LISA YUSKAVAGE
Centering a vulva in a picture eases all sorts of structural problems. That's one takeaway from Yuskavage's sugary new paintings of nubile and bosomy, naked females in shadowy interiors and glowing fantasy landscapes. Most are seen singly, afire with narcissistic reverie. Two appear together, cozily in flagrante, by a mountain lake. Since the bland pathos of her last show, the artist has remobilized her inner vulgarian, prettily brushing id-drenched apparitions in delectable greens, pale golds, and dense blues. She proposes lucid decadence as a proper aspiration of art in fallen times. Can you let yourself love it? This show tests the resistance of our self-respect to shoot-the-works bliss. Through March 28. (David Zwirner, 533 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

Short List

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA: David Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070. Through March 28. **MATT KEEGAN:** D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460. Through April 25. **ELLSWORTH KELLY:** Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200. Through April 11. **ADAM MCEWEN:** Klasgbrun, 520 W. 20th St. 212-243-3335. Through April 18. **YOSHITOMO NARA:** Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889. Through March 28. **TONY OURSLER:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through April 11. **CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN:** Nitsch, 534 W. 22nd St. 212-645-2030. Through March 28. **DANA SCHUTZ:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Opens March 13. **MUNGO THOMSON:** John Connelly Presents, 625 W. 27th St. 212-337-9563. Through April 4. **"BROKEN THORN SWEET BLACKBERRY":** Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262. Through March 28. **"TALK DIRTY TO ME":** Goldston, 530 W. 25th St. 212-206-7887. Through March 28.



LAURENT CILLUFFO

POP NOTES

THE SWEETER THE BERRY

Hip-O Select's ambitious reissue philosophy has resulted in series devoted to the entire Motown catalogue (a dozen boxed sets to date) and James Brown's complete singles (six so far), but Chuck Berry has made out like a bandit, too. In 2007, Hip-O released a four-CD set of Berry's complete Chess recordings from the fifties. The sequel, **"You Never Can Tell: His Complete Chess Recordings 1960-66,"** is available now, and it's at once more uneven and more fascinating than its predecessor. The reasons are as biographical as they are artistic: in the late fifties, Berry transported (by car, of course) a young woman from Texas to Missouri and was subsequently convicted of violating the Mann Act. The original sentence was five years and a five-thousand-dollar fine; upon appeal, Berry went away from February, 1962, until October, 1963.

The prison sentence sidetracked one of the most successful careers in rock and roll, but it also served to cook it until it was hot. While Berry was away, new acts like the Beatles and the Beach Boys recorded his songs so often and with such enthusiasm that his audience grew, even as he sat still. And he wasn't exactly sitting still: he was reading up on business and law and also writing songs, many of which would not only consolidate his early fame but advance it. In late 1963, just after being released, he went into the studio with members of his band—the pianist Johnnie Johnson, the drummer Odie Payne, and the tenor saxophonist Leroy C. Davis—and cut "Nadine (Is It You?)" and "You Never Can Tell," instant additions to his canon.

This sense of drama runs through the set. The sessions from before Berry's incarceration find him in an exploratory mood. A pair of early 1960 dates with Matt (Guitar) Murphy approached straight blues; Berry himself played steel guitar on two stellar instrumentals, "Mad Lad" and "Surfin' Steel (Cryin' Steel)." After his release, the relaxed vibe is gone. In December, 1964, backed by a small, tough Chicago band anchored by the guitarist Jules Blattner, Berry not only spits out the not quite double entendre "Want to Be Your Driver" but also tears through "Dear Dad," one of his shortest, finest car songs. Elsewhere on the set, there are pleasurable oddities (a pair of long instrumental duets with Bo Diddley, a pair of exceedingly loose Big Joe Turner covers) and buried-treasure originals ("You Two," "Trick or Treat"). The last recordings on the set, from April, 1966, include the lickerish "Ramona Say Yes" ("All in favor of Ramona's style, say yes / Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes") and the blistering "Viva Viva Rock 'N' Roll." The latter of these, which finds Berry in fierce celebration of his music (and himself), would stay in the can for half a decade; shortly after the April session, Berry signed with Mercury Records. He would return to Chess in 1969 and even cut some fine records, but it was never quite the same.

—Ben Greenman

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JACOB KASSAY
Art this conspicuously clever is rarely so beautiful. The twenty-four-year-old New Yorker amalgamates photography and monochrome painting—with

I will finally
get a programmable
thermostat.

And so will we.

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a tip of the squeegee to Gerhard Richter—by putting his paintings through chemical paces that mirror the silver-gelatin process. After layering his identically sized canvases with acrylic, Kassay sends them out to be professionally coated in reflective silver. The results, with their charred edges (the chemicals burn unprimed fabric) and mottled gleam, call to mind the deliquescent surfaces of Albert Pinkham Ryder as readily as the conceptual canniness of R.H. Quaytman. Kassay's paintings have a dusky, irresistible elegance, like the far sides of so many moons. Through March 29. (Eleven Rivington, 11 Rivington St. 212-982-1930.)

HENRY TAYLOR

The works here, all dated 2009, move beyond the portraiture of Taylor's 2007 Studio Museum show in favor of urban scenes painted on canvas, cardboard boxes, and a suitcase. Taylor's blunt painting style and streetwise subject matter have an outsiderish feel, but don't be fooled—the show is full of knowing references. In "Served Up," a man (the artist himself?) walks through a cluster of iconic images, borrowed from both pop culture (the Schlitz malt-liquor bull) and Pop art (a Rosenquist plate of spaghetti, a Warhol soup can). Look long enough at the hot-pants-wearing, midriff-baring hookers in "Double Up" and their pose starts to conjure Degas's dancers, with the curb doing double duty as the ballet barre. Through March 22. (Rental, 120 East Broadway. 212-608-6002.)

"ALMOST NEWS"

Artist Jocko Weyland collected these small, glossy black-and-white photographs while working at a news-photo agency, zeroing in on pictures from the nineteen-forties and fifties. More than two hundred unframed images alternate with photocopies of their identifying captions in a floor-to-ceiling grid that's a fascinating array of deadpan weirdness. Instead of accidents and crime scenes, Weyland looked for something he calls "homespun surrealism": a mechanical butterfly, a parakeet circus, a platter of plastic eyes. An image of Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup is also here, and the collision of vernacular and fine art is a running theme. Look for the picture of three people examining enormous scroll drawings by the unnamed Martin Ramirez, identified only as a "schizophrenic artist." Through April 11. (K.S. Art, 73 Leonard St. 212-219-9918.)

Short List

ERICA BAUM: Dispatch, 127 Henry St. 212-227-2783. Through March 22. **XAVIER CHA:** Taxter & Spengemann. 212-229-9029. Through March 28. **JOHN KESSLER:** Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 212-343-7300. Through April 4. **NATE LOWMAN:** Maccarone, 630 Greenwich St. 212-431-4977. Through March 28. **LAURA PARNES:** Participant, Inc., 253 E. Houston St. 212-254-4334. Through March 29.

DANCE

PAUL TAYLOR DANCE COMPANY

In its final week at City Center, this impressive troupe offers a last chance to see "Beloved Renegade," Taylor's newest work, a reflection on leave-taking and the role of the artist (on Sunday), as well as his dark piece "Scudorama," from 1963 (on Thursday), and his exuberant masterpiece "Esplanade" (Thursday and Saturday matinée), from 1975. The Saturday matinée also features two dreamy, sumptuously produced works, "De Sueños" and "De Sueños Que Se Repiten," both of which display an eclectic mix of Mexican symbolism and syncretic ritual. For a full schedule, visit www.nycitycenter.org. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. March 10-12 at 7, March 13 at 8, March 14 at 2 and 8, and March 15 at 3.)

SAVION GLOVER

At the Joyce, the leading luminary of tap presents "Solo in Time," a side trip into flamenco. Don't expect any but the most casual references to that dance form, or any evidence that Glover has studied its traditions. He relies on his ear, which usually merits such trust. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 10-11 and March 17 at 7:30, March 12-13 at 8, March 14 at 2 and 8, and March 15 at 2 and 7:30. Through March 22.)

ARMITAGE GONE! DANCE

"Think Punk!" is a welcome retrospective of Karole Armitage's breakthrough output from the eighties, when Armitage, a budding choreographer and Cunningham standout who favored a violent attack and punk music, was heralded as a perverse vindication of classical dance values. "Drastic Classicism," the piece so praised, is joined by "The Watteau Duets" (1985), a pas de deux partly performed in stiletto heels, and "Wild Thing" (1987), a duet to the Jimi Hendrix cover. "Mashup," a full-company première, stays in a similar spirit, clothed in a concept of the French philosopher Guy Debord. (Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. March 11-14 at 8.)

"Rock of Ages," an ode to eighties rock, at Brooks Atkinson.

PUNY

PAVEL ZUŠTIAK/PALISSIMO

Born in the former Czechoslovakia, Zuštiak has an interest in the darker shades of human behavior, which he explores in striking, even harrowing duets and trios. His new work, "Weddings and Beheadings," an offering of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Festival, was inspired in part by the experience of a dancer friend who fell in love while serving in the Israeli Army, thereby experiencing the exhilaration of simultaneous passion and panic. The stage design is a collage of projected images by the photographer Robert Flynt, with a soundscape by Zuštiak. (Ailey Citigroup, 405 W. 55th St. 212-415-5500. March 11-12 and March 14 at 8 and March 15 at 2.)

LORI BELILOVE & THE ISADORA DUNCAN DANCE COMPANY

The dedicated efforts of Belilove and her troupe are today's closest approximation to the century-old, world-changing aesthetic of Isadora Duncan—not as close as one would wish, but better than nothing. The pianist Anastasiya Popova accompanies two programs mixing Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms, with appearances by the junior company the Beliloveables. (Judson Memorial Church, 55 Washington Sq. S. 212-691-5040. March 11-13 at 8, March 14 at 3 and 8, and March 15 at 7.)

ANTONIETTA VICARIO MAKES DANCES

Vicario, a young choreographer interested in the representation of women and in extremes of movement, from static to thrashing, examines the relationship between the collective and the individual in "Our Togetherness." Uniformity and pooled force come first, as the all-female quartet treads heavily in an insistent rhythm. Gradually, the group splits, each dancer doing her own thing as the dance slows to its opposite pole in poses. Bradley Kemp, Josh Sinton, and Jacob Wick contribute a live sound score. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. March 12-14 at 8:30.)

NAI-NI CHEN DANCE COMPANY

A choreographer of often sumptuously theatrical visions, the Taiwanese-born Chen sets her international cast in the Silk Road desert for "Mirage." More specifically an evocation of China's Xinjiang region, home to a Muslim minority, the dance takes its drive from an original score by the cross-cultural percussionist Glen Velez. Two company favorites, "Bamboo Prayer" and "Calligraphy II," fill out the program. (Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Ave. 800-650-0246. March 13-14 at 8 and March 15 at 3.)

DEBORAH SLATER DANCE THEATRE

In "The Desire Line," the San Francisco-based choreographer borrows the compositions of the painter Alan Feltus—contemporary scenes of self-absorbed figures rendered as if by Piero della Francesca—and brings them to life in full-bodied, at times acrobatic, dance. The title refers to an architectural term designating the path people actually take as opposed to the one the designers had in mind, and Slater's domestic dramas turn on sudden shifts in course: a letter received, a glance. (Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer St. 212-352-3101. March 13-14 at 8 and March 15 at 3.)

"BALLET BUILDERS"

Every year for this showcase, a panel of dance professionals selects a short list of choreographers working in the ballet idiom—pointe shoes and at least some use of classical technique and positions required. This year, the choreographers include a dancer with Oregon Ballet Theatre (Anne Mueller), a teacher at Ballet Austin (Jennifer Hart), and the director of Boulder Ballet (Peter Davison). (DiCapo Opera, 184 E. 76th St. 212-868-4444. March 14 at 8 and March 15 at 3.)

"WORKS & PROCESS" / ETHAN STIEFEL

You may know him from his star turn in the ballet movie "Center Stage," or from his crisply executed performances with American Ballet Theatre, but this week at the Guggenheim, Stiefel will be wearing his other hat, as the recently named dean of the School of Dance at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. A group of his student dancers will demonstrate excerpts from classical and contemporary works, as well as a newly commissioned piece by the clever downtown choreographer Larry Keigwin. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. March 15-16 at 7:30.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Even for a bel-canto opera, Bellini's **"La Sonnambula,"** a melodrama about a sleepwalking girl in a Swiss village, strains the suspension of disbelief. It needs great artists: written for Pasta and Rubini, the finest Italian singers of the day, it flourished famously via the voices of Maria Callas and Cesare Valletti in the legendary 1955 production (by Luchino Visconti) at La Scala. Mary Zimmerman, the daring director who turned "Lucia di Lammermoor" on its head last season, gives the old warhorse a lighthearted, contemporary treatment, working with two more singers bound for greatness, Natalie Dessay and Juan Diego Flórez; Evelino Pidò conducts. (March 11 and March 14 at 8.) ♦ By taking the title role in Dvořák's tender fairy-tale opera **"Rusalka"** (about a water nymph who yearns to be human), Renée Fleming helped cement her hold upon Met audiences in the late nineteen-nineties. She brings her persuasive presence to the piece again this month, in what will be her last role at the house this season. She will be joined by an impressive cast that features Christine Goerke, Aleksandrs Antonenko, and, not least, the beloved Stephanie Blythe; the Czech master Jiří Bělohlávek conducts. (March 12 and March 17 at 8 and March 14 at 1.) ♦ David McVicar's new production of **"Il Trovatore"** thankfully banishes the ghost of the company's disastrous 2000 staging. With charismatic and capable singing from Sondra Radvanovsky (in a star-making turn in the role of Leonora), Dolora Zajick, Marcelo Álvarez, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky; voices and instruments fuse powerfully under the baton of Gianandrea Noseda. (March 13 at 8.) ♦ With Luciana D'Intino replacing Zajick. (March 16 at 8.) ♦ No one puts on a gala performance like the Met. Its **125th Anniversary Gala** celebrates not only that temporal benchmark but also the fortieth anniversary of Plácido Domingo's début with the company. As befits Peter Gelb's new Met, the evening's assemblage of stars (including such singers as Domingo, Blythe, Fleming, Flórez, Deborah Voigt, and René Pape) will not parade on and off in tuxes and gowns, but instead will participate in twenty-six staged scenes (from "Faust," "Rigoletto," "Carmen," and other operas) with sets and video projections designed by Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, whose production of "Satyagraha" was staged at the Met last season. (March 15 at 6.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

VERTICAL PLAYER REPERTORY: "VIGNETTES FROM 'DER ROSENKAVALIER' "
Count on Judith Barnes's edgy little company to give the old scenes-and-arias formula a twist. In its first drafts, Strauss and Hofmannsthal's opera was centered around the supporting character of Baron Ochs; Barnes employs the veteran actor Paul Hecht ("The Invention of Love") as a narrator to link the scenes together and enact the Baron's revenge. Barnes sings the role of the Marschallin; Cathy Venable is at the piano. (219 Court St. Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. 800-646-0686. March 12-13 at 8 and March 15 at 4.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Lorin Maazel and his orchestra, just back from a U.S. tour, serenade listeners with an audience-friendly program—Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" Overture, Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 (with Glenn Dicterow), Telemann's Concerto in A Major for Oboe d'Amore (with Thomas Stacy), and Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. March 13 at 2 and March 14 at 8.)

BAVARIAN RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Mariss Jansons, a master craftsman of orchestral sound, conducts his magnificent ensemble at Carnegie Hall. March 13 at 8: The invaluable Emanuel Ax is the soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 in C Major, the center of a concert bookended by Jörg Widmann's "Con Brio" (in its U.S. première) and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F Minor. ♦ March 14 at 8: Two symphonic landmarks—Haydn's Symphony No. 88 in G Major and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor (with the singers Ricarda Merbeth, Michelle Breedt, Michael Schade, and Michael Volle, complemented by the Westminster Symphonic Choir). ♦ March 15 at 2: Julia Fischer, a glamorous and expert advocate for the standard violin repertory, performs Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major in a program that begins with music by Rodion Shchedrin and concludes with Brahms's First Symphony. (212-247-7800.)

5 AV
ARMANI/5th AVENU
5 AV

DANIELLE SIEGELBAUM

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

ARMANI/5TH AVENUE

717 Fifth Ave. (212-339-5950)—Across the street from Bendel's and around the corner from Niketown sits what you might call Mondo Armani (official name: Armani/5th Avenue). This brand-new four-story complex carries a batch of Giorgio Armani's various clothing lines, as well as sporting goods, swimwear, jeans, eyeglasses, fragrances, jewelry, cosmetics, and a smattering of home goods, all within a vertical glass box that's just a few square yards shy of a football field. "People who buy Giorgio Armani can come here and then pick up an Emporio item, too, and be just as happy with both purchases," a saleswoman said, referring to one of the priciest lines and to its hipper, cheaper cousin. Without breaking a sweat, you could, for instance, acquire a Giorgio Armani textured navy silk blazer ($2,495), a coal-colored Emporio halter T-shirt decorated with a large silvery beetle ($345), an Armani tennis racket ($425), and a black cut-glass sphere that looks like a bowl but is really a vase ($2,065). While you're waiting for your credit card to be declined, you could make your way upstairs to the restaurant via the white-and-beige vortex of a staircase that coils up the center of the store—similar to the one at the Guggenheim, but with much worse posture. Or you could stop off at Armani Dolci, on the third floor, and drool over the marmalade ($30), shortbread ($50 for sixty-four pieces), or Mr. Armani's favorite, the caramelized almond nougat rolled in bitter cocoa powder ($15 and $30 bags).

Giorgio Armani, one of the few fashion stars to have never taken his business public, became a somebody in 1980 when Richard Gere wore his clothes in the movie "American Gigolo." I quite liked the men's trenchcoat in heather blue cinched with an inset belt that loops and snaps closed and with a zipper on a diagonal that goes nowhere special ($1,095). "This is one of the only places a man can shop like a woman," an Italianate salesman told me, adding, "Of course, if his girlfriend is fashionable, the guy is going to lose some pieces."

—Patricia Marx

NEW AMSTERDAM SINGERS: "JOURNEYS AND ELEGIES"
A firmly Anglo-American program, highlighted by renowned works by John Corigliano ("Fern Hill," a setting of the Dylan Thomas poem) and John Harbison (the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Flight Into Egypt"), is the next presentation of Clara Longstreth's excellent avocational chorus, singing at the Church of the Holy Trinity. (316 E. 88th St. 212-842-1511. March 13 at 8 and March 15 at 4.)

EARLY MUSIC NEW YORK
Frederick Renz's long-established ensemble, a survivor in a difficult city for early music, continues its season at St. James' Church in a concert devoted to works by composers associated with the Austrian imperial court, such as Muffat, Fux, and Biber (the "Serenada," ca. 1670). (Madison Ave. at 71st St. 212-280-0330. March 14 at 8.)

"HONOR!" FESTIVAL: "ASK YOUR MAMA!"
Carnegie Hall's festival celebrating the legacy of African-American music, curated by Jessye Norman, reaches a climax with Laura Karpman's new work, a ninety-minute multimedia fantasy based on Langston Hughes's cycle of poems from 1961, which Hughes began writing at the Newport Jazz Festival. In addition to Norman's shining soprano, the performance features the hip-hop group the Roots; George Manahan leads the Orchestra of St. Luke's. (212-247-7800. March 16 at 8. For full schedule, see www.carnegiehall.org.)

PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
As part of the "Honor!" festival, Charles Dutoit and his elegant ensemble perform the Pulitzer Prize-winning orchestral song cycle "Lilacs," by the distinguished African-American composer George Walker, along with classic works by Milhaud (the jazz-soaked "Création du Monde"), Mahler ("Songs of a Wayfarer"), and Dvořák (the "New World" Symphony). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 17 at 8.)

RECITALS

LEIPZIG STRING QUARTET
The respected German ensemble—three of whose players are former members of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra—continues the Metropolitan Museum's Beethoven series with performances of the String Quartets in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3, in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3, and in E-Flat Major, Op. 127. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. March 12 at 8.)

"THIRD MIND LIVE"
The Guggenheim Museum offers a series of concerts that explore how Asian influences have filtered through the works of prominent American experimentalist composers. March 12-13 at 8: The performance artist Laurie Anderson offers a new work, "Transitory Life: Some Stories." ♦ March 14 at 9: An evening with La Monte Young, the titan of West Coast experimentalism, with Marian Zazeela and their ensemble, performing Young's magnum opus, "Raga Sundara." (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587.)

JESSICA RIVERA
The reverent yet irreverent Nico Muhly's new, Carnegie-commissioned "The Adulteress" (settings of texts from the Gospel of St. John) is the highlight of the soprano's recital at Weill Recital Hall, which also features works by Barber ("Hermit Songs") and Schubert ("The Shepherd on the Rock," with the clarinettist Todd Palmer). (212-247-7800. March 13 at 7:30.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER: "AROUND PROKOFIEV"
The Society, in an ingenious five-concert series this month, puts the Russian master in context with music by a variety of composers from his turbulent times; all concerts take place at the fabulously renovated Alice Tully Hall. March 13 at 7:30: The pianists Inon

Barnatan and Anne-Marie McDermott, joined by the commanding young musicians of the Belcea Quartet, explore music by Prokofiev (including the String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, and the Piano Sonata No. 7) and Benjamin Britten (featuring the airy String Quartet No. 1 in D Major.) ♦ March 15 at 5: A concert pairing Russian music's two great "frenemies," Prokofiev (featuring the "Overture on Hebrew Themes") and Shostakovich (the Fourth Quartet and the iconic song cycle "From Jewish Folk Poetry"). The musicians include the mezzo-soprano Irina Mishura, the pianist Gilbert Kalish, and the Jupiter String Quartet. ♦ March 17 at 7:30: Prokofiev and Felix Mendelssohn, two composers who revelled in delicate yet pointed orchestral sound, are celebrated for their more intimate achievements in a concert featuring the pianist Frederic Chiu, the violinist Elmar Oliveira, the flutist Ransom Wilson, and the Orion String Quartet; the repertory includes Mendelssohn's exhilarating Quartet in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1, and Prokofiev's stormy Sonata No. 1 in F Minor for Violin and Piano. (212-875-5788.)

MILLER THEATRE COMPOSER PORTRAIT: ARLENE SIERRA
The sterling young International Contemporary Ensemble and the soprano Susan Narucki join forces in a survey of music by the young American composer, long resident in Great Britain; the works include her "Neruda Settings" and a Miller-commissioned world première. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 13 at 8.)

TAKÁCS QUARTET: THE BARTÓK QUARTETS
The earthy yet distinguished half-Hungarian ensemble essays the composer's six masterworks in three concerts, with a little Beethoven added in. Its first foray includes the Quartets Nos. 1 and 4, along with Beethoven's Quartet in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. March 14 at 8.)

MUSIC AT THE 92ND STREET Y
March 14 at 8: The appealing young pianist Shai Wosner performs Schumann's "Carnaval" and "Nachtstücke," along with Book I of Debussy's "Préludes." ♦ March 15 at 3: Another major up-and-comer, the violinist Nikolaj Znaider, teams up with members of the New York Philharmonic in an afternoon of music by Mendelssohn (the Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, and the Octet) and Bach. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

BARGEMUSIC
The St. Petersburg Quartet—after the Borodin, the most renowned Russian string quartet—makes its début at the barge, performing quartets by Mendelssohn, Shostakovich (the harrowing No. 13 in B-Flat Minor), and Schubert (in D Minor, "Death and the Maiden"). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083. March 14 at 8 and March 15 at 3. For full schedule, see www.bargemusic.org.)

NEW YORK FESTIVAL OF SONG: "SONGS OF THE IRISH POETS"
Steven Blier and Michael Barrett's engaging recital series comes to Merkin Concert Hall for a program honoring St. Patrick's Day, in which such composers as Beethoven (from his "Irish Songs"), Britten, Schumann, and Barber are heard in their settings of poems by Yeats, Joyce, and Paul Muldoon (an editor at this magazine), among others. The performers include the soprano Joelle Harvey, the tenor Paul Appleby, and Christopher Layer on pipes and flute. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 17 at 8.)

MOVIES

OPENING

THE CAKE EATERS
Mary Stuart Masterson directed this drama, about a chronically ill teen-ager (Kristen Stewart) who longs to experience love. Co-starring Melissa Leo and Bruce Dern. Opening March 13. (Quad Cinema.)

CARMEN & GEOFFREY
A documentary, directed by Linda Atkinson and Nick Doob, about the dancers Carmen De Lavallade and Geoffrey Holder. Opening March 13. (Quad Cinema.)

FUEL
Josh Tickell directed this documentary, about America's dependence on oil and possible solutions to the problem. Opening March 13. (Village Theatre VII.)

THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT
A remake of the 1972 horror film, about escaped convicts who unknowingly take refuge in the house of their victim's parents. Directed by Dennis Iliadis. Opening March 13. (In wide release.)

MISS MARCH
A comedy, about a young man who awakens from a four-year coma and finds that his former girlfriend is about to become a *Playboy* centerfold. Directed by and starring Zach Cregger and Trevor Moore. Opening March 13. (In wide release.)

RACE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN
Andy Fickman directed this children's film, based on a novel by Alexander Key, about two teen-agers who hire a cabdriver to take them to a secret place in the desert. Starring AnnaSophia Robb and Carla Gugino. Opening March 13. (In wide release.)

SEVERED WAYS
A drama, directed by Tony Stone, set in the eleventh century, about two Vikings who are lost in the New World. In Greenlandic. Opening March 13. (Angelika Film Center.)

SUNSHINE CLEANING
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening March 13. (Lincoln Square and Sunshine Cinema.)

TOKYO SONATA
Kiyoshi Kurosawa directed this drama, about a man who loses his job but keeps the fact from his family. In Japanese. Opening March 13. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and IFC Center.)

NOW PLAYING

THE CLASS
Extraordinary. François Bégaudeau, a teacher in a Parisian public school in the Twentieth Arrondissement, published a novel in 2006 chronicling a year in his classroom. Along with the director Laurent Cantet and the writer Robin Campillo, he then condensed and reshaped the material into a two-hour drama centering on the teacher (Bégaudeau, playing himself) and a small number of students (all played by actual students, though not the same ones he wrote about). Bégaudeau, who is in his thirties, is handsome, lean, and quick, with a strong voice; his slouching or rowdy fourteen-year-olds are mostly of African or Caribbean descent—still outsiders in France, and rightfully touchy about it. Some of them are resistant to education, which disrupts the pleasures of adolescence, and Bégaudeau aggressively comes after them, challenging, correcting, teasing, criticizing. The students are alive to him and come back hard, questioning French notions of discipline and manners. In all, "The Class" is a prime document of French post-colonial blues, though its relevance to American urban education could not be any greater if it had been shot in the Bronx or Trenton or South Los Angeles. In French.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/22 & 29/08.) (In limited release.)

CORALINE
The spindly metal claw, like a tarantula made of steel, squeezes under a door and comes right at you; the hummingbirds hover before your face. The animated "Coraline," seen in its 3-D version, now and then uses the third dimension aggressively, for nose-biting or swooping effect, but most of the time, the writer-director Henry Selick, working with Neil Gaiman's novel, extends his reach into space as a way of increasing mobility and adventure—as a gift to imagination. There's a lot of barrelling through tunnels and dashing into rooms, and also some very startling effects, such as when the heroine, Coraline (voiced by Dakota Fanning), a spunky eleven-year-old girl, is walking with an all-knowing cat (Keith David) and both of them are under the control of a witch who suddenly, piece by piece, turns everything around them into white blankness. All dimensions, it seems, can be erased. Coraline longs for more attention than she's getting from her parents, so she enters a parallel world in which her parents are very attentive indeed—so attentive that they

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

ANYTHING BUT LOVE

The enduring fascination of Howard Hawks's 1938 screwball comedy, "Bringing Up Baby" (screening at MOMA March 11-13), transcends the film's effervescent qualities. In finding his voice as a comedy director, Hawks sets up archetypes of theme and performance that are still valid. He turned Cary Grant into an extension of his own intellectual irony, an absent-minded professor who seems lost in thought but awaits the chance to unleash his inner leopard. He reinvented Katharine Hepburn as a sexually determined woman who hides her aggression under intricate scatterbrained schemes that entrap the deep thinker in adventures that reveal his untapped humor and virility. And he brought to fruition his own universe of hints and symbols for the force that rules the world: she tears his coat, he tears her dress, she steals his clothes, she names him "Bone," and the mating cries of wild animals disturb the decorum of the dinner table, even as a Freudian psychiatrist in a swanky bar gives viewers a skeleton key in advance.
—*Richard Brody*

COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

want to take control of her and sew buttons into her eyes and turn her into a ghost child. Scary and elegant.—*D.D.* (3/2/09) (In wide release.)

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON
A child is born in New Orleans in 1918 with the features and internal organs of an old man; then, as time passes, his age declines until he goes through late middle age, middle age, youth, and so on, back toward infancy and death. This science-fiction reverse-aging conceit, from an early F. Scott Fitzgerald story, has been rendered by the writer Eric Roth and the director David Fincher with a fanatical literalness that occasionally touches the uncanny but that often feels laborious and even pedantic. As Benjamin becomes younger, he turns into the handsome, forty-ish Brad Pitt, and he has an affair with a vibrant, normally aging dancer (Cate Blanchett). They meet in the middle, so to speak, but the relationship is odd, since, instead of the fervent memories of youth, Benjamin has only the relief that he is no longer a crotchety old man. He's bland; he's Brad Pitt. There is much else, about New Orleans, the sea, and many other things, but the movie is an attenuated folly.—*D.D.* (2/9 & 16/09) (In wide release.)

FRIDAY THE 13TH
A reboot of the popular horror series (the 1980 original was a rip-off of the infinitely superior "Halloween") about the murderous madman Jason Voorhees, whose mother was killed by a camper at Camp Crystal Lake. In this version, he takes his revenge on a group of nubile, pot-smoking campers in the usual grotesque ways (bow and arrow, hatchet, machete), and the screaming never stops. The most popular slasher films of the seventies and eighties earned their scares through low-budget scuzziness, tight screenplays, and suspense. The recent rash of remakes (such as "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "The Hills Have Eyes") have traded that uniqueness for wide-screen lensing, mediocre dialogue, and unimaginative violence. This slasher film is about as exciting as a visit to the butcher. The fresh-faced unfortunates include Jared Padalecki and Danielle Panabaker; the routine direction is by Marcus Nispel.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

GOMORRAH
A hell of a film, if you can take the hell. Matteo Garrone's movie is adapted from a 2006 book, an inflamed investigation of organized crime in Naples, by the journalist Roberto Saviano. The screen version is no less shocking, but Garrone, unlike Saviano, keeps his cool—as he needs to, with five separate narratives to juggle. We get a pair of teen-agers who dream of becoming sadistic big shots, although the camera catches something instantly pathetic in their delirium. (Watch them standing on a lonely beach in their underpants, firing stolen guns at nothing at all.) We get a kid who carries drugs for the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia, the innocence seeping from him with every favor. Then, there are three men who look as if they could be related (it must be deliberate casting). One is a tailor who moonlights as a teacher for Chinese immigrant workers; another hands out money in the Mob-ruled warrens of a northern suburb; the third dumps toxic waste into the sump of the countryside. These are finely gauged performances (Salvatore Cantalupo's heartbreaking one, as the tailor, being the standout), but Garrone went one better by recruiting locals into the minor roles, and the whole project has a dangerously authentic smell. Yet the movie stirs beyond documentary, ending up as a controlled rumination on the cruelty of fate; most of the characters are as flies to wanton boys, and they don't come more wanton than the Camorra. In Italian (or, rather, Neapolitan).—*Anthony Lane* (2/23/09) (In limited release.)

THE INTERNATIONAL
A Luxembourg-based outfit called I.B.B.C., and clearly modelled after the infamous Bank of Credit and Commerce International (B.C.C.I.), serves as a middleman in mayhem-producing arms deals and buys off or assassinates anyone who tries to investigate its criminal behavior. Yet two entirely virtuous people—an Interpol agent (Clive Owen) and a Manhattan assistant district attorney (Naomi Watts)—refuse to give up, and they chase the bad guys all over the world. Despite its fresh subject, there's nothing original in the form of this if-it's-Tuesday-this-must-be-Istanbul thriller, with its portentous globe-hopping and racing through colorful street bazaars. For those who like tony scenes of wealth, the movie offers amusingly austere impressions of high-style viciousness—men with closely cropped beards and perfectly tailored silver-gray suits meeting in circular, sparsely furnished conference rooms and climbing into shiny black Audis. Yet one can't help feeling that the visual panache of director Tom Tykwer is beside the point. The real-world bank story, it turns out, is about the banality of evil, not murder ordered at the highest levels. With Armin Mueller-Stahl.—*D.D.* (3/2/09) (In wide release.)

KATYŃ
Andrzej Wajda's stunning epic begins in September, 1939, on a bridge in central Poland. A group entering from one end flees the invading Germans; a group entering from the other flees the Soviets, and they mingle in abject confusion. Wajda's movie recounts the period in Polish life when the country's fate became a joke between Stalin and Hitler. Katyń was the name of the forest in the Soviet Union, near Smolensk, in which, in April, 1940, at least ten thousand captured Polish officers were murdered by the Soviet secret police, the N.K.V.D., along with another ten thousand or so Polish teachers, civil servants, and other members of the educated élite. At first the massacre was blamed (correctly) on the Soviets, but when the Red Army "liberated" Poland

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* 2006 Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, *Volver.* ** 1982 Best Actor in a Leading Role, *Gandhi.* *** 2003 Best Actress in a Supporting Role, *Pieces of April.*
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in 1944 and 1945, and local Communists backed by the Soviets took over, the blame was shifted to the Nazis, and Poles loyal to the new government had to accede to this extraordinary lie. Wajda goes back and forth between the sudden, stunning seizure and elimination of large groups and intimate moments of companionship among the families waiting for news—any news. The scenes are curt, decisive, and unsentimental to the point of bluntness. With Artur Żmijewski, as a captured officer whose diary serves as a narration. Adapted from the novel "Post-Mortem," by Andrzej Mularczyk. In Polish, Russian, and German.—*D.D.* (3/2/09) (Film Forum.)

"Miss March," directed by Zach Cregger and Trevor Moore, opens March 13.

QUICKHONEY

LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN

A welcome rerelease for John M. Stahl's melodrama, from 1945. Age has not withered its rich tones or softened its proximity to madness. The lovely, untrustworthy Ellen (Gene Tierney) meets Richard, a writer (Cornel Wilde), on a train to New Mexico and, like a snake, entrances her prey. (Not the least of the movie's joys is the smoothness of period detail; check out the curved rear of the club car in which they get to know each other.) Quickly she strikes, dropping her unwanted fiancé (Vincent Price) and marrying Richard, while her relatives—played by Ray Collins and Jeanne Crain, among others—stand by helplessly and watch, as if they have seen it all before. The glides into violence are all the more frightening for being so controlled, and for being shot in the full bloom of Technicolor, at once crystalline and dreamy; even now, Ellen's deliberate trip down a flight of stairs, not to mention her part in the killing of a child, is difficult to watch without a flinch. Tierney gives herself so unhesitatingly to the role that the foolish excess of the film's conceit is wiped away, and we are left with a lethally cogent study in emotional dictatorship. The photography, by Leon Shamroy, won an Academy Award, and rightly so.—*A.L.* (3/9/09) (Film Forum.)

MADEA GOES TO JAIL

Tyler Perry's alter ego, the housecoat-wearing, six-foot-six force of nature, Madea, returns in this hit-or-miss soap opera, the latest in a long string of hits from Perry's Atlanta movie factory. The plot concerns a sensitive district attorney (Derek Luke) who tries to help a heroin-addicted prostitute (Keshia Knight Pulliam) while his selfish, status-seeking fiancée fights him every step of the way. When Madea enters the fray (she doesn't serve much jail time), she forcefully delivers her usual no-nonsense advice and, as a comic tornado, gives the predictable melodrama some much needed energy. There's not much here that Perry hasn't done before, and he still has trouble blending comedy and drama engagingly (his films work only fitfully), but his imposing, cross-dressing creation is riveting. With Madea, he attains an undeniable cultural relevance that's both madcap and redemptive.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

MILK

Gus Van Sant's vibrantly entertaining bio-pic recreates, without starchiness, the San Francisco life of the gay activist and politician Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), who was assassinated in 1978, along with Mayor George Moscone, by a fellow-politician, the family-values conservative Dan White (Josh Brolin). The righteous march of events is warmed by the banter, the casual sex, and the candor of the gay milieu in the giddy seventies, the period just before AIDS, when life was free and easy. Much of the time, Penn keeps his voice down, but the fervor and humor are there in the most offhanded moments. Without ostentation, he creates a new body, a new temperament: he loosens his neck and shoulders and swivels his head; his smile is enormous and all-embracing; he holds an elbow out and pumps a forearm up and down like a semaphore as Harvey speaks in public. Brolin, a slab of hair lying low across his forehead, gives White a brick-headed, baffled manner, a tormented neediness. In the filmmakers' interpretation, there's a suggestion that White suffered from murderously repressed homosexuality.—*D.D.* (12/1/08) (In wide release.)

PAUL BLART: MALL COP

Kevin James must be feeling the love now that his latest film—about an overweight security guard who encounters a bunch of hapless thieves holding hostage a crowd of shoppers at a West Orange, New Jersey, mall—has turned out to be a smash hit. The movie is divided into two parts: the first is a sitcom-like look at Paul Blart's home life (he's a single dad with a daughter); the second is a semi-inventive comic take on the "Die Hard" movies, as James uses his surprisingly spry bulk to rescue the hostages. The story stays in family-friendly territory (there are no raunchy jokes or lessons about conspicuous consumption), and most of the mindless nonsense of the script (which James co-wrote with Nick Bakay) passes pleasantly, thanks to the rotund sweetness of James's performance. Directed by Steve Carr.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

PAYDAY

Shot entirely on location in Alabama, it's an acrid, hardboiled melodrama with a feeling for authentic characters and details. An exceptionally functional script, by the novelist Don Carpenter, makes it possible for the director, Daryl Duke, to cover the grimy country-music scene of a small-time recording star—a goaty, rancidly unromantic third-rate Johnny Cash. Rip Torn, with his smirking satyr grin, may never have had a role that suits him better than the barnstorming Maury Dann. In the back of his Cadillac between two girls, Maury Dann is a sweating rajah, drinking Coke and beer and bourbon, smoking pot and popping pills. The movie's only real flaw is the flaw that's also present in hardboiled fiction: when a world is this clearly defined, our imagination is frustrated. With Michael C. Gwynne as Maury's manager; Cliff Emmich as his fat, loyal driver and cook, who takes a prison rap for him; Elayne Heilveil as a teen-age groupie who works in a dime store; and Ahna Capri as Maury's blond mistress, who goads him at the wrong moment and is deposited in the middle of the highway. Released in 1973.—*Pauline Kael* (Anthology Film Archives; March 13.)

THE READER

The British director Stephen Daldry made a splash with "The Hours," and this new film is no less worthy, ambitious, and exasperating. The screenwriter, once again, is David Hare, who fillets the best-selling novel by Bernhard Schlink. For all Hare's expertise, however, we are stuck with the unsavory pretensions of the original tale. Kate Winslet plays Hanna, who, thirteen years after the Second World War, works on the trams in Neustadt, West Germany, and has occasional sex with a local teen-age boy named Michael (David Kross). Their first time, though lingeringly shot, has all the finesse of cheap porno; where else does a woman tell a lusty youth to shed his clothes and take a bath because he has dirt on his face? In the movie's second half, we see Hanna being tried and imprisoned for her wartime deeds; there is a shocking revelation, which comes as no surprise; and the middle-aged Michael (Ralph Fiennes) turns up to help his onetime love. Daldry takes things painfully slowly, not helped by a sappy score, and we are encouraged to muse upon the cultural shortcomings, or even improvements, in the life of an aging member of the S.S. This is not an issue that most of us feel the need to worry about. With a strong performance, late in the day, from Lena Olin.—*A.L.* (12/15/08) (In wide release.)

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

An eighteen-year-old Muslim tea-boy named Jamal (Dev Patel), born and raised in the poverty of Mumbai, teeters on the verge of fame and fortune. A nation awaits. Such is the old-fashioned, sentimental cliffhanger to which the screenwriter Simon Beaufoy and the director Danny Boyle have, with unembarrassed drive, committed themselves. Jamal is a contestant on the Indian edition of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?," and the suspicion of the police—who, in an ill-judged prelude to the story, hold and torture him—is that he must have cheated. His response is that experience alone, whether wretched or comic, has by chance furnished him with the correct answers, and the bulk of the film, constructed from flashbacks, proves his point. The style, seen previously in "City of God" and other movies, is what you might call urban-manic: heated performances, even hotter colors, and camerawork that vies with

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Zane's first designs were born out of his love for a young hula dancer, Nalani Kanaka‘ole, who would later become his wife. When they first met, they swam at a pond deep in Mānoa Valley. "It was surrounded by ginger, and I would grab these flowers and give them to her," he says. "My first design was with white ginger that I did in her honor."

More designs followed. At first they enhanced costumes for the Kanaka‘ole hula school, and later a line of men's, women's, and children's clothing celebrating Hawaiian culture. "One year I did all the different winds," he says, "like the cold, piercing wind at the volcano. This year it's all about the different *pu‘u,* the hills and cinder cones that dot our landscape."

As Zane carefully cuts each design by hand, carving it first into bamboo, then into special screen-print film, the deeper meanings fill his head. "Just one *maile* vine takes an hour to cut, and in that hour I'm thinking of the name, all the cultural uses, and how I'm going to tell the story," he says.

Clothing's cultural message is so important to Zane that he takes great care when choosing his own. "If I'm attending something that needs energy, I wear a plant like *koa* because it means strength or fearlessness. If I'm going to a wedding, I will wear *‘ulu,* the breadfruit, for that means ‘to grow.'

"For many, a favorite tree is *pūhala.* But when people want to use it for their wedding, I tell them *hala* means ‘to fail' and that they cannot." He smiles. "When you give a politician a *hala lei* it means, ‘O.K. brother, you're going to lose…'"

In Hilo, on Hawai‘i's Big Island, where Zane and his wife settled, the country atmosphere, with its local farmer's market and wooden storefronts, suits his casual lifestyle. Typically, his workday begins with an hour of surfing off the nearby black-sand beach at Honoli‘i. And the forest, offering him constant inspiration, is ten minutes away.

Hiking a trail, Zane plucks a leaf or flower, collecting raw material for his work. Then he draws new renditions of favorites. Most recently, another white-ginger design emerged as he watched the patch in his yard bloom. His thoughts returned to that magical time in Mānoa, showering Nalani with fragrant ginger. "It's love revisited," Zane muses. "We're so lucky...we're *surrounded* by so much green, so much forest."

– Beverly Creamer

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TOP, FROM LEFT: SIG ZANE ©TOR JOHNSON/HVCB; WHITE-GINGER FLOWER ©KEIKO KISHIMI; BOTTOM: FABRIC BOLTS COURTESY OF SIG ZANE; WOODBLOCKS ©TOR JOHNSON/HVCB

the editing for nerve and speed. The lad at the center of it all is actually on the dull side, but the energy around him—not least in the dance sequence over the final credits—is difficult to resist.—*A.L.* (11/24/08) (In wide release.)

SUNSHINE CLEANING

As any actor will tell you, goodness, of all the character traits, is one of the hardest to make interesting. The young Amy Adams, with her doll-like appearance—blue eyes, red hair, very pale skin—has what can only be called a gift for portraying generosity, optimism, and cheerfulness. She can make ingenuousness seem noble, by expressing a powerful will to find the best in life. In this Sundance-style independent movie, she plays an overburdened single mother living in Albuquerque. She looks after her kid, her scapegrace younger sister (Emily Blunt), and her affectionate but unsteady father (Alan Arkin), while carrying on a motel-room love affair with a married cop (Steve Zahn). Her school friends have married well, while she and her sister make a living entering shabby houses in which people have been murdered or committed suicide and then cleaning up the remnants of their lives. What draws them to this depressing line of work? That's the movie's mystery, which is only gradually revealed. The writer (Megan Holley) and the director (Christine Jeffs) might have gone further into danger and emotional loss; at times, "Sunshine Cleaning" borders on mere whimsy. But Adams, forging ahead gamely, keeps it aloft.—*D.D.* (Lincoln Square and Sunshine Cinema.)

TAKEN

Liam Neeson plays a divorced father and former C.I.A. employee, who lives in Los Angeles to be near his immensely annoying teen-age daughter (Maggie Grace). When she is kidnapped on a trip to Paris, he tracks her down, taking the opportunity to combine his two favorite cultural interests: tender paternal love and indiscriminate homicide. First, he slaughters the Albanians who stole her, before moving on to the Arabs who want to buy her, and you feel quite sure that he would, if required, slash and thump his way through the rest of the alphabet. For those with a taste for political allegory, there is something to ponder here, although the director, Pierre Morel, together with his producer (and co-writer) Luc Besson, takes things at such a clip that little room is left for contemplation. The result is unrelenting, improbable, and humorless; Neeson, as domineering as ever, shades his feats of aggression with a solemn gravity that they scarcely deserve, and anyone raised on "An American in Paris" will weep to think how far we have travelled from Gene Kelly. That was a fantasy of international ease; this is a bad dream of revenge. With Famke Janssen.—*A.L.* (2/2/09) (In wide release.)

TOKYO!

This three-part film, composed of half-hour segments set in the Japanese metropolis, directed by Michel Gondry, Leos Carax, and Bong Joon-ho, is an unfortunate triumph of intelligence over heart. Gondry's anecdote offers the most local color, featuring a comically struggling young filmmaker and his slacker girlfriend, in what begins as a sweet satire on the city's tight real-estate market and stringent job market (as shown in the rigorous test to which aspiring package-wrappers are subjected). The sketch veers off into a metaphorical special-effects dénouement that's as silly as it is offensive. Carax, who hasn't made a movie in a decade, comes back with "Merde," a political monster story that fuses Dostoyevsky's Underground Man with Quasimodo, "Beauty and the Beast," and contemporary terrorism. Denis Lavant valiantly throws himself into the role of a vengeful sewer-dwelling creature as the story careens from the slaughter of innocents to a courtroom circus and an execution. Carax's former poetic inventiveness seems hemmed in by doctrine (or just lack of practice); he appears mainly to enjoy flinging insults. Bong exercises his apocalyptic imagination in a trifle about a *hikikomori*, or agoraphobe, who is forced out of his cloistered life by an earthquake; though several images are striking, a gratuitous cyborg-centric conceit kills all feeling. This overly calculated project seems to respond to little inner need on the filmmakers' part. In Japanese, French, and a made-up monster language.—*Richard Brody* (Sunshine Cinema.)

TOUCHED IN THE HEAD

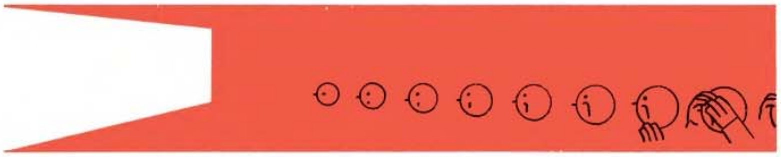
The Paris of chic Maoism and suave dialectics seems half a world away from the workaday urban setting of this playful yet serious French drama, from 1974. The director Jacques Doillon's young Parisian laborers—Christophe (Christophe Soto), an apprentice baker; his girlfriend, Rosette (Roselyne Villaumé), a cashier in the same bakery; and his friend Léon (Olivier Bousquet), an underemployed mechanic—have one foot in nineteenth-century toil and just a toehold in modernity. They're not yet twenty; they listen to rock and play video games in cafés, and the dandyish Léon drives an ancient Citroën for kicks; but their perspectives are narrow and their prospects bleak, and their lives are overturned when Christophe—who lives in a garret over the bakery—loses his job. The story veers into modern bureaucratic politics when a union delegate takes up the young man's cause, and the arrival of Liv (Ann Zacharias), a young Swedish free spirit who takes an interest in Christophe, nearly swings the action toward the awakening of the bohemian spirit—toward the same sexually audacious and romantically agonized terrain as Jean Eustache's monumental "The Mother and the Whore," but without the cultural commentary. In Doillon's Paris, May '68 may as well have never happened: his characters struggle merely to scrape by, held back by the ingrained notions of generations past. In French.—*R.B.* (French Institute Alliance Française; March 16.)

12

A Russian remake of "12 Angry Men." The main conceit is unchanged: one member of a jury holds out against convicting a defendant, and gradually changes the minds of his fellow-jurors. The background, however, could hardly be more different. The accused is a young Chechen (Apti Magamaev), charged with murdering his adoptive father, an officer in the Russian Army, and the jury—none of whom are named—is sequestered in the echoing gymnasium of a modern Moscow school. There are poised performances, notably that of the pensive engineer (Sergei Makovetsky) who, propelled by conscience, follows in the tracks of Henry Fonda, but there is also a fair dose of grandstanding, not helped by the lengthy, self-dramatizing speeches with which many of the men are encumbered. You just know that the cabdriver (Sergey Garmash) who starts by spitting anti-Semitic jibes will get his redemptive turn in the spotlight. The movie is directed by Nikita Mikhalkov, who allots himself a plum part as the wise, white-haired foreman, and whose visual style has grown busier and less circumspect of late; would the Mikhalkov who made "Burnt by the Sun," from 1994, have agreed to the nagging flashbacks we get here, or to the special-effects sparrow that flutters into the gym as an instant symbol of the freedom-seeking soul? In Russian.—*A.L.* (Film Forum.)

TWO LOVERS

If this really is the swan song of Joaquin Phoenix, as the actor has vowed, then it's a fine-looking swan to go out on. He plays Leonard, who lives in Brighton Beach with his parents, works in the family's dry-cleaning store, and seems not just troubled in mind but, as it were, only half-formed as an adult member of society. Not that this stops him from attracting the attention of beautiful women; first comes Sandra (Vinessa Shaw), the daughter of his parents' friends, followed shortly by Michelle (Gwyneth Paltrow), whose apartment overlooks his own, and who can boast a range of perplexities almost as broad as his, what with her weakness for drugs and her reliance on the wallet of a married man (Elias Koteas). James Gray's film observes Leonard as he seesaws between these two alliances; as late as the final scene, we cannot tell which way he will tip, still less whether his choice will make him happy ever after. The overall result is a cramped and distressing movie that is somehow eased and opened



LAURENT CILLUFFO

DVD NOTES
FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

If, as Nietzsche said, tragedy is the art of expressing great pain in beautiful language, Luchino Visconti's last film, **"L'Innocente"** (Koch Lorber), from 1976, is truly tragic. His adaptation of Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1892 novel brings glorious language to the story of a marital disaster. A Roman aristocrat, Tullio Hermil (Giancarlo Giannini), pursues the dark-eyed, willful temptress Teresa Raffo (Jennifer O'Neill, dubbed into Italian) and complains about his romantic torments to the wife he neglects, Giuliana (the willowy Laura Antonelli). When, in turn, Giuliana seeks solace in the arms of a young writer (Marc Porel), Tullio comes home to her, his conjugal passion reignited—but the revelation of her pregnancy sets off a chain of seemingly inevitable agonies.

For Visconti, himself an aristocrat, the script's florid speeches are not dryly dialectical patches but sensual delights, the translation into language of a now vanished opulence that his images so lovingly display. The lavish, colorful depictions of stately villas with their sumptuous furnishings and immortal art work and the characters' exquisite attire are matched by the director's carnal delight in the beautiful people themselves. He films Giannini, Antonelli, and O'Neill with a rapt tenderness, capturing their exchanges of glances across crowded rooms or empty space with closeups of a rare magnetic power. These ravishing images are matched by the mellifluous, modulated voices that pour out grief in lofty and delicate phrases—and conceal, with the same rhetorical flourishes, deeply calculated machinations of an imperial cruelty.

Amazingly, F. W. Murnau's 1926 adaptation of Goethe's **"Faust"** (available in a new restoration from Kino) uses no speech at all: it's a silent film, and Murnau extracts the essence of Goethe's poetic masterwork through the strength of his images. The movie tinkers a bit with the story in order to favor the director's own visions; Goethe's wide-ranging imagination sets in motion a teeming world, whereas Murnau suggests medieval villages with expressive set design (narrow alleys, steep stairways, sharply sloping roofs, and slashing shadows). If the human element is reduced in scale (Faust himself is stripped of metaphysical rhapsody and becomes merely frustrated), Goethe's cosmic element is Murnau's triumph: the director conjures grand-scale conceits that set the drama firmly between Heaven and Hell. Such astonishingly vast visual conceits as the Devil covering a town with his wings and spewing gas to spread the plague, or the final transfiguration of the martyred lovers, suggest an artistic imagination that isn't merely adaptive but even rivals Goethe's own.

—*Richard Brody*

out by its rich soundtrack and, above all, by the grace of its compositions. With Isabella Rossellini as Leonard's long-suffering mother.—*A.L.* (2/23/09) (In limited release.)

WATCHMEN

The names of many directors, including Terry Gilliam and Paul Greengrass, have been linked with this project over the years. Only now will they realize what a lucky escape they had. The task was to find a way of dramatizing Alan Moore's graphic novel—something of a cult among devotees, which means that, like all cults, it has escaped critical rigor. The helm was finally handed to Zack Snyder, who made the loopy but entertaining "300"; this time, he has conjured a work that forgets to entertain but somehow manages to bore, bewilder, and disgust. We are introduced to a band of former crime busters, now under threat: Nite Owl (Patrick Wilson), the Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup), the lithe but witless Silk Spectre (Malin Akerman), a moneyed fop named Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), and, lastly, Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), who takes time off from merciless slaughter to narrate the proceedings. None of them is striking enough to hold our attention for long; their powers, superpowers, toys, and disguises seem wide-ranging but indeterminate, and any hint of political satire—as intended by the angry Moore—is drowned in a flood of brutal murk. The result takes infinite adolescent pleasure in its own nastiness and gives no pleasure in return. With Carla Gugino, a fine actress who should have stayed away.—*A.L.* (3/9/09) (In wide release.)

Z

How a political murder is made to look like an accident. Costa-Gavras's extraordinary thriller, from 1969—one of the fastest, most exciting melodramas ever made—was based on contemporary events in Greece. The picture never loses emotional contact with the audience; it derives from the traditions of the American gangster movies and prison pictures and anti-Fascist melodramas of the forties, and is based on the real-life Lambrakis affair, as it was presented in fictional form in the novel "Z," by the Greek exile Vassili Vassilikas. In 1965, Gregoris Lambrakis, a professor of medicine, was struck down by a delivery truck as he left a peace meeting; the investigation of his death uncovered such a scandalous network of corruption and illegality in the police and in the government that the leader of the opposition party, George Papandreou, became Premier. But in 1967 a military coup d'état overturned the legal government. The movie reënacts the murder and the investigation in an attempt to show how the mechanics of fascist corruption may be hidden under the mask of law and order. When the picture is over and you've caught your breath, you know perfectly well that its techniques of excitation could as easily be used by a smart fascist filmmaker.—*P.K.* (Film Forum; March 13-26.)

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Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—The films of Rip Torn. March 11 at 7:15: "Time Limit" (1957, Karl Malden). ♦ March 11 at 9:15 and March 15 at 6:30: "Maidstone" (1970, Norman Mailer). ♦ March 12 at 7:15 and March 15 at 8:45: "One P.M." (1972, Jean-Luc Godard, D. A. Pennebaker, and Richard Leacock). ♦ March 12 at 9:15: "Beach Red" (1967, Cornel Wilde). ♦ March 13 at 7:15: "Payday" (†). ♦ March 13 at 9:30: "Tropic of Cancer" (1970, Joseph Strick). ♦ March 14 at 2:30: "Forty Shades of Blue" (2005, Ira Sachs). ♦ March 14 at 4:45: Archival footage featuring Torn. ♦ March 14 at 7:15: "Lucky Days" (2008, Anjelica and Tony Torn), followed by a discussion with the directors. ♦ March 14 at 9:30: "Sweet Bird of Youth" (1962, Richard Brooks). ♦ March 15 at 2: "Coming Apart" (1969, Moses Milton Ginsberg). ♦ March 15 at 4:30: "Beyond the Law" (1968, Norman Mailer). ♦ Films by George and Mike Kuchar. March 11, March 13, March 15, and March 17 at 7: Short-film program, including "The Naked and the Nude" (1962). ♦ March 11, March 13, March 15, and March 17 at 9: Short-film program, including "Lust for Ecstasy" (1963). ♦ March 12, March 14, and March 16 at 7: Short-film program, including "A Town Called Tempest" (1963). ♦ March 12, March 14, and March 16 at 9: Short-film program, including "The Slasher" (1958). ♦ March 14-15 at 5: Short-film program, including "Power of the Press" (1986).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—The films of Carl Theodor Dreyer. March 13 at 6:50 and 9:15: "The Passion of Joan of Arc" (1928; silent). ♦ March 14-15 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Day of Wrath" (1943; in Danish). ♦ March 16 at 7: "The President" (1919; silent). ♦ March 17 at 7: "Michael" (1924; silent).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. March 11-12 at 1:10, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, and 9:50: "Leave Her to Heaven" (†). ♦ March 13-26 at 2, 4:30, 7 and 9: "Z" (†).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." All films are in French. March 11 at 1:30: "Eden Is West" (2009, Costa-Gavras). ♦ March 11 at 3:45 and March 12 at 8:45: "The Apprentice" (2008, Samuel Collardey). ♦ March 11 at 6 and March 14 at 3:50: "Mesrine: Part 2" (2009, Jean-François Richet). ♦ March 11 at 9 and March 15 at 5:30: "The Other One" (2008, Patrick Mario Bernard and Pierre Trividic). ♦ March 12 at 1 and 6:15: "Stella" (2008, Sylvie Verheyde). ♦ March 12 at 3:45, March 14 at 9:10, and March 15 at 1: "Bellamy" (2009, Claude Chabrol). ♦ March 13 at 1:30 and 6:15 and March 15 at 8: "35 Shots of Rum" (2009, Claire Denis). ♦ March 13 at 4 and March 15 at 3:15: "Tout Courts," recent French short films. ♦ March 13 at 8:45 and March 14 at 6:45: "Villa Amalia" (2009, Benoît Jacquot). ♦ March 14 at 1:30: "Mesrine: Part 1" (2009, Jean-François Richet).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through March 31: The films of Jacques Doillon. March 17 at 12:30, 4, and 7:30: "Touched in the Head" (†).

IFC CENTER

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." All films are in French. March 11 at 7: "The Joy of Singing" (2007, Ilan Duran Cohen), followed by a discussion with the director. ♦ March 11 at 9:30: "Stella" (2008, Sylvie Verheyde). ♦ March 12 at 7: "35 Shots of Rum" (2009, Claire Denis). ♦ March 12 at 9:30: "Villa Amalia" (2009, Benoît Jacquot). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." March 13-14: "eXistenZ" (1999, David Cronenberg). ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. March 17 at 8: "American Swing" (2008, John Hart and Matthew Kaufman).

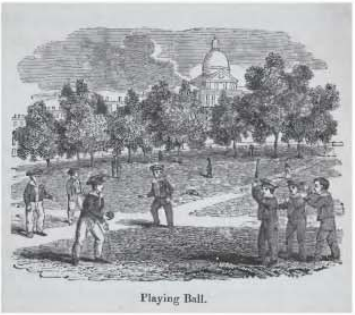
(LE) POISSON ROUGE

158 Bleecker St., at Thompson St. (212-796-0741)—"Deeper Into Movies." March 16 at 9: "Blow-Up" (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni). ♦ March 16 at 11: "L'Avventura" (1960, Antonioni; in Italian).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Still Moving." March 11-13 at 1:30: "Bringing Up Baby" (1938, Howard Hawks). ♦ The films of Ivan Passer. March 11 at 4:30: "Golden Sixties" (2009; in Czech). ♦ March 11 at 8:30 and March 12 at 6: "Intimate Lighting" (1965; in Czech). ♦ March 13 at 8:30: "Born to Win" (1971). ♦ "Private Century," a documentary series directed by Jan Sikl (2007); all films are in Czech. March 11 at 6 and March 14 at 4:30: Parts 3 and 4. ♦ March 12 at 8: Parts 1 and 2. ♦ March 13 at 8:30 and March 15 at 5: Parts 5 and 6. ♦ March 14 at 6:30 and March 15 at 2:30: Parts 7 and 8. ♦

SWANN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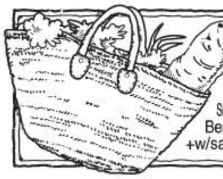

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"Joseph P. Kennedy Presents." March 11 at 8:15: "The Trespasser" (1929, Edmund Goulding). ♦ "Batiste Madalena and the Cinema of the 1920s." All films are silent. March 14 at 2: "Beau Brummel" (1924, Harry Beaumont). ♦ March 14 at 4:30: "The Freshman" (1925, Sam Taylor). ♦ March 14 at 6:30: "Underworld" (1927, Josef von Sternberg). ♦ "ImaginAsian." March 11, March 13, and March 16 at 6; March 12 at 5:30; March 14 at 2; and March 15 at 4: "Megane" (2007, Naoko Ogigami; in Japanese). ♦ March 12 at 8 and March 15 at 2: "Seagull Diner" (2006, Ogigami; in Japanese).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." March 13 at 9:30: "Band of Outsiders" (1964, Jean-Luc Godard), introduced by Jonathan Lethem.

READINGS AND TALKS

NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE FINALISTS
Nearly all of this year's nominees, including Honor Moore, Marilynne Robinson, Brenda Wineapple, and Richard Brody (an editor at this magazine), will offer selections from their possibly prize-winning work on the eve of the awards ceremony itself. (The New School, 66 W. 12th St. No tickets necessary. March 11 at 6.)

TRIBUTE TO REGINALD SHEPHERD
Poets House, Cave Canem, and the New York University Creative Writing Program bring together Timothy Donnelly, Marilyn Hacker, Timothy Liu, Kevin Prufer, Evie Shockley, Susan Stewart, and Yerra Sugarman to pay homage to the late poet, critic, and teacher, who died last year. (Lilian Vernon Creative Writers House, N.Y.U., 58 W. 10th St. No tickets necessary. March 12 at 7.)

PETER SINGER
The bioethicist and author of "Animal Liberation" talks about his latest book, "The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty." (Strand Bookstore, Broadway at 12th St. No tickets necessary. March 16 at 7.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE
The first New York City St. Patrick's Day parade took place in 1766, organized by Irish soldiers keeping the peace. The parade has grown a bit since then. It takes over Fifth Avenue from 44th St. to 86th St., drawing marching bands, bagpipe players, and, of course, politicians. (March 17, starting at 11 A.M.)

"BRAINWAVE"
The Rubin Museum of Art's annual festival exploring the mind through art, music, and meditation brings in Stephen Mitchell, who is celebrating the publication of his latest work, "The Second Book of the Tao," by discussing Taoist philosophy with the neurobiologist John Kubie. With Paul Muldoon, the poetry editor for this magazine, who will read selections from his own work. (150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5000, ext. 344. March 11 at 7.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
In the lead-up to Asia Week—sans International Asian Art Fair this year, a victim of the harsh economic climate—**Christie's** holds an elegant auction of contemporary art at relatively low prices, under the rubric "First Open" (March 11). Then, on March 17, the Asian sales begin with a selection of Japanese and Korean art, ranging from traditional to modern, and led by a beautiful large painting by Katsushika Hokusai, "Cooling Off on a Summer Evening," a delicate creation of grays and greens. Likely to be another highlight is a set of delicately rendered—and very naughty—late-eighteenth-century erotic paintings by the ukiyo-e painter and printmaker Katsukawa Shunsho. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ **Sotheby's** eases into the weekend with a wine auction from a private cellar (March 14) featuring vintages from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, as well as Sassicaias (the original super-Tuscan) and Barolos. Then it's on to Chinese ceramics and works of art (March 17), including four distinguished pieces from the Gordon Getty collection—three porcelains and a fabulously complex nineteenth-century "figures in a landscape" automaton. Within a large wood-and-glass case lies a lush and intricate universe, a mountain landscape complete with clouds, bridges, and a pagoda; when activated, it comes alive, as a scribe moves his quill across a page, a sea monster rears its head, and a butterfly flutters by. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ More Asian art goes up for auction at **Doyle** on March 17, in a sale that combines Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian art from the Neolithic period to the twentieth century. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.)

NEWYORKER.COM

Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.

"Monkey King," at La Salle Academy.

FIDO NESTI

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
MULLIGAN'S, TOO
March 18–25

The Film Society kicks off a yearlong series, "American Auteurs," devoted to the work of unjustly overlooked filmmakers, with a retrospective of films by Robert Mulligan. Mulligan, who died in 2008, elicited superb performances from his actors, including Gregory Peck in "To Kill a Mockingbird," Steve McQueen in "Baby, the Rain Must Fall," and Richard Gere in "Bloodbrothers." (212-875-5610.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND
MONKEYING AROUND
March 18–25

Diane Wolkstein and two dozen other master storytellers take the stage at La Salle Academy for a marathon rendition of the epic Chinese tale "Monkey King: Journey to the West," in which a supernatural simian is punished for attempting to take over Heaven. (www.monkeykingepic.com.)

DANCE
WHITE LIKE HER
March 22–29

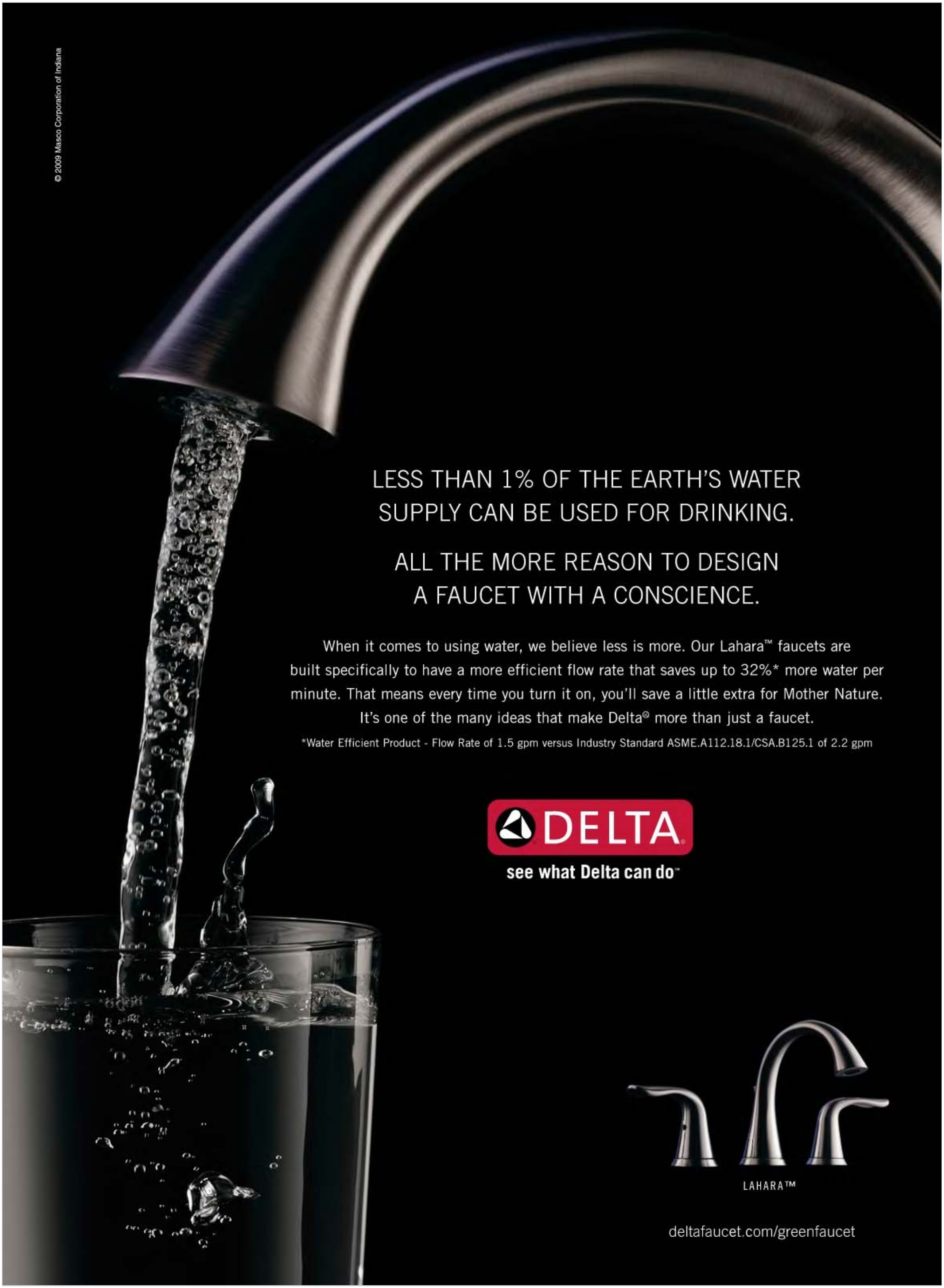
In the work of the eccentric, beloved downtown choreographer Sally Silvers, awkwardness gives way to wit and then philosophy. "Yessified!," her new ensemble piece at P.S. 122, roughs up the issue of race. (212-352-3101.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
WOLF AT THE DOOR
March 23–24 and March 29–30

The music of Sergei Prokofiev, currently offered by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, gets an extra push from Valery Gergiev and the London Symphony in four concerts at Avery Fisher Hall that include all seven of the composer's symphonies. (212-721-6500.)

ART
TALE OF THE TAPE
March 27–July 5

The Brooklyn Museum will exhibit "Enfolding 280 Hours," a site-specific mural made of black masking tape by the Korean-born, New York-based Sun K. Kwak. The work's title estimates the time it will take Kwak and her assistants to complete it. (718-638-5000.)



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FOCUS on driving

THE NEW YORKER

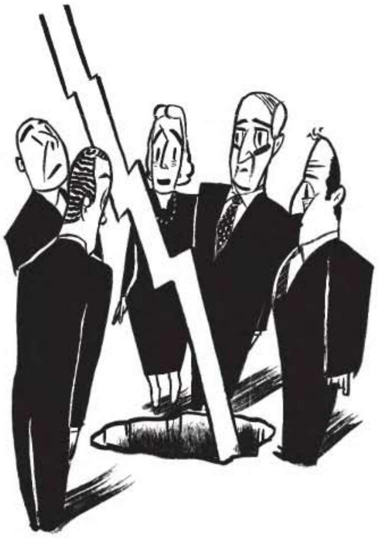
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
HARDER TIMES

As an exercise in political symbolism, the release of the White House's $3.6-trillion budget for 2010 was an important moment. President Obama, by putting some numbers behind his plans to reform health care, limit carbon emissions, and tackle rising inequality, confirmed his intention to lead the country in a new direction. Republican jibes that the budget was "socialist" should be treated with the respect they deserve, which is to say none: after a major rise in outlays this year, due to the stimulus package, federal spending as a share of the gross domestic product is projected to fall back to twenty-two per cent by 2013, which represents a rise of just one per cent over last year's figure.

The problem with the budget isn't its size or its underlying philosophy, which is one of pragmatic progressivism. The problem is that unless the deterioration of the economy stops, the Administration's ambitious multiyear plans could end up being purely symbolic. Last week, businesses across the country were shedding workers and sales at frightening rates: General Motors sales are half what they were this time last year; sales at Saks have dropped by a quarter. On Wall Street, A.I.G. revealed new losses of more than sixty billion dollars, the Dow dipped toward 6,500, and Citigroup stock traded for less than a dollar a share. If you haven't looked at your 401(k) statement lately, this is not the moment to get brave.

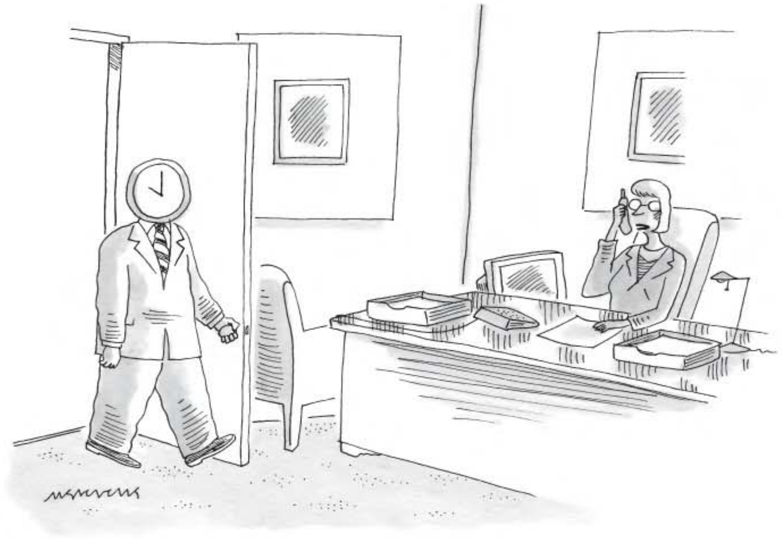
With some economists talking openly about a "depression," the Administration needs to start rethinking elements of its recovery program, and the President himself needs to get more involved. By outsourcing the financial crisis to Lawrence Summers, the head of the National Economic Council, and Timothy Geithner, the Treasury Secretary—two clever but conventionally minded public officials who played significant (although inadvertent) roles in leading the economy to its present state—the President has closed off some options that should be considered, such as nationalizing insolvent banks, suspending payroll taxes, and offering everybody in the country a cheap mortgage. Such proposals would produce the usual protests, but the time for half measures has passed.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Before Obama took office, he and his team appeared to know what needed to be done. To break the recessionary dynamic, they suggested that they would pursue an integrated economic program consisting of a big stimulus bill, a meaningful effort to help struggling homeowners, a rescue package for the Detroit automakers, and an effective bank-stabilization plan; and in the final weeks of 2008 the Dow jumped nearly twenty per cent. According to the Congressional Budget Office's latest analysis, the new spending and tax cuts in the $787-billion stimulus package, which Obama signed into law on February 17th, will boost the gross domestic product by about 2.6 per cent in 2009. That sounds encouraging, but in the last quarter of 2008 the G.D.P. fell at an annual rate of 6.2 per cent, and a similar downward lurch is expected in the current quarter. The stimulus alone, as it stands now, won't be sufficient to counter that fall.

The foreclosure-prevention plan will cost $275 billion, but only $75 billion is directed at homeowners who are behind on their mortgage payments. The rest is going to shore up the finances of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which the government took over last year. Refinancing is available for some people who are up to date on their payments and whose homes are still roughly worth their



"Gotta go. My ten o'clock is here."

mortgages. But this rules out many in Florida, California, and Arizona whose homes have dropped in value by some forty per cent. The plan to save the auto industry remains a work in progress, as does the banking-industry restabilization, the importance of which can't be exaggerated: Japan's experience in the nineteen-nineties demonstrates that fiscal stimulus without effective financial stabilization doesn't work.

The problem comes down to how to deal with the banks' "toxic assets"—distressed mortgage bonds and mortgage-related derivatives, mostly—which have been festering on their balance sheets for nearly two years. Summers and Geithner favor letting the banks function on their own, pumping more money into them, and relieving them of their toxic assets. This is hard to do without rewarding shareholders and bank executives, overpaying for bad assets, and infuriating the public, but Geithner believes that he has found a way around these challenges. Under his proposal, the government will team up with hedge funds, buyout firms, and other Wall Street operators to buy the distressed mortgage assets. Meanwhile, about twenty big banks are being forced to undergo "stress tests," to see if they need more capital.

This plan could work. However, it shares several features with the Bush Administration's failed approach to dealing with the banks, which Geithner, in his former post as head of the New York Fed, helped to shape. It is incremental rather than definitive; it is opaque; it works with the financiers who caused the crisis; and it is based on the assumption that an economic recovery will begin next year. If the recession turns out to be deeper and longer than the Treasury is expecting, the banks will need even more government money.

Another option—which recently received the reluctant endorsements of even Alan Greenspan, James Baker, and Lindsey Graham—is temporary nationalization: the government takes over the most troubled banks, splits off their toxic assets, puts those assets in a publicly owned "bad bank," and sells off the healthy parts of the businesses. After a ruinous boom-bust cycle in the late nineteen-eighties, some Scandinavian governments followed this approach. Within a couple of years, their economies were recovering strongly, and the Swedish government ended up making a profit. Here the strategy could punish irresponsible bankers (whose shares and options would be wiped out), avoid having to put a price on the toxic stuff, and enable the government to order the institutions under their control to make more loans.

Right now, for instance, the government could take temporary control of Citi and Bank of America, and, if necessary, give larger handouts to those banks that are deemed capable of surviving. A President with Obama's communication skills and approval ratings should be able to market such steps to the public, especially if he were also to set up a 9/11-style commission to investigate what went wrong on Wall Street (an idea that shouldn't be ruled out just because John McCain supported it) and to demand repayment of some of the bonuses given out to executives at firms like Citi and A.I.G.

Last week, Christina Romer, the head of the Council of Economic Advisers, expressed the hope that the Administration's policies would lead to a "Rooseveltian moment," by which she meant a sharp economic upturn, like the one that occurred from 1933 to 1937. Acting in a Rooseveltian manner involves defying orthodoxy, challenging powerful interests, and giving voice to the public's disgust at the corrupt financial establishment. F.D.R. was called a lot worse names than socialist. He didn't let it stop him.

—*John Cassidy*

ANALYTIC HOUR
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

A man arrives in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria. He has been invited by the American Psychoanalytic Association to "Drinks with Shrinks," a party to "meet and mingle—with a number of APsaA's leading members," who are in the city for their annual winter meeting, a week of discussions such as "Making Freud More Freudian" and "Shame Dynamics." He notices that his feet make no sound on the carpet, as if he weren't there at all, as if someone else could easily be inserted into the space he is so tentatively occupying. A man and a woman, sharing a drink, seem to break off their conversation as he passes. He smiles and nods slightly, like an actor, and they simply stare at him, their faces like masks, he thinks, those tribal masks in the Metropolitan Museum that are always a little disturbing to visit, because they suggest ceremonies and superstitions that are passionate and dangerous. He has always taken care to keep such thoughts from his waking life.

The lobby is enormous and seems full of chambers and passageways. The unconscious must be like this, he thinks. Hallways you walk down with no one in them, and doors you wish you hadn't opened. The elevator leading to the suite where the party is under way is difficult to find. Beside it is a man with his back to him, and before his mind focusses he thinks it is his father, dead thirty years. When he rounds the man's shoulders, the impression dissolves and is replaced by the recollection of a disturbing dream in which he was chased by a snake shouting, "Sigmund Freud! Sigmund Freud!"

At the door to the suite, he is met by Dottie Jeffries, the director of public affairs for the association. Leading him gently toward a room of men and women, standing in twos and threes, Jeffries guides him to a woman seated on a green chintz couch with red, white, and yellow flowers, and he thinks, I'm so short. "The mind is never silent," the woman, Dr. Prudence Gourguechon, from Chicago, says. "Your mind has always got something going on in it." He has the irrational impulse to tell her that he has always felt as if a shadow lay across his path. He asks instead, "Is the economy hurting psychoanalysis?" Too much is made of fees, Dr. Gourguechon says. What's important is the frequency, four days a week. "If you come only once a week, as in conventional psychotherapy, you're reporting events," she says. "'I had the same fight with my wife, and I still hate her,' or, 'I still can't make up my mind between these two women.' When you see someone every day, the repetitive fight, the indecision, recedes. They say, 'What do I talk about?' Whatever comes to your mind, as Freud said. Psychoanalysis is defined by the deeper orders of the mind."

I want to lie down, the man thinks, but he doesn't. Another analyst, Fred Sander, tall and lanky, like Lincoln, sits in a chair across a coffee table from him. "Many more patients are coming to psychoanalysis who present with marital problems," Dr. Sander says. "Instead of the hysterical women patients that Freud so famously saw, now you see couples that are in trouble."

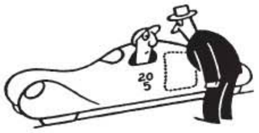
"What about the economy?" the man asks.

"We have some things to offer, such as analytically informed marital therapy, which is less costly than psychoanalysis proper," Dr. Sander says. Curbing an urge to talk about women in big hats, the man thanks Dr. Sander and rises from his chair. His path to the bar is intersected by a tall, elderly analyst with an intelligent, melancholy face and ears like Barack Obama's. The man asks about the economy and finds repeating the question comforting. "As a treatment modality, psychoanalysis is very expensive," the analyst says. "And the Zeitgeist is against it. Particularly for Americans, who want answers fast. There's supposed to be a pill to fix everything. If not, you sue your doctor. People tend to take up psychoanalysis after they have failed at other supportive therapies. It's a major intervention, and you don't want to do it if something else can do the job."

This is all the man can take. He wants to tell the attractive woman analyst in the pants suit that her hair is the same color that his mother's was, but he makes for the door unbetrayed. In the beautiful elevator, with the metalwork and the cherry-burl walls, he feels a solace. Halfway to the ground, aware of the plunge, he thinks suddenly, I am descending through the mine shaft of the dark and unknowable, and tries hard not to think about it.

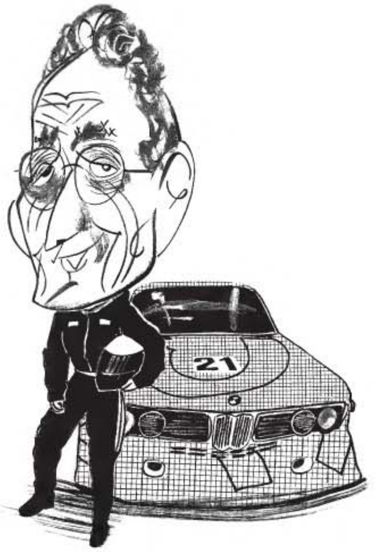
—*Alec Wilkinson*

VROOM DEPT.
IS IT ART?



The marriage of art and business has multiple offspring, but perhaps none are more enduring than BMW's art cars. In 1975, the German automaker persuaded Alexander Calder to design a paint job for one of its racing models, and then promptly enlisted Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol to do the same, eventually commissioning twelve other artists, including Robert Rauschenberg, A. R. Penck, David Hockney, and, most recently, Olafur Eliasson (2007). Exhibited widely here and abroad, the Big Four of the art cars—by Stella, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Rauschenberg—arrive on March 24th at Grand Central Terminal, where, through April 6th, they will bear proud witness to everything that Detroit's Big Three have done wrong.

The artist whose life and work were most affected by the art-car gambit is Frank Stella, whose black-and-white, graph-paper-patterned BMW 3.0 CSL competed in the twenty-four-hour Le Mans race in 1976. Reminiscing about it last week, at his house in the Village, the artist, who retains his grunge look at the age of seventy-two, said that he did not go to Le Mans that year but wishes that he had. "BMW was trying to be more prominent at Le Mans, which at the time was dominated by Porsche," he said. "So they built a very powerful car"—Stella's—"and it shot out front at the start. Of course, after an hour or so it was no longer in front, but the news photos of the start went all over the world, and the black-and-white design reproduced great."



Frank Stella

Stella went to a lot of Grand Prix and Formula Two races after that. "I knew Ronnie Peterson, the Swedish driver who drove my BMW at Le Mans," he said. "Harriet, my wife, and I saw him race in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza in 1978. That was really sad, because he crashed at

Monza, and died of his injuries. I made a series of prints called 'Polar Coordinates' about him, and gave some of them to the Royal Automobile Club of Sweden. Later, I did a huge series of paintings called 'Circuits,' which were named after race tracks I'd been to."

Stella's fee for the BMW paint job was a two-year lease on a new, non-racing BMW. "I'd never owned a car before," he said. "Harriet and I went down to Florida to pick it up, and within five minutes I destroyed the gearbox. BMW gave me several more cars after that, and I gave one to Harriet, and finally I learned to drive better. I also drove some Ferraris."

"Frank likes speed," Harriet called out from the kitchen, where she was chopping apples for a pie.

"I got a few tickets," he conceded. One of them, in 1982, was for driving his Ferrari a hundred and five miles an hour on the Taconic State Parkway. He spent a night in jail; the court, in lieu of a thirty-day sentence, obliged him to deliver a series of lectures on art in the local high-school auditorium. These days, he drives an Audi station wagon to his place upstate and to his studio, in Newburgh, New York. It has plenty of power, but he doesn't drive it as fast as he used to. "No, no, I'm very good now," he said.

Although Stella has never driven in a race, he has photographs of himself, suited up in helmet and white coveralls, in the passenger seat of the Warhol art car during a race in Germany last July. The car was featured at the German Grand Prix to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the BMW M1, a mid-engined beauty that had just come out when Warhol painted it. (Warhol insisted on painting directly on the car, rather than on the scale models that BMW supplied; his gaudy colors and scratched lines were unpopular with automotive purists, who thought that he had obscured the M1's svelte contours.) "Jochen Neerpasch drove the car, and I just sat there," Stella said. "They thought at first I wouldn't want to get in Warhol's car. But we won the race! Of course, it was an honorary race, and the other guys weren't allowed to pass us. Even so, it was a triumph."

Asked whether he thought the BMW art cars qualified as works of art, Stella did some verbal downshifting. "It depends on who you ask," he said. "The design is made by an artist, so it's art." He declined to comment on the other art cars. "Let's just say I liked the earlier ones," he offered, "because they weren't about being an art item." Most of the later cars, beginning with Ernst Fuchs's, in 1982, were production models, not made for the track. "It's the racing part that's interesting," Stella said. "That car I did was a nice introduction to racing, and a relief from the art world."

—*Calvin Tomkins*

OLD AND NEW
GEHRY AT EIGHTY

When Frank Gehry turned an old warehouse in downtown Los Angeles into a museum, in 1983, he wasn't looking for a place to celebrate his eightieth birthday, which was then twenty-six years away. The idea was just to give the Museum of Contemporary Art a place to exhibit for a year or two while it waited for its fancy new building, by Arata Isozaki, to be ready. Nobody expected the Temporary Contemporary, as the place was called, to stick around and become one of the museum's most popular features. Gehry, like his building, is a survivor: understated in appearance and tough underneath. Last week, he invited five hundred friends to the museum, which is now called the Geffen Contemporary, for a party.

Even though Gehry produces some of the most widely studied and discussed buildings in the world, no one can accuse him of living in an architects' ghetto. He played hockey and rode motorcycles until a few years ago, and he loves to sail. The guests at his party included Brad Pitt, Arianna Huffington, Donald Sutherland, Maureen Dowd, and Laurence Fishburne.

"Brad Pitt, he's a huge architecture buff," Gehry said. "He likes architecture parties. That's how I first met him. When my hockey team won the league a few years ago, I had a party at my house, and the doorbell rang and there was Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston standing there with a bottle of tequila. It turned out he had a friend who knew someone on the hockey team who told him about the party, and he'd always wanted to see my house. I told him he had to see the Einstein Tower, in Germany, by Erich Mendelsohn, and he went to see it in Berlin."

There were a lot of personal toasts. "I have written a book about Picasso, but until I met Frank Gehry I had not met a genius who is nice," Huffington said in hers. "Frank Gehry is the friendly genius."

"He was my motorcycle buddy," Fishburne said. "And sometimes I'd, you know, smoke a bit of marijuana and he would be riding with me and I would think, Oh, my God, I have the greatest living architect on my motorcycle, and what if I crash?"

Thomas Krens, who commissioned Gehry's museum in Bilbao, explained that whenever Krens went to him with a small request, as the building was being designed, Gehry would make bigger changes, just to show how full of ideas he was. "It's the same story he always tells about what a big ego I have," Gehry groused later on. "He should look in the mirror."

After the speeches, the actress Sally Kellerman sang "Happy Birthday," and a huge cake, loosely based on the swirling stainless-steel forms of Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, was rolled out. He was pleased. "I love going to Disney Hall, especially now that I'm no longer self-conscious about the architecture," he said. "It's done. I can just go and listen to the music."

Gehry said that he has given up his plan to build a new compound for himself and his wife, Berta, near Venice, California. "I came up with thirty different houses, and I could never decide," he said. "I even thought about a guesthouse on the property, where pianists coming to play at Disney Hall could stay. Berta said to me, 'Frank, I can't do that. Who's going to make breakfast for the pianists?' Berta brings me to reality. She said the Philharmonic should send the pianists to a hotel and borrow a Steinway."

Gehry has cut back the size of his office somewhat, since one of his biggest projects, Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, is on hold. "But I have plenty of work," he said. "I told my staff that when I was eighty I would slow down. Well, I did, but not much. I don't feel like eighty. I guess you never think you're the age you are, and, as long as you don't look in the mirror, you aren't."

—*Paul Goldberger*

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

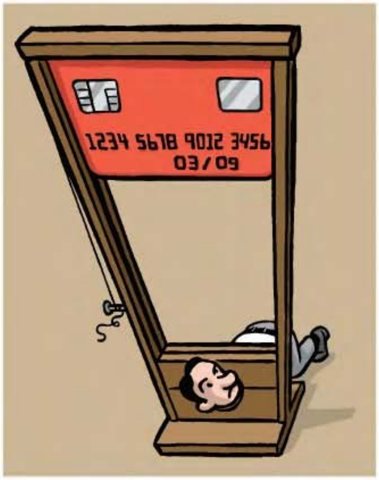
HOUSE OF CARDS

In tough times, businesses will do nearly anything to get new customers—look at the big markdowns at retailers and the cheap financing at auto dealerships. But there is an exception to the rule: these days, credit-card companies are trying to get rid of customers. They're shutting down accounts, shrinking credit lines, and, in some cases, actually paying customers to go away. American Express recently offered some of its customers three hundred dollars if they would pay off their balance and close their account.

This is a pretty startling change of direction for the lords of plastic. For decades, they've been deluging Americans with come-ons (in 2007, 5.2 billion offers for new cards were sent out), so much so that, as of 2006, there were nearly 1.5 billion charge cards in circulation. And these cards did not go unused: between 2000 and 2006, even as Americans' real income was essentially stagnant and their savings rate negligible, credit-card borrowing rose by about thirty per cent. Our willingness to spend beyond our means served the credit-card companies well: their profits jumped forty-five per cent between 2003 and 2008. But while making borrowing easier boosted the companies' profits, it also increased the risks they faced, risks that started to hit home once the economic slowdown began. According to Fitch Ratings, credit-card chargeoffs—debts that companies determine they will not be able to collect—rose to almost 7.5 per cent in December, up forty per cent from a year earlier. And, as unemployment continues to rise, so, too, will the number of people who are unable to pay their bills.

It's little wonder, then, that credit-card companies are now scrambling to shed the customers they think are most likely to default, and to limit the amount that others can spend. In effect, they're trying to follow the advice given by Larry Selden and Geoffrey Colvin in a book called "Angel Customers & Demon Customers." Not all customers are equal, it turns out: some are tremendously profitable, while others, like the guy who calls customer service six times a day to check his account balance, cost more than they're worth. To boost profits, you must cultivate the angels and protect yourself against the demons.

That sounds easy enough. But credit-card companies have created a strange business, in which there's a fine line between good and bad customers. Their best customers aren't those who dutifully pay off their balance every month; instead, they're the ones who charge a lot and pay only a little every month, carrying a sizable balance and racking up interest charges and late fees. These are the "revolvers," and the credit-card business feeds on them. Credit-card companies don't necessarily want revolvers to pay off their debts; if they did, there'd be no interest or fees to collect. They want their loans to be, in the words of a banking regulator, "a perpetual earning asset." And they've thought a lot about how to keep those interest payments coming. For instance, they used to keep minimum payments relatively high. But, over time, companies started lowering minimum payments, sometimes to just two per cent of the balance. The lower the minimum payment the less people pay off each month and the longer they stay on the hook.



CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

The catch is that while revolvers are the companies' best customers, they're also more likely to default, which would make them the worst. That's why credit-card companies have had to rein in their lending and shed accounts. Since that risks shrinking profits, they're also trying to get as much as they can out of their existing customers, by doing things like sharply increasing their interest rates. This increase is partly a response to the greater risk of default, but it also takes advantage of the recession. Many cardholders don't have enough money to pay off their balance in full, so when interest rates rise they aren't able to just close their account and get a different card. Effectively, they're captive customers. And since credit-card companies, unlike most lenders, are allowed to change the terms of their loans at any time, people who borrowed a big chunk of money at, say, nine per cent may now be paying seventeen per cent on the loan.

These tactics are not going to improve the credit-card industry's dismal reputation. They're also not going to help an economy in recession, since reduced credit lines take away an important cushion for consumer spending, and higher interest rates and increased fees are likely to drive more people to default. But the odd thing is that while less access to revolving credit is a bad thing for us in the short run, having people rely less on credit cards is a good thing in the long run. The easy availability of credit cards encouraged people to live beyond their means—studies suggest that people really do spend more when they can pay with a credit card, and that big credit lines further encourage extravagance. And the high price of credit-card debt meant that billions of dollars in interest and late fees went to credit-card companies instead of to more productive uses. Smaller credit lines and less borrowing make sense. But in the short run they're going to throw a lot of sand into the economy's gears.

This is the paradox of deleveraging: it's good for borrowers to reduce their debt, and good for lenders to be more rigorous in their standards, but when everyone deleverages at once it does real damage. It's like a drug addict whose dealer cuts him off: it's good to stop using, but withdrawal is painful. The end of the credit-card boom isn't going to wreak as much havoc as the end of the housing boom. But it is helping to put a brake on our spending. And, at this point, every little bit hurts.

—*James Surowiecki*

Special Advertising Section

EXPLORE: IRELAND

Be Our Guest

Irish country houses provide rich historical settings from which to explore the land's contemporary pleasures.

Ireland's family-owned country houses are much more than gracious places to stay. These magnificent Georgian estates also offer authentic connections to local history and personal introductions to a region's people.

"Guests step back in time" at **Enniscoe House** in County Mayo, says D. J. Kellett, proprietor of the estate, which has been in the same family since it was built, around 1720. Portraits of his ancestors recall the home's singular place in history.

The manse's architectural details are well preserved, as is its setting on 150 acres overlooking Lough Conn. But what guests will likely prize as much are meals prepared with homegrown organic produce, and Kellett's clear directions to "beaches hardly anyone knows about" along North Mayo's coastline. Take the road to the west coast and discover tree-lined Westport Town's Georgian landmarks and Romanesque abbey. Follow it further to reach the mountains, bays, and water sports of Achill Island or the cliff-clinging Sky Road of Connemara.

Arrive at County Cork's **Ballyvolane House** by tea time when the young children (ages one through eight) of owners Justin and Jenny Green serve this daily gathering. "It's part of the way of life we share here," says Justin Green, which is what the couple, both hotel-school grads, decided to return to after distinguished stints in five-star hotels all over the world.

The 1728 stone house, purchased by Green's grandfather in 1955 from the family that built it, has only six guest rooms. "Top-notch service" is the hallmark of the estate, Green says, "because having guests is what allows us to stay here." The freshness of garden-dug potatoes and just-caught salmon from the nearby River Blackwater help provide a true sense of place unmistakable to visitors.

Gastronomic delicacies also await in nearby Kinsale, a foodie haven combining Norman, Spanish, and English influences. To plant your feet more firmly in nature, arrange guided walks with the Greens in the challenging Galty and Knockmealdown Mountains. Or venture farther afield, north to the Rock of Cashel medieval heritage site (Ireland's Acropolis) in Tipperary, or west along the storied Ring of Kerry trail that circles the Iveragh peninsula.

At **Newforge House** in Northern Ireland, about twenty miles from Belfast, proprietor John Mathers promises, "It'll be me and Louise who greet you at the door." Built in 1785, the house, clad in ivy of changing hues, has been in John's family for six generations. Gardens tended by John's father help supply the kitchen, where John, a trained chef, presides.

From Newforge it's only a ten-minute drive northeast to the nature preserve on Lough Neagh, a birdwatchers' haven. Beyond lies Armagh, the site of both Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals. The other direction takes you into the Mourne Mountains to Rostrevor, gateway to a scenic drive along the rugged coast. Belfast, with its lively music scene and the Ulster Museum, is less than thirty minutes away. John Mathers goes there weekly to buy beef, lamb, bacon, and cheeses from the local farmers who gather at the hundred-year-old St. George's Market.

This is the essence of the country house experience, he says: "We are very near Belfast, and also away from it all."

FROM TOP LEFT: NEWFORGE HOUSE AND GROUNDS CO. ARMAGH, GALWAY CITY; BELOW: ENGLISH MARKET CORK CITY. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF IRELAND TOURISM

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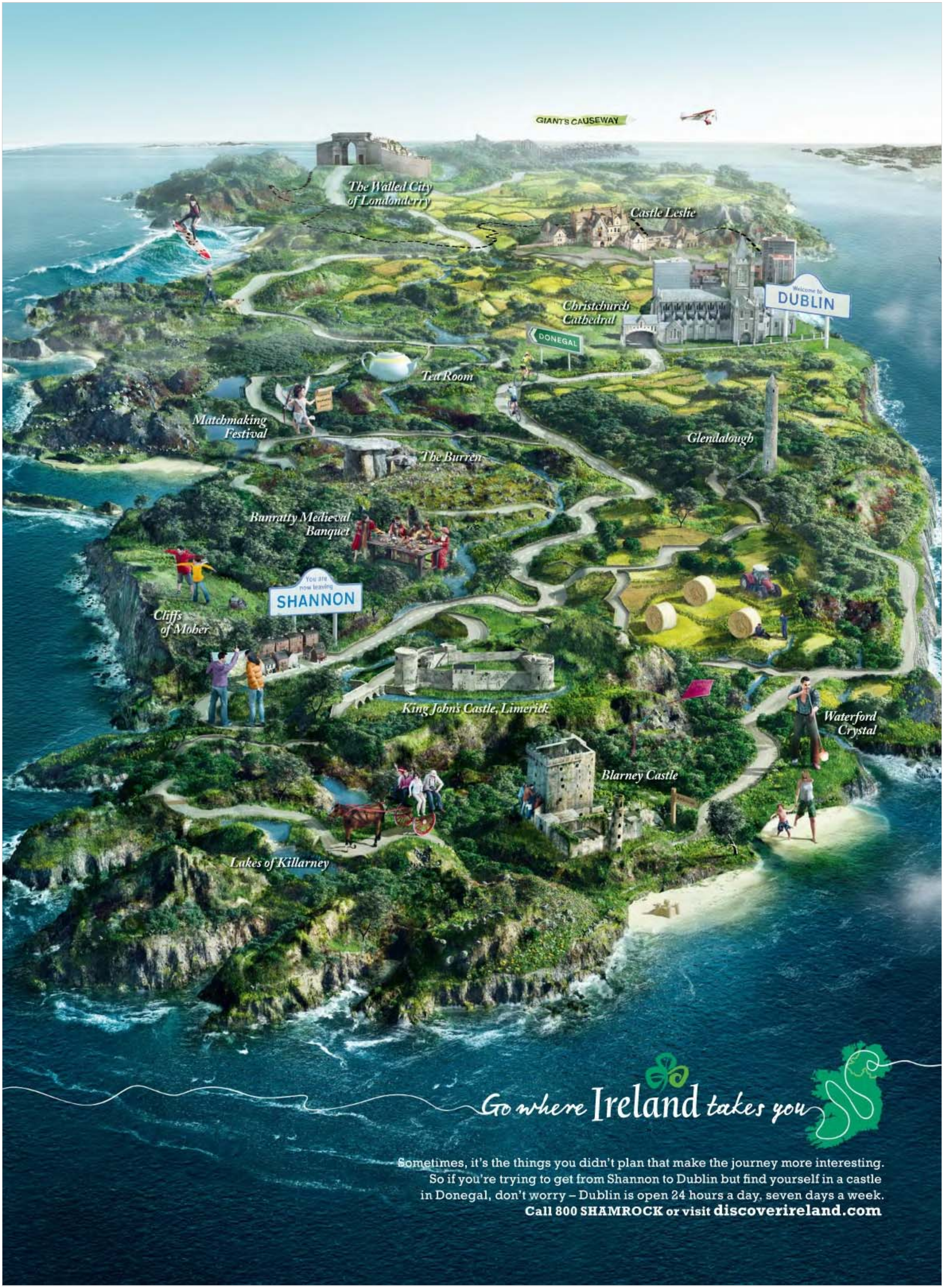
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TO DINE...OR TO FEAST?

Given the many dining options at MGM Grand, using the suite's gourmet kitchen may not be necessary. In the latest edition, the *Michelin* guide once again gave its highest rating, three stars, to Joël Robuchon at the MGM Grand, which it calls "perfection on a plate." Other dining destinations include Wolfgang Puck's California-inspired cuisine and Emeril Lagasse's signature blend of Creole-Cajun specialties. Craftsteak, by Chef Tom Colicchio, offers mainstays like Kobe beef along with veal, salmon, and lobster dishes prepared with the purest ingredients from small family farms. SEABLUE, by Michael Mina, is inspired by the bustling ports and marketplaces of the Mediterranean and is noted for its two open kitchens, which prepare seafood over wood-fired grills. Nobhill, also by Mina, has a popular bar and lounge that captures the look and feel of a top-flight San Francisco eatery. Still more restaurants include the sleek Fiamma Trattoria & Bar, and Pearl, which serves cuisine inspired by Canton and Shanghai.

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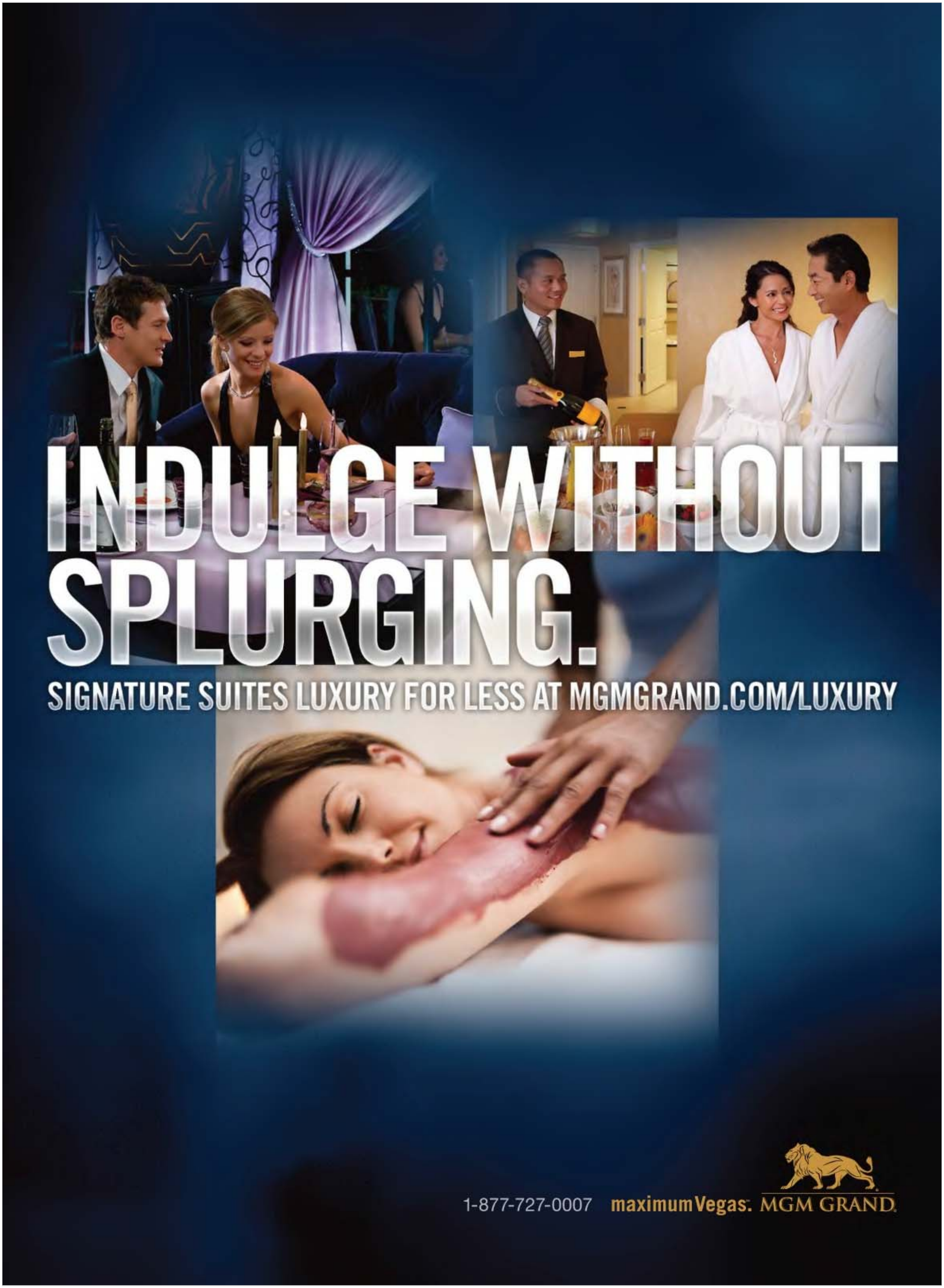
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OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

MAN ON THE STREET

Bill Cunningham takes Manhattan.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

A few summers ago, on upper Fifth Avenue, Bill Cunningham spied a remarkable creature: a woman, in her seventies, with a corona of blue hair—not the muzzy pastel hue associated with bad dye jobs but the irradiant one of Slurpees and laundry detergent. The woman gave Cunningham an idea. Every day for a month, whenever he saw something cerulean (a batik shawl) or aqua (a Hawaiian-print sarong) or azure (a Japanese parasol) coming down the sidewalk, he snapped a picture of it. One morning, he spotted a worker balancing, on his shoulder, a stuffed blue marlin. "I thought, That's *it*, kid!" he recently recalled. The following Sunday, "On the Street," the street-fashion column that Cunningham has maintained in the *Times* for more than a decade, was populated entirely with New Yorkers dressed in various shades of the color—a parade of human paint chips. "Mediterranean shades of blue are not yet the new pink, but they are a favorite this summer," he wrote. "The cooling watery tones, worn as an accent with white and browns, appear in turquoise-color jewelry and blue hair, but it is rare to see a man crossing the Avenue of the Americas with a trophy sailfish."

Cunningham's job is not so different from a fisherman's: it requires a keen knowledge, honed over years, of the local ecosystem and infinite patience in all manner of weather conditions. His first big catch was an accident. It was 1978, and a woman wearing a nutria coat had caught his eye. "I thought: 'Look at the cut of that shoulder. It's so beautiful,'" he later wrote. "And it was a plain coat, too. You'd look at it and think: 'Oh, are you crazy? It's nothing.'" Cunningham shot frame after frame of the coat, eventually noticing that other people on the sidewalk were paying attention to its wearer. It was Greta Garbo. Cunningham showed the pictures, along with some shots of Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney (whom he recognized), Farrah Fawcett (whom he didn't, not owning a television), and the King and Queen of Spain, carrying plastic bags from Gristedes, to an editor at the *Times*. "The editor said, 'Why don't you wait and see who you get next week?'" Cunningham recalled. "And I said, 'My God, I'm not expecting Jesus Christ.'" Soon after, his column became a recurring feature.

"On the Street"—along with Cunningham's society column, "Evening Hours"—is New York's high-school yearbook, an exuberant, sometimes retroactively embarrassing chronicle of the way we looked. Class of 1992: velvet neck ribbons, leopard prints, black jeans, catsuits, knotted shirts, tote bags, berets (will they ever come back, after Monica?). Class of 2000: clamdiggers, beaded fringe, postcard prints, jean jackets, fishnet stockings, flower brooches (this was the height of "Sex and the City"). The column, in its way, is as much a portrait of New York at a given moment in time as any sociological tract or census—a snapshot of the city. On September 16, 2001, Cunningham ran a collage of signs ("OUR FINEST HOUR," "WE ARE STRONGER NOW") and flags (on bandannas, on buildings, on bikes) that makes one as sad and proud, looking at it now, as it did when it was published. So far this year, he has identified vogues for picture-frame collars, microminis, peg-legged pants, and the color gray ("often with a dash of sapphire or violet," in the manner of the Edwardians). His columns are frequently playful—he once featured a woman, near the Plaza, walking three standard poodles, "an unmatched set in pink, turquoise, and white"—but they also convey an elegiac respect for the anonymous promenade of life in a big city, and a dead-serious desire to get it all down.

For two groups of New Yorkers—the fashionable people, whose style changes

MIDDLE: RON GALELLA/WIREIMAGE; FASHION: BILL CUNNINGHAM/COURTESY NEW YORK TIMES

Bill Cunningham, surrounded by people whose outfits he has photographed. "I don't really see people—I see clothes," he says.

more rapidly than that of the masses, and the truly creative ones, whose style, while outré, in its theatricality never really changes at all—"On the Street" is also a family album. The magazine editors Anna Wintour, Cecilia Dean, and Carine Roitfeld and the society dermatologist Lisa Airan are regulars on the page, as are Tziporah Salamon (her Web site showcases her eight appearances in Cunningham's column, including one—a Capri-pants montage—in which only her legs are visible), and Louise Doktor, a midtown executive secretary, whose experimental outfits Cunningham has been documenting from afar for twenty-five years. "She once bought a coat with four sleeves!" he told me. At a party thrown last season at Bergdorf Goodman to celebrate the decoration of the store's windows in Cunningham's honor, guests included not only the police commissioner, Ray Kelly, and Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the publisher of the *Times* ("You're great! This is a really big thing," he said, grabbing Cunningham, who had shown up at his behest, by the shoulders), but a woman wearing, on her head, what looked like one of those blue pompoms from a car wash, and a man with a Swiss-dot veil drawn in ink on his forehead.

Cunningham, who turns eighty this month, is an annual presence at certain society events: the Fifth Avenue Easter Parade, the Central Park Conservancy luncheon, the Hampton Classic Horse Show. This winter, at the ice-skating rink in Central Park, he took pictures of the children of the children whose parents he once shot outside Maxim's and at the Hotel Pierre (where, at a dinner dance in 1984, he captured thirty-three women in similar Fabrice beaded gowns). His vocabulary ("Cheers, child!")

and his diction ("Mrs. Oh-*nah*-sis") are those of a more genteel era—the weekly audio slideshow he does for the *Times* offers many of the pleasures of a Lomax recording—but he rarely goes for the easy grip-and-grin shot. His sensibility is exhilaratingly democratic. He takes wonder, or whimsy, where he finds it, chronicling the Obama Inauguration, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, Wigstock, and the snowman sweatshirts and reindeer turtlenecks of tourists; the do-rag and the way that, at one point in 2000, many young hip-hop fans spontaneously took to wearing their sweatshirts abstractly, with the neck hole on the shoulder, or with the sleeves dangling down the back. (He related the phenomenon to both the Japanese deconstructionists and the sideways baseball cap.)

The four corners of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street are some of Cunningham's favorite shoals. One bright afternoon, he was there, as he has been for countless hours, casting about for inspiration. "I have an idea what I'm going to do this week," he said. (What that was he refused to say.) "I've got to face the bullet very quickly. If it doesn't have enough depth, I should wait." It was a crackerjack day. "Look at the style you have here!" Cunningham said. "Stay here on Fifth Avenue and you see the whole world. Summertime—the vacationers and the Europeans. The holidays—everyone from the Midwest, the West, Japan. They're all here, the whole world!"

Cunningham: "I'm looking for something that has beauty."

CLINT SPAULDING/PATRICK MCMULLAN

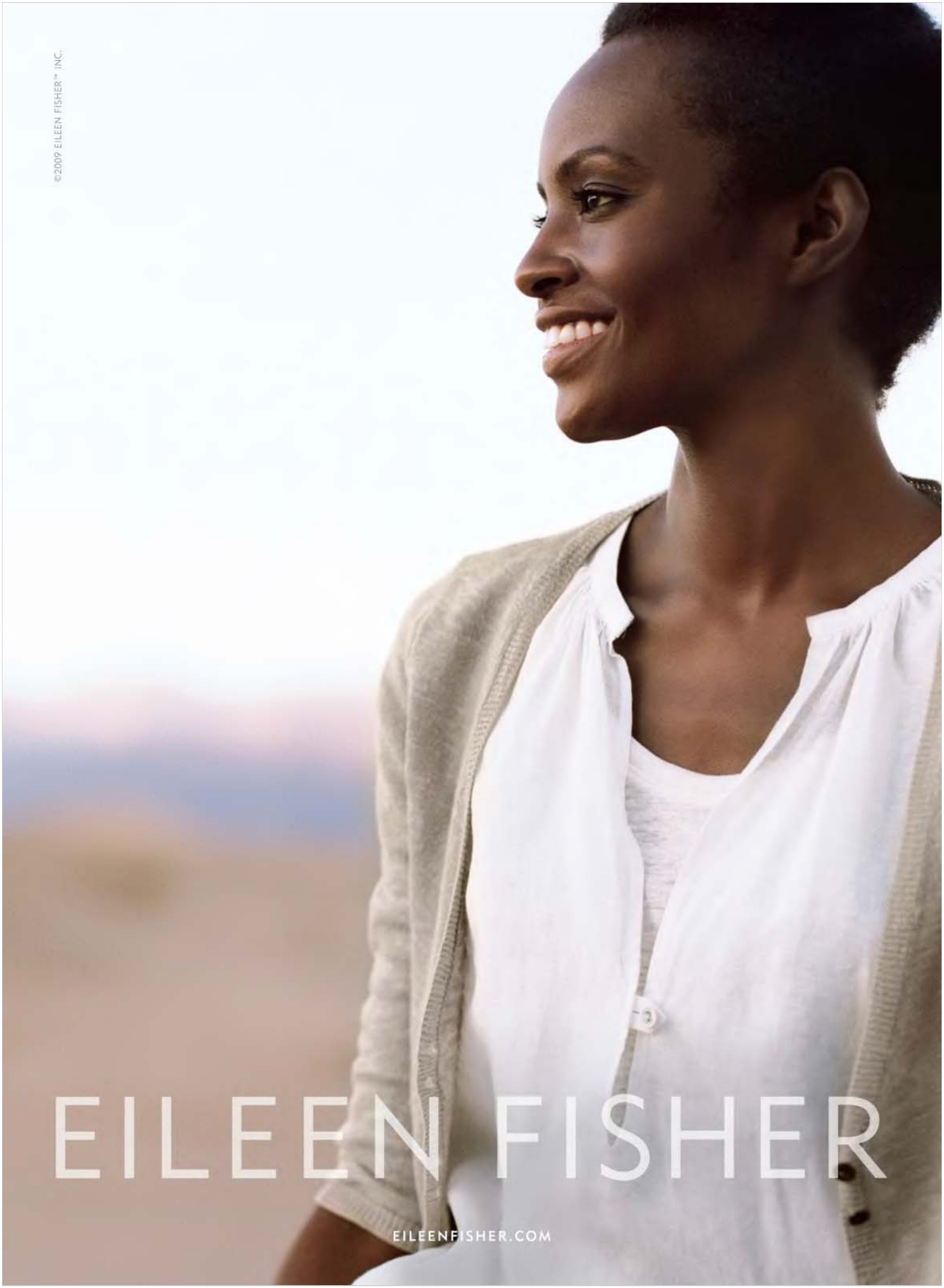
Cunningham lives alone in the Carnegie Hall Tower, one of the last tenants in a formerly vast complex of artists' studios, without a private bathroom or cooking facilities. His bed consists of a piece of foam, a wooden board, and several milk crates. Nearby is a metal file cabinet crammed with decades' worth of negatives. (Trip Gabriel, the editor of the *Times'* Sunday Styles section, where Cunningham's column appears, told me that when Cunningham goes to the Paris collections "our reporters are staying right in the First Arrondissement, sometimes at the Ritz, and Bill insists on staying at a cheapo hotel that has no phones in the rooms." To make a reservation, he sends a postcard.) "When I fall out of bed in the morning, I can come over here and get up my adrenaline," Cunningham said, blowing his nose into a deli napkin that he produced from a pocket of the blue workman's smock that he customarily wears, as if to say, in solidarity with the hot-dog venders and delivery boys amid whom he spends his days, that his office is the street. Around his neck was a battered Nikon. Its strap was held together with duct tape. Cunningham has often been described as a fashion monk, but he is closer to an oblate—a layperson who has dedicated his life to the tribe without becoming a part of it. A friend of Cunningham's told *Artforum* in 1996, "One of Bill's favorite sayings, when anyone starts taking the fashion scene too seriously, is 'Oops, you're falling into the traps of the rich.' " In a recent column, examining the way New Yorkers dress for wet weather, Cunningham poked fun at "the snobs," who "are so above it all, they think the waters will part for them even as they sink to their ankles."

Behind Cunningham, the windows of Bergdorf's were festooned with blow-ups of his columns. Linda Fargo, the store's vice-president of visual merchandising, said it had taken ten years to persuade Cunningham to agree to the exhibit. "Bill is not somebody you can ever press yourself on," Fargo said. "I once, to thank him for something, gave him a very small box of chocolates, and he personally delivered it back to my office two days later." In one of the windows, there was a red bicycle with silver fenders, in tribute to his customary means of conveyance. There was confetti made from shredded newspapers. "I'm delighted, but also a little embarrassed, because you try to be invisible, and this blows your cover!" Cunningham said, hoisting the Nikon to his eye and darting off, mid-sentence, in pursuit of a woman with a fetching fur-lined handbag.

"Luckily, you can slip back into being anonymous very quickly," he continued, once he'd returned. "I don't really see people—I see clothes. People say everybody's a slob. Ridiculous! There are marvellously"—it came out, in a wonderful archaic honk, as "*maah*-vahlously"—"dressed women you see at a quarter to eight, going to business. When people say fashion is no more, they're ridiculous! It's as good as it ever was."

I asked if he ever photographed people who didn't look so great, the sidewalk's blooper reel. He seemed almost offended. "I'm not drawn to something awful," he said. "I wouldn't even see that. I'm looking for something that has beauty. Do's and don'ts? I don't think there are any don'ts! What right does one have? It's like the Queen of England, when she appears, and people have nasty things to say. My God, she's dressing for her station and her office!"

A burly man dressed in a flannel shirt and steel-toed boots approached. "Hi! I'd like to shake the hand of the kid!" he said,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boomingly, offering his palm to Cunningham, who smiled. The two men began shadowboxing.

"Congrats, Billy. Can't believe they even got a bicycle in the window!"

The man headed off down the sidewalk, and, as he faded from view, I asked who he was.

"You get to know people," Cunningham said, explaining that it was an undercover cop.

Cunningham was born and brought up in Boston, the second of four children in an Irish Catholic family. There remains about him a distinct New Englishness. "One of our colleagues says that his voice sounds like that of an elderly hardware-store owner in Vermont," Trip Gabriel said. At the *Times*, Cunningham doesn't use a computer; he recently got a desk, and voice mail, which he has never checked. The paper got rid of its film-processing lab a few years ago, when it went digital, so Cunningham has his film developed at a one-hour photo center, on Forty-third Street. Each week, he brings a batch of his negatives to the office, where a member of the art department helps him create a layout. "He has browbeaten and exhausted and worn out the patience of generations of assistants in that process," Gabriel said, with affection.

"It was difficult around the turn of this century," Cunningham said, "because I had older art directors and they had other ideas of how things should be laid out. No one could stand me. Too much trouble! Five pictures, and that's it. I said, 'You can't do that. You've got to tell a story to the reader.' I'm writing with pictures—that's what I always tell them. You go and tell Maureen Dowd she can only use fifteen words, and no changes. That's ridiculous!" He continued, "Young kids, aren't they wonderful? Not because I push them around—I would never do that—but because they're more open to new thought."

According to "Bill on Bill"—an autobiographical article, published in the *Times* in 2002, that for those with an interest in Cunningham has taken on the authority of a holy text—Cunningham got his start in fashion as a stockboy at Bonwit Teller, where an executive, noticing his habit of watching the lunchtime passersby ("I said, 'Oh, yeah, that's my hobby' "), encouraged him to revamp their outfits in his mind's eye. In 1948, after a few months of classes at Harvard, Cunningham arrived in New York, where he lived with an aunt and uncle and worked at Bonwit's, again, in advertising, his uncle's profession. "That's why my family allowed me to come here and encouraged me to go into the business," he wrote in "Bill on Bill." "I think they were worried I was becoming too interested in women's dresses."

Actually, hats. After a year, Cunningham rented a top-floor room in a walkup on East Fifty-second Street. In exchange for the apartment, he agreed to clean for the men who owned the building. He worked at a drugstore, and at Howard Johnson, as a counterman. ("Both jobs provided my meals," he wrote, "and the dimes and nickels of my tips paid for millinery supplies.") He sold his creations to a carriage-trade clientele under the name William J. "My family would have been too embarrassed," he recalled. "They were very shy people."

During the Korean War, Cunningham was drafted into the Army; when he returned to New York he resumed the hat trade from a shop on West Fifty-fourth Street. In 1963, John Fairchild hired him as a writer at *Women's Wear Daily*. (Eventually, he went on to cover fashion for the Chicago *Tribune* and for *Details*.) For a time in the late fifties, he owned a hat shop on Jobs Lane, in Southampton. He is said to have slept on a cot, hanging his wardrobe—khakis, a shirt, a pair of underwear—over the closet door. In 1966, a photographer Cunningham knew gave him an Olympus Pen D half-frame camera. "It cost about thirty-five dollars," Cunningham wrote. "He said, 'Here, use it like a notebook.' And that was the real beginning."

The best ensembles Cunningham ever saw were in the sixties. "I was at a fashion show on Seventh Avenue one day, and I heard commotion out on the street," he said. "I said, 'Huh, what's that?' and got up and left the show and saw all these flower children protesting the Vietnam War. I suddenly realized that I had always liked the street. I should have known all along." Other scenes that have stuck with him: the "incredible things" from "those marvellous concerts in Tompkins Square Park"; a woman, walking up Madison Avenue, in a beige-and-black knitted suit from Sonia Rykiel, accompanied by two beige-and-black pug dogs on Venetian-red leashes with gold bells.

Cunningham stepped up to one of the Bergdorf windows and peered at the exhibit inside. "Oh, this is a Doktor," he said, referring to a shot of Mrs. Doktor, the secretary, with the hushed reverence accorded a Renoir or a van Gogh, as if she, not he, were the artist. "One of the most fascinating. That's a wooden gold picture frame that she's wearing as a

necklace. I got up close, and saw that it had been cut and it was on hinges, so that it conformed to her body." A few seconds earlier, a young Japanese woman had pressed her nose to the glass. "See, that's a Margiela sweater," Cunningham said, indicating what appeared to be a few stray white yarns on the back of the woman's cardigan. "It's his label. He just uses stitches."

Haute couture, of which Cunningham has rabbinical knowledge, is appealing to him insofar as it attracts the most fluent speakers of fashion, which he, and his admirers, consider a sort of social language. "He is able to show us who we are before we're able to see it," Linda Fargo said, when we spoke last fall. "No sooner does Bill call it a trend—observe it, organize it, and publish it—than it's a trend. The real news of the week was the aggressive footwear. I'm kind of bubbling and aerating it with our team, and *boom!*"—Cunningham's column the following Sunday featured a montage of mostly black high heels and boots, studded and strapped like those of a stampede of dominatrices. In October, a few years ago, Cunningham noticed, on his daily rounds, that an unusual number of women were carrying enormous—practically Hefty-size—tote bags embellished with geometric patterns. "I thought, My God, what's going on?" he recalled. "You see, the story was the handbags were becoming more elaborate and heavier and heavier, and apparently Goyard, a hundred-year-old French firm, was able to develop a canvas coated with lacquer that was durable, lightweight, and could hold lots of stuff. There's got to be a reason when a lot of people buy things."

Cunningham is as attuned to the bourgeois as he is to the avant-garde, and the mundane accessories of day-to-day life are as exalted in his photographs as any platform shoe or deconstructed bustle. Balaclavas, shown in collage, hint at the martial aspect of New York street life. An umbrella, flipped inside out by the wind, becomes an abstract sculpture; a snow poncho, wrapped around its wearer's head, is a plastic exoskeleton that will eventually be shed. He is drawn to anything natural: children, gardens, parks, animals. (His column has featured a parrot, a duck, a python, a monkey, a tortoise, and many dogs; not long ago, he took a train all the way back to Long Island when he realized that some black irises he had just seen at Old Westbury Gardens perfectly echoed the filigreed lines of both a 1900 cut-velvet Worth gown and some nearby wrought-iron gates.) He has a thing for curbside puddles. "It's a little ridiculous, but a fierce snowstorm is wonderful!" he said. "Oh, it's marvellous—it just rearranges the whole fashion scene when the wind blows down from the top of the Avenue. Six-, seven-hundred-dollar shoes, and they're all in the slush—hey, it's pretty peculiar!" He went on, "Nothing like a good blizzard, kid, and you got pictures!"

Among the sort of people who know they are wearing noteworthy outfits it is considered poor form—and, moreover, bad luck—to acknowledge that Cunningham is taking one's picture, to blow his pose of invisibility. "If you see him, proper etiquette is just be yourself, but keep moving forward," Linda Fargo said. For a civilian, though, opening the Sunday paper and finding that the way she looked, on the way to a dental appointment, or to the grocery store, was pleasing to Cunningham can be a thrilling experience, like opening the mailbox to find a love letter from a suitor she didn't know existed.

"I'm so excited that my picture is in here!" a woman exclaimed, in front of the Bergdorf windows, pointing to an almost unintelligible figure in one of the blown-up columns. "You made my life. I'm in the pink earmuffs—I just wish I had looked better."

Cunningham nodded politely, but said little. As soon as he could, he scampered off down the sidewalk to snap a picture of a matron, on her husband's elbow, in a yellow-and-black checkerboard suit.

"The season is changing, but it's more than change of season," he said, when he returned. "It's how fashion will reflect the financial changes. Fashion, the people wearing it, will do it before they even know what they're doing. You don't know yet, it's just starting to gel, but there *will* be a style. You watch, you'll see something. There's the old saw about hemlines. Who knows? It's only in the future you can know. You just have to stay out on the street and get it. It's all here." ◆

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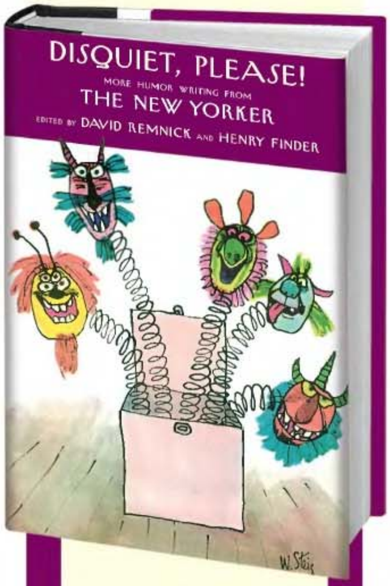

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

CONFESSIONS OF A PILGRIM SHOPAHOLIC

BY PAUL RUDNICK

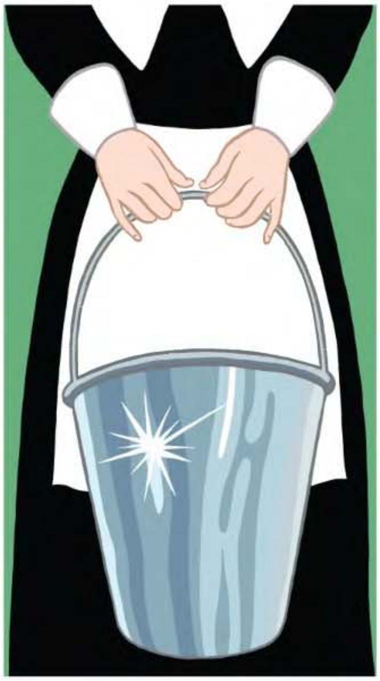
I am Rebecca, the wife of Mister Jonathan Harnsill. We arrived in the New World in 1626 and took up residence in a small cabin in the Plymouth Colony. Toward the end of our first January, I travelled to Boston to purchase a thimbleful of salt. And now, five years later, I have travelled to Boston for a second thimbleful. I am out of control.

During our first winter, I sewed two simple black woollen dresses, which I have alternated wearing in the years since. And yet this morning I find myself thinking about patching the frayed collar on one of the dresses. Have I no shame?

My mind has been consumed with nothing but thoughts of spending, purchasing, and the wanton enjoyment of unnecessary goods. On many nights I dream of acquiring a tin milk pail, like our neighbor's. I picture myself strolling through the town as strangers whisper, "There she goes, the proud lady with the pail." I imagine myself attending a fancy-dress ball with the pail on my arm, filled with pinecones and soil. I fear that I shall speak these dreams aloud, and beg my husband to bludgeon me.

I have heard tales of another woman, much like myself, in the Virginia colony. It is said that she bartered her second child to a local tradesman for a wooden button. The following Sunday, the preacher railed against the need for additional buttons, calling the woman a spendthrift and a profligate. She then stood and raised her arm high, opening her hand to reveal the button. It is said that the other women surrounded her, staring at the button in adoration, and then they ripped her limbs from her torso and ate them.

I tremble for my influence upon my children. Just this morning, young Abigail came to me and said, "Mother, look. I have made a doll from a small rock. I will call my doll Rockelle." Of course, I struck her and grabbed the rock from her hand, saying, "Be ye the Queen of the Nile, with such gilded pleasures?" I will confess only to this diary that I have kept the rock for myself, and married it to an acorn, which I have named Mister Joseph Elmsford. Has my evil no limits?



MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

Today I entered the lion's den, as I went to market. I was dazzled, as if dancing before the Golden Calf! To one side, there was a tray of one-inch straight pins, and beside them a spool of pale-white thread! I was drowning! I turned away, only to see a cart piled with at least three wilted leeks, along with a rusted spoon! Was I at the French court? My mind reeled—I wanted everything! The box of damp matches; the single moth-eaten stocking, removed from a corpse; the tiny empty vial that had once held extract of vanilla! In my mind, I was naked, demanding to be draped in finery, in brittle cornhusks and crumbling bark and the splintering nub of a pencil!

My fever has broken. When I awoke, I was in our minister's home, surrounded by all the women of our village, who were on their knees in fervent prayer at my bedside. It seems that I have been possessed by the Devil himself, and that I was found in the apothecary shop, speaking in tongues and babbling about something which no colonist has ever heard of: "guest soaps." Pastor Witherspoon has suggested that I might be hosting a demon from some future century, and he has arranged for an exorcism. I am so grateful, as I was told that, in my frenzy, I had also approached our blacksmith and demanded to know which horseshoes were on sale. I am an abomination.

At the exorcism, I was taken to the barn and placed upon a rough blanket; various plasters and poultices were applied to my flesh. Pastor Witherspoon raised his Bible high over my head and demanded, "Satan, leave this good woman! She is a simple, pious soul, with no wont for luxury goods!" At first, I responded by shrieking in an unearthly wail, "Shoes! More buckled shoes!" As all the villagers began to repeat the Lord's Prayer, I howled, "Tallow! Scented tallow and beeswax! Tied with a decorative ribbon!" Then, as the people laid their hands upon me, my demon cackled and swore: "A bonnet! Bring me another bonnet! A peaked black bonnet as fine as any widow's!"

"Satan, *begone!*" Pastor Witherspoon shouted, and then I lost consciousness.

Now, a day later, as I return to life, I know that my demon is vanished, gone back into his fetid underworld. I am able to walk through the village, with my head bowed modestly, without even a thought of a turnip or the cobbler's wares. This morning, I almost picked up a pretty yellow leaf from the ground, to press in my hymnal, but then I thought, I have so many leaves, and I returned it to the tall grass.

While I am wholly myself again, I am concerned for my dear husband, who I fear has been o'ertaken by his own demon. Last March, we had intimate relations, and now, although it is only November, he desires them again. ♦

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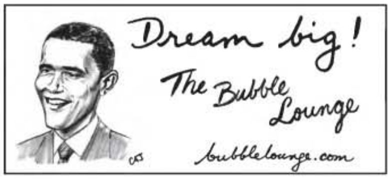
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LIFE AND LETTERS

NOWHERE WOMAN

Yasmina Reza returns to Broadway.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

In 2006, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was then the Interior Minister of France, agreed to let the playwright and novelist Yasmina Reza follow him, as part of his inner circle, while he campaigned for the Presidency. The proposal came without any pretense on her part of servility or of discretion in how she would portray him. Reza is an adversarial writer even in her tender moments, which are infrequent, and she has a gift for derision which Flaubert might have admired. One has to wonder what Sarkozy was thinking. But he gamely countered with his own dare. "Even if you demolish me, you will elevate me," he boasted to her at the outset. "I don't think I did either," Reza told me, in January, in Paris, "but I might have wounded his amour propre. The truth does that."

"Dawn, Dusk or Night" was published in France shortly after Sarkozy's victory, in 2007. (Their last interview and, Reza wrote, their only attempt at a real conversation took place at the Élysée Palace.) It created a sensation, selling some three hundred thousand copies, although reviewers could not agree what to make of it: it was "too close," "too detached," "cruel," "savory," "photoshopped prose," "lucid," "like pictures from a spy satellite," "caustic," "a literary curiosity," and a "literary monument." "Sometimes," one commentator remarked, "the hunter is more interesting than the prey."

Reza distilled her notes from an intermittent year on the campaign trail into a collage of fugitive impressions and vignettes, some poetic and penetrating, others a bit cavalier, and at least a few naïvely conceited. (Sarkozy and his then wife, Cécilia, attend one of Reza's plays, and Reza reports that, on the plane to a rally, he recites from memory a short "essential" bit of monologue.) Sarkozy introduced Reza as a "genius" to Tony Blair, and invited her to sit in on his first meeting, in Washington, with the then junior senator from Illinois. The concentration of so much political talent and Presidential ambition in one room impressed her, but, on the whole, she found politics a bore—"a dumb job for smart people," as a friend of hers puts it in the book. A journalist warns her that she is out of her depth. "Don't do it, Yasmina," he says. Politicians "are stronger than us." But, she reflects defiantly, "To be threatened by someone's strength, you have to be in competition with him. Or weakened by sentiment."

"The Ballad of Yasmina and Nicolas," as a headline referred to "Dawn, Dusk or Night," does have a model in French letters: the private journals that courtiers of the eighteenth century wrote by candlelight to edify an unworldly child, or to amuse a paramour. Reza's aphoristic style has some of the same elegance. (When the polls show Sarkozy in the lead, she observes, "To be the favorite: how disappointing for a lover of adversity.") Beneath its disenchantment, it also has some of the same yearning for sincerity. As the title suggests, Reza, too, was hiding something from the glare of day. The book is dedicated to a man whom she calls G, and of whom she gives tantalizing but mysterious glimpses. One infers that he is an important politician, perhaps a rival to Sarkozy; that she is courting him with this bravura performance of lèse-majesté; and that he eludes and therefore compels her as Sarkozy does not. (After a speech that Sarkozy felt was particularly bold and clever, he asked Reza familiarly, "*Ça t'a plu?*" —"Were you pleased?" The presumption of the question—that she, "of all people," would be pleased by his self-infatuated rhetoric—insults her.) Yet Sarkozy, she told me, not without admiration, also "understood better than anyone else what I had done." In a way, she conceded, she had betrayed him. It wasn't that she had exposed his vanities—he had signed on for the scrutiny. But he had once chided her, half-jokingly, "You're

Reza writes for an ensemble of equals—there are almost no minor roles in her plays.

CAROLE BELLAICHE/ART + COMMERCE

not here to admire others!" And, without his knowledge, she had spent a uniquely privileged year in his company writing, as she put it, "a chronicle of love" whose true subject was another man. (G's identity has aroused speculation but has never been revealed.)

A talent for ingratitude is often a prerequisite for great achievement. Few creative artists have the gall of Yasmina Reza, but few have her powers of invention. In the past two decades, she has produced three novels of literary distinction; three screenplays; a translation of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" for Roman Polanski; two memoirs in the laconic style of the Sarkozy book; and seven works of theatre that have earned her a controversial celebrity. (Six of her plays have been translated for the English-speaking stage by Christopher Hampton.) On March 22nd, her latest play, "God of Carnage"—a comedy of manners, or, perhaps more accurately, a debacle of manners—opens on Broadway. "I always refuse to change the setting for foreign productions," she said, "but in this case I made an exception. The characters work so plausibly as New Yorkers." (They are two well-off couples who meet with civilized intentions to discuss their sons, eleven-year-old schoolmates. One boy has bashed the other's teeth in.)

Reza made her début with "Conversations After a Funeral," which won the Molière Award (France's most prestigious drama prize) for Best Author in 1987, when she was twenty-eight. It was followed by "Winter Crossing," in 1989, which also won a Molière. Her third play, "Art," won two, in 1995, but they were perhaps the least noteworthy of its honors. "Art," which describes an episode in the friendship of three men who come to blows over a minimalist painting and end up vandalizing it and the friendship, has been translated into more than thirty languages, and, according to Reza, no other contemporary play in the world is performed as often or as widely. (Gross receipts have been estimated at more than three hundred million dollars, making Reza one of the most successful contemporary dramatists in any language.) The London production, with Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay, and Ken Stott, won a Laurence Olivier Award for Comedy, and ran for six years. ("The category surprised me," Reza said dryly. "I thought I had written a tragedy.") The New York production, in 1998, starring Alan Alda, Victor Garber, and Alfred Molina, won a Tony for Best Play.

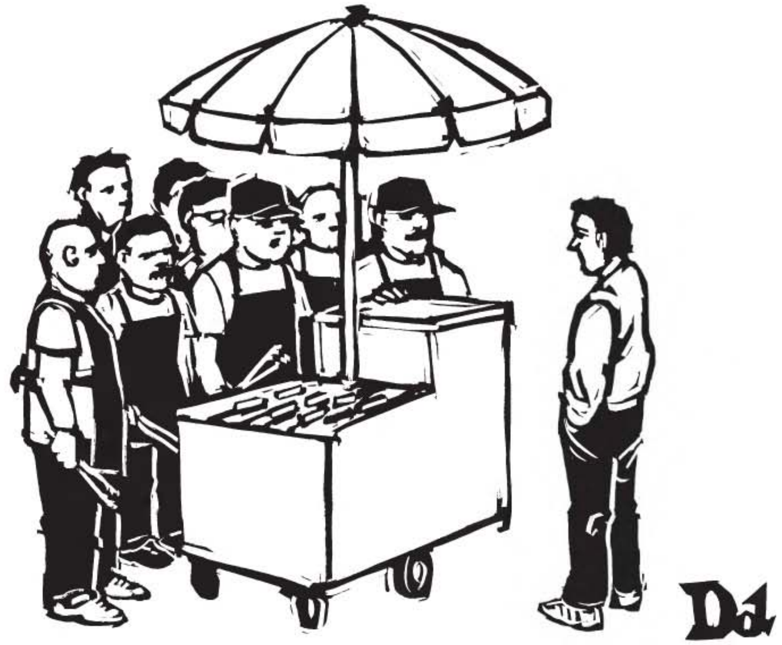
The argument among the friends, about the white-on-white canvas for which one of them has paid an exorbitant sum, is really a debate about the way that people value, or overvalue, the attributes, relations, and received ideas in which they invest their identity. But the play itself became a screen upon which beholders projected their view of Yasmina Reza. Few quibbled with her stagecraft or her dialogue. She has a mynah bird's ear for the coded preening, casual profanity, and calculated self-deprecation by which her protagonists—upper-middle-class professionals, for the most part—dissemble their fragility. Some critics, however, perceived "Art" as the polemic of a closet philistine who was mocking modernism, if not modernity. Others dismissed Reza as a boulevard crowd-pleaser with art-house pretensions: "the queen of 'big ideas, lite.' " The French were disdainful of her triumphs abroad, and Reza was scathing to me on the subject of "left-wing journalists in whose opinion success is right-wing." To the degree that she will consent to define herself—and escaping definition is one of her central preoccupations—it is not only as a writer who doesn't traffic in big ideas but as one with a profound antipathy toward intellectualizing. "I'm not cerebral," she said. "I never theorize about human nature. My work is visceral and subjective. I'm interested in the banal, un-guarded moments and the hairline fractures in a character that let the light through. Sarko has a fracture, that's why I have a tenderness for him—his surface isn't impermeable." Reza, who is a first-generation French citizen—her parents were both Eastern European Jews—likes to consider herself an outsider to the cultural establishment. "I have *never* wanted to join a coterie. But my reserve and my ferocity are mistaken for arrogance by journalists, so I give them the strict minimum. If they sense that I don't care about their opinions, they're right." (In part because she is so loath to be branded, Reza followed "Art" with "The Unexpected Man," a small, beautifully nuanced study of character in which two strangers on a train—played, in New York, in 2000, by Alan Bates and Eileen Atkins—fantasize about each other without speaking until the end.)

"God of Carnage" was written on commission, in 2006, for the Berliner Ensemble, and directed by the legendary Jürgen Gosch. Reza herself directed the Paris production, which starred Isabelle Huppert. (Ralph Fiennes headlined the cast in London, last year.) The Broadway production, directed by Matthew Warchus, stars James Gandolfini, Marcia Gay Harden, Jeff Daniels, and Hope Davis as the two couples, one earthy, the other patrician-looking. The action takes place in a long, uninterrupted scene in the Cobble Hill living room of the victim's parents (the earthy ones). A discussion of the boy's dental work—implants will have to wait until his jaw matures—and of the penitence that his mother feels is appropriate are the first items on the agenda, but good will quickly evaporates. The ensuing fracas follows an arc that Reza has perfected: fraudulent politesse gives way to toxic cavilling that degenerates into a brawl in the course of which all bluffs are called. (Some of the comedy, which involves projectile vomiting and annoying phone calls, and some of the irony, which relates to Darfur and a hamster, are atypical for a satirist of Reza's finesse.)

Actors love Reza's work more reliably than drama critics do. She writes for an ensemble of equals—there are almost no minor roles—and the volatile mixture of wit and resentment in a tight structure ignites with a spark. She herself started out as an actress. After college, at Paris X Nanterre, where she studied sociology and theatre—"I was just really passing time"—Reza auditioned for the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art. She thought that she had given "a very original performance, but I didn't get in, and the rejection left me with an enduring sense of injustice." (Eight years later, she noted, "I was a judge.") On the rebound, she enrolled at the International Theatre School Jacques Lecoq, where the training stresses movement, gesture, pantomime, and spatial awareness. Reza said, "Lecoq played to my forte—a physical language that you are born with or not. I think, write, and direct with my body. French actors trained at the Conservatory tend to work with less spontaneity. I had to liberate Isabelle Huppert from her classical education. I had to get her to use her body more capriciously." (Huppert's character in "God of Carnage" pins her husband to the sofa and pummels him like a Fury.) For a few years, when Reza was in her twenties, she did "all kinds of parts, from Sacha Guitry to Arrabal, and quite a few that were avant-garde—my physique is modern." But she thought that she wasn't beautiful enough, or beautiful in the right way, for the leading roles that she aspired to. (She is beautiful in an exotic way, small and waifish, with dark hair that frames sensuous features—the face of a houri.) "So I had to find something else," she said. "Acting, finally, is a disastrous profession. You are at the mercy of others, and you spend your life waiting, which is intolerable to me. I am very impatient." She has described time as a "curse," "Hell," and as an enemy "I can't bow to."

Reza did not have to wait long for fame; she was thirty-five when "Art" had its première. But the scope of her success brought her a notoriety that was, she said, "destabilizing, and even devastating. You can't pretend to not give a damn, but you have to try to forget about it. In order to regain my balance, I turned down all the offers and invitations that poured in, and spent my time with real friends who don't give a shit about my celebrity. I wrote 'The Unexpected Man' and 'Hammerklavier' "—a memoir of fragments in a terse, dreamy present tense. "And I went off to the seaside with my daughter"—Reza has two children—"for three weeks, where I wrote a key section of 'Desolation,' " her first novel. "They satisfied the need to create something intimate, and to repossess myself. By then, I was forty, and I felt free again."

"Desolation" is an eloquent howl at the grotesque fatuity of a tame life, and a work of exceptional virtuosity. In a novella-length monologue delivered with a murderous glee, Samuel Perl-



"Sorry. We don't need anyone at the moment."

man, a retired clothier, addresses his absent son, a thirty-eight-year-old beachcomber whom, his wife tells him, he has "crushed." When his daughter reports that her brother is, finally, "happy," Perlman unleashes a diatribe about all the therapeutic clichés with which people who aspire to be civilized console themselves for having compromised their vital obsessions. Mellowness, tolerance, self-acceptance—they are, in his view, "the peace of dead souls." As Perlman takes stock of his losses—of the few friends who nobly "embraced frivolity"; of the mistress who, despite being a "complete nothing," had a genius for abandon; of the wife who charmed him until she began "neglecting futility"; of the children whose laughter had once been free and defiant—he recognizes that he, too, has been "tragically humanized."

Reza's fiction is the deep end of her talent—a reservoir of buoyant anguish and pessimism. The protagonist of "Adam Haberberg" (2003), her next novel, is an obscure writer sitting on a bench in the Jardin des Plantes, feeling the first chill of mortality, who realizes that he can no longer bear to be Adam Haberberg. The central character in "Dans la Luge d'Arthur Schopenhauer" (2005), Ariel Chipman, is a suicidally depressed academic who has sacrificed real living to an idea of what his life should be. (The three other characters are his long-suffering wife, Nadine; an ex-colleague whom he despises; and a psychiatrist.) "Luge" was staged in 2006, with Reza playing Nadine. She tells the psychiatrist, "You're going to say, but I don't care, that I'm arrogant to think I've done well by keeping my distance from these so-called brainiacs who have ruled my husband's life, for his whole life my husband has been crazy about these so-called brainiacs who desert him at the crucial moment . . . to a terrible solitude." Reza was accused of sharing Nadine's contempt for intellect (Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze are also mentioned in passing; the former, it is noted, strangled his wife, and the latter jumped out a window)—a version of the charge levelled at "Art." But Reza told an interviewer, "There is nothing useless about philosophy. On the contrary, I would like philosophy to recover its original function: as an art of living." Spinoza's theory that "one should put aside hope, and concentrate on joy" is, she believes, admirable in principle, but all theory "has to be confronted by lived experience." (If her work had a house philosopher, it would probably be Thomas Hobbes.)

I was introduced to Reza in New York, late in December, at a reading at the Strand Bookstore. "The first thing I noticed about you was your trousers," she said. "I thought they were something that I might wear." Reza, the connoisseur of frivolity, finds fashion interesting, knows what suits her (a trim little skirt, high heels), and makes it a uniform. Her literary persona has a whiff of machismo that is at odds with the intensely feminine woman, a bit uncertain despite her bravado, that she seems in person. There are not many women writers whose work, like Reza's, is a theatre of cruelty—though it's a festive cruelty, like the bullfight. "The actress is the female part of me, and as a female I am an idiot, archaic, a slave of instinct who can't exercise her intelligence," she says wryly. "I write as a man." The archaic woman finds questions about her date of birth impertinent, but Reza will turn fifty on May 1st. I asked her if age hadn't cured her of some of her idiocy, and she laughed. "The only wisdom I've acquired is how not to be too wise."

Our conversation continued a couple of weeks later in Paris. I arrived on a mild, overcast Sunday in the middle of the couture shows, and the Rue Saint-Honoré was mobbed with Americans stimulating the French economy. Reza had invited me for tea, and to shake my jet lag I walked through the Tuileries, crossed the river, and meandered around Saint-Germain. Half the magazines at the news kiosks seemed to have a radiant Carla Bruni—Sarkozy's new wife—on the cover. I thought about the passages on love in "Dawn, Dusk or Night." Reza had marvelled at the inanity of a sentence in Sarkozy's autobiography: "Today, Cécilia and I are back together for good, for real, no doubt, forever." Another day, he had said, "Love is the only thing that counts." Returning from a trip, he had confided, "I can only love a landscape if I'm in it with someone I love." "A vain formula," Reza wrote, "like all those in which he brandishes the banner of love." At least once, though—at his most endearing—she lets him catch her in flagrante with a romantic platitude:

> Flying to Toulouse.
>
> I say I still love the men I have loved.
>
> He shrugs as if I had uttered something incredibly stupid.
>
> —Yes, I assure you. I have never stopped loving the men I've loved.
>
> —Oh, please!
>
> —I still love them, but differently.
>
> —It's all in the "differently," my pretty one. Don't take me for a moron. Once you qualify love, it ceases to exist.

The author of "Art" could afford the grandeur of a private house, or an aerie on the Seine, but she lives in a writerly apartment in an old building in a Left Bank cul-de-sac. A narrow dining room with a marble fireplace adjoins a big, square salon. Shelves lining a long wall are filled with art books and a few small heirlooms. There are two dark paintings on varnished wood that look antique but were done by Reza's best friend, Moïra Paras, a Romanian artist who is, Reza says, her severest and most trusted critic. "We are opposites in almost every respect, but very alike," she told me. Moïra, she writes in "Hammerklavier," "couldn't care less how the rest of the world sees her."

Reza does her writing in an office, but she checks her e-mail at an old rolltop in a corner of the dining room. A mass of papers and purple tulip petals from a dishevelled bouquet littered the dining table. (Two vases of tulips figure in "God of Carnage." They are part of the drama. Reza's stage directions sternly forbid superfluous props or detail. They invariably read, "No realism," "The barest décor possible," "Maximal abstraction.") We settled in the salon, on two deep white sofas covered with tribal rugs. An untidy stack of classical sheet music sat on top of an upright piano that Reza had bought with her first royalties—she is a passionate amateur musician—and under an etching of Beethoven. French doors opened onto a little balcony whose potted orange trees were shrouded for winter. The balcony overlooked an unkempt but charming park, with a crumbling stone wall at one end, where an old woman was feeding birds, and a playground at the other. It was almost empty at that hour, but a few children were making the noise of a dozen.

Reza's own children—her daughter,

"The DNA sample from the mink fibres found in the suspect's car matched the DNA sample from the mink coat found at the scene of the crime, so I'm thinking, maybe these minks were twins?"

• •

Alta, a twenty-year-old law student, and her sixteen-year-old son, Nathan—were both at home. Reza had made Sunday lunch for them, and their father, Didier Martiny, a filmmaker, had come over to help Nathan with his homework. Martiny was Reza's companion for twenty-three years. They met in college, and he has directed three films from her screenplays. They never married (there are no happy marriages in Reza's work—"Conjugal life," Nadine says in "Luge," "kills everybody"), and they separated years ago but remain close friends. Nathan is learning Spanish, he told me, and Reza is relearning it. This spring, she will direct her first film, which is partly set in Málaga. It is the story of three sisters—one a movie star, one a housewife, one a struggling actress—and of their widowed mother, a Spanish hairdresser who, improbably, has become engaged to a younger man, her building manager. Emmanuelle Seignier plays the movie star. The story is drawn from an episode in "A Spanish Play" (2004), a drama about the profession of acting that is more self-consciously literary than most of Reza's playwriting. (In 2007, "A Spanish Play" had a brief Off Broadway run, in a production directed by John Turturro.)

Reza's protagonists tend to be dangerously wounded middle-aged or old men, like Samuel Perlman and Adam Haberberg. (A mature, infuriated bull makes a compelling menace on the stage, to himself and to others.) Her film will focus on women—"on their failed dreams and their solitude." The character of the hairdresser is inspired by Reza's mother, Nora. "It has taken me a lot of time, maturity, and daring to examine our relationship," she said.

Nora Reza is a former violinist who abruptly ceased to play when she had children. (Yasmina never heard a note.) She was born in Hungary, and immigrated to France in 1950. On a trip to Budapest with Yasmina in 1997, she pointed out the elegant building on Vörösmarty Square where her family had lived on an entire floor. Her father was a rich wool merchant, and Nora went to school with the children of "the Jewish aristocracy." Of all the girls, she told Reza, she was the prettiest. For several days, mother and daughter wandered through the city, and Nora, Reza wrote in "Hammerklavier," reminisced "about her resplendent past without emotion, without apparent regret." But she never lost her Hungarian accent: "My father must have liked it."

Reza's father, Elias, was a Russian Jew of Iranian nationality whose parents came from Samarqand. As a way to deflect anti-Semitism, his ancestors, when they were living in Persia, had changed their name, Gedalea, to Reza, a common Persian patronym. Fleeing the Bolsheviks, the family arrived in France sometime in the nineteen-twenties. Elias earned an engineering degree but later went into the import business. He was interned at Drancy, the camp from which French Jews were shipped east for extermination, but his name and his Iranian passport, Reza said, saved his life. She is the eldest of her siblings; she has a brother who is a film producer and a sister who is a psychotherapist. Yasmina is actually Reza's middle name. "I won't tell you what my parents called me," she said. "It's too absurd, and very French." When she was seventeen, she embraced the sense of foreignness and singularity that she has always felt, by becoming Yasmina Reza.

Neither of her parents mentioned their experiences living under the Nazis ("The past is very vague in our family"), and Elias became observant only in old age. But one evening, after the Six-Day War, in 1967 (Reza was eight), her father suddenly "introduced the word 'Jew' into the house in an uncompromising, mythical way," which is how she still uses it. She will often pause to reflect that a trait she is describing in herself or a character is "typically Jewish." Her grandparents' escape route from Russia to France was "a typical Jewish circuit." Her sense of humor is a "typically Jewish distancing device that laughs at catastrophe." "Jews don't have much affinity for modesty," she writes in "Dawn, Dusk or Night." (Sarkozy's maternal grandfather was a Greek Jew, and his father was Hungarian; those points of ethnic kinship with Reza have been widely noted.) Perhaps her most constant refrain touches upon her "Jewish anguish about assimilation"—a feeling that she has no roots, no native soil, no sense of place, no nostalgia for one. Even to establish the bare facts of her life in a conversation, like the one we were having, stirs her fear of captivity. "I am not what I say about myself," she warned me later. "Writers inevitably return to their childhoods," she remarks in "Nulle

Part" ("Nowhere"), an autobiography composed in 2005 from vivid shards of memory and sensation. But a skittish name changer who comes from nowhere "has nowhere to return to."

Any place, however, can be nowhere if, like Reza, you grew up, as she put it, "estranged from reality." Her childhood home was a middle-class apartment in the suburb of Saint-Cloud. (She has admitted to giving journalists the impression that her background was much grander—"gilded youth, travels, cosmopolitanism, etc.") Her father, she said, worked day and night, and her mother's beauty was a similarly full-time vocation. (Reza was afraid that Nora would recognize herself in a passage of complacent prattle by the mother in "A Spanish Play," "but luckily she didn't.") "It was a terrible childhood," Reza said lightly, as if she were saying "a terrible haircut." "My parents were too busy doing other things to bring up their children." The most poignant sentence in "Nulle Part" evokes a memory of being lost as a little girl: "In this public park where my parents showed up to look for me—they who never looked for me anywhere—I ran toward them with so much joy that its lack of all proportion was a chagrin."

Reza's father was a self-made man with a reverence for French culture who recited Paul Valéry to his children. Like his daughter, he was a passionate amateur pianist, always furious at his own mediocrity. "At the piano, we are rivals," she writes in "Hammerklavier," where she also recounts a dream in which her father comes back from the dead to tell her that he has met Beethoven, who scolds him for presuming to imagine that he could ever play the Adagio from Opus 106. When Elias was dying of cancer, she writes, he did in fact massacre that movement, which he and Reza both loved. (He sits at the keyboard in his nightshirt, and "the waning light lays bare all the evidence of decay." Reza's reaction is to laugh uncontrollably at the catastrophe.) Yet for all his refinement and his intelligence, and for all her ironic tenderness in his regard, Elias, she said, was a brutal man who "didn't know how to be a father. Yet his brutality wasn't malicious. He was violent but loving. And I understood from our relations that human beings can't be reduced. Without that revelation, I couldn't have become a writer."

If you read Reza closely, you realize that she almost never uses the past tense. There are also certain words that recur like an incantation both in her writing and in her speech. In "Desolation," she is everywhere at pains to distinguish "joy" from "happiness," and to exalt "frivolity" as an art of living but also as a form of unrepentant fatalism. *Devenir*, "to become"—in Reza's sense, to become oneself—is ubiquitous. "To keep becoming is the obsession of everyone to whom I have given a name and voice," she writes in the Sarkozy book. And then there are the nouns *chagrin* and *fêlure*. *Chagrin* can mean "pain," "grief," or "suffering." A *fêlure* can be the crack in a hard surface—Flaubert describes human speech as a "cracked iron kettle." But Colette uses *fêlure* as an essential rift in her being. It is the split between a male and a female seeking reunion in the act of love, and between a parent and a child who have lost their primal connection. I suspect it has that meaning for Reza.

I had hoped to meet with Reza once more, in New York, at a preview performance of "God of Carnage," but she e-mailed to say that, with her film starting to shoot in a few days, she was too anxious and tired to come. "I would ideally love to make a film the way I write," she had told me, "fast, no script, improvising as I go along, not thinking too much. 'Art' was written in six weeks. But I need more experience."

On one of my last days in Paris, we drove to the muddy countryside with Reza's art director and her assistant to scout locations, and tramped through several dilapidated châteaux. They were looking for a winding staircase with wooden risers and light from above; an old-fashioned bedchamber with a single window to the right of a long wall that was big enough for a piano; and a quality of soulful gloominess. Reza's decisions—"yes," "no," never "maybe"—seemed to come, like her prose, from a well of mysterious assurance. "I know just what I want," she said, "but the minute I've answered a question I feel like changing my mind." ♦

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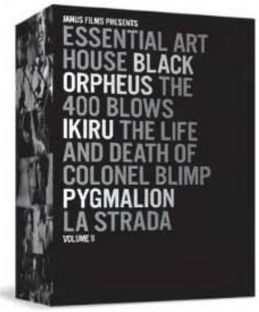

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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

MADE IN U.S.A.

Buying American is a shopping challenge.

BY PATRICIA MARX

The production of this paragraph was not outsourced to the Philippines or Mexico. It was written, punctuated, and fact-checked in the U.S.A. It was, however, composed on a laptop computer that was manufactured by Lenovo, a company in which the Chinese government owns a twenty-seven-per-cent share (Lenovo.com; Model X301, starting at $1,999). The writer is American, but also Russian and Romanian. Her ideas derive partially from Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher and political economist. A coffeemaker made by the German company Braun was tangentially involved (Amazon.com; ten-cup coffeemaker, $39.99).

Don't our fellow-citizens create anything? Well, McDonald's hamburgers are ground from American cattle (except when they are supplemented by Australian and New Zealand beef), most of the Hummers on our roads are assembled at plants in Indiana and Louisiana, and the bulk of unwanted bulk e-mail originates right here. Permit me, then, to rephrase the question: Are there any domestically produced goods that we might be proud to call our own?

What does the label "Made in the U.S.A." mean, anyway? According to the Federal Trade Commission, it designates that "all or virtually all" of the product and its components were made in the fifty states, the District of Columbia, or any American territory or possession. This is one of the reasons you have never seen a "Made in Johnston Atoll" label.

Where else to begin the search for indigenous stuff but at Lord & Taylor, the first major emporium to spring up on Fifth Avenue, the first to have an elevator, and the first to turn its windows into a Christmastime spectacle? Each morning as business begins, an orchestral recording of "The Star-Spangled Banner" can be heard resounding through the ten-story Italian Renaissance Revival building, a ritual that started in 1979, during the Iranian hostage crisis.

Imports once felt exotic; now homegrown goods seem special.

SILJA GÖTZ

"If they're serving mimosas, I'll have one," joked the woman sitting next to me on one of the folding chairs hospitably set out just inside the entrance for customers who arrive early. One saleswoman told me, "I'm American-born, so I really like the tradition. I stop what I'm doing, but the others keep counting their registers, which makes me cringe." She was standing in front of a rack on which an appealing and patriotic-looking Michael Kors linen jacket ($159.50) hung. But its broad stripes of red, white, and blue gave proof, under the fluorescent light, that our rags are not being made here. Hint: the jacket hails from a land that has a red flag and rhymes with "angina." From where else does the merchandise arrive? Sri Lanka (Joseph Abboud lavender checked men's shirt; $98), Tunisia (Hugo Boss men's belt; $85), India (Cole Haan tan saddle-leather belt with white stitching; $59), Indonesia (Kenneth Cole men's slim-fit stretch shirt; $59.50), Peru (Ike Behar New York blue tattersall shirt; $165), Finland (Ben Kahn red sheared-mink coat; reduced to $2,445), Honduras and El Salvador (Jockey classic boxer briefs, three for $27; Jockey T-shirts, three for $24), Israel (Iris Braunstein hand-painted bracelets decorated with crystals, sparkles, and gloss; $85). If you hunt, you can even find a thing or two from the United States—for instance, a smart black nylon quilted A-line jacket from the Malaysian-born designer Yeohlee ($750, reduced to $149.99).

The retailarchy Bloomingdale's has yet to go multinational, although a Dubai venture is in the works. Don't be fooled by the Juicy Couture shopping-themed Monopoly game that comes in a box proclaiming "Born in the Glamorous U.S.A." ($58). (The dice were born in China.) "Sure, we have lots of things made here in the States," a woman in housewares told me. "I don't know specifically what, but, gee, there must be something." After looking high and low, we came across some lattice-weave placemats made in New York, by a company called Chilewich (variety of colors; $15-$18).

Aha! Up on the fourth floor, take a look at the ladies' apparel by St. John, all of it manufactured in California. St. John Knits, if you are not familiar with the line, look as if they were made in an era when women wore clothes that were made in the U.S.A. But doesn't that putting-green-colored suit jacket ($1,795), perfect for a country-club luncheon, look lonely without a crocodile clutch? Let's see if there is anything in the handbag department stitched in the United States. "Nothing, nothing, nothing," a saleswoman in the Marc Jacobs section said, noting that the high-end bags are from Italy and the cheaper ones are from you-know-where. "Obama should give tax breaks to companies that employ people here," she said. "And we should subject our products to the same poisonous dyes used by foreign companies, if that's what it takes to compete."

Just when you thought you were getting ready to go shopping, here comes the economy. Should we be in favor of free trade or protectionism? Proponents of the former argue that frictionless commerce makes for cheaper stuff—and plenty of it. Protectionists, who support tariffs, quotas, and subsidies, say that, without government guardianship, American firms don't have a chance against foreign counterparts that can pay lower wages and save money by ignoring human rights and environmental concerns.

"Oh, yeah? What about the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act?" free-traders like to retort, referring to the 1930 legislation that many believe exacerbated the Great Depression. Then they point out that globalization is here to stay.

In practice, the stance of most politicians is somewhere in between. "We have a right to sell you our stuff without any restrictions, and if you're nice or lend us a bunch of money maybe we'll let you sell us your stuff" is the way former Senator Bob Kerrey summarized the position to me, noting that purists from either camp belong only at conferences and on talk shows. Members of Congress initially pushed for a Buy America provision in the economic-stimulus package, but it was watered down, at the President's urging. Most economists, by the way, favor free trade. But George W. Bush leaned that way, and you know how we felt about him.

What could be more American than Early American furniture? Shakers who can't afford Shaker can acquire dovetailed pieces for their meetinghouses at Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers (699 Madison Avenue, at 62nd Street, second floor), although the walnut chaise may be just slightly more curvaceous than a Believer in Christ's Second Appearing can tolerate (authentic Shaker dresser, $48,000; chaise, $4,350). Mr. Moser, a former professor of speech, got into the home-furnishings game thirty-seven years ago, and today is joined in the business by three of his sons. Their chairs, tables, stools, desks, and credenzas are informed not only by Shaker design but by the Arts and Crafts movement, the Bauhaus School, and traditional Japanese joinery. The pieces are constructed in Maine from Pennsylvania cherry trees, although, on request, the Mosers will use another species if they deem the choice aesthetically and ecologically appropriate.

Simon Pearce's eponymous emporium (500 Park Avenue, at 59th Street) has for decades specialized in glassware, ceramics, and sundry other breakables, most of them handmade in the company's workshops in Vermont and Maryland. A New York galley kitchen may not be able to accommodate the XXL glass cake plate ($395), but surely the less grown-up stand for a single cupcake ($65) would fit. Do customers care that the goods are made by the home team? According to the store manager, "The 'Is it made in America?' question comes up, especially from people who are travelling overseas and want to bring their hosts a locally produced gift. But it's not the top question." And that question would be? How to spell Quechee (home of the flagship store, in Vermont).

At the Times Square branch of the French-owned cosmetics chain Sephora posters advertise "Star-Spangled Skin Care Values" and declare, "We the pretty, in order to form a more gorgeous complexion for all, do solemnly swear to faithfully preserve, protect, and defend the constitution of your skin." Take that, Chief Justice Roberts—not to mention Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, "I have come to a resolution myself as I hope every good citizen will, never again to purchase any article of foreign manufacture which can be had of American make, be the difference of price what it may." (Don't tell anyone, by the way, that

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Jefferson, despite his buy-American rhetoric, went on such a Continental shopping spree while he was minister to France that he returned to the States with eighty-six shipping crates of souvenirs.)

Do cosmetics consumers care that Stila, Too Faced, Bare Escentuals, DuWop, Cosmedicine, and Tarte manufacture on our shores? "I am a twenty-year-old on a budget," said a twenty-year-old on a budget, who was trying on some Bare Escentuals "soft black" eyeshadow ($13). "I don't have the means to take into consideration where the money is going." "Once, I had a customer ask if something was made in the U.S., but I can't remember if she wanted it to be American or not," a saleswoman told me as she smeared a Tarte cheek stain on my hand to show me the color of this fine American water-based rouge ($28), which is packaged like a fat pushup ChapStick. Incidentally, ChapStick was invented in the eighteen-eighties by a pharmacist in Virginia, and it is still made there (Walgreens; $1.99).

Do you remember when foreign stuff was still exotic? It used to be exciting to buy things that weren't made in America—Pier 1 Imports was like Shangri-La. How thrilled we were when Julia Child found France and brought back coq au vin! Nowadays it's homegrown goods that feel special. Take the Fender guitar. Models from the firm's plant in Mexico start at five hundred dollars, whereas the varieties made in Corona, California—handbuilt of superior materials—start at a thousand (Guitar Center, 25 West 14th Street). Cannondale's most élite bike, the SuperSix, ridden by the Italian racing champion Ivan Basso, is handmade in Bedford, Pennsylvania, whereas some of the company's cheaper models are manufactured in Taiwan and Vietnam.

Ask someone in another country to name his favorite American goods and chances are the answer will not be semiconductors, aircraft, or automobile engines, even though these are among our top exports. So which American products make the shopping lists of foreigners? Here's a sampling of responses I received: Canadians like Red Wing shoes, Trish McEvoy makeup, Smucker's peanut butter and jelly in the same jar, Cherry Coke Zero, Milky Ways, and pickles. The English go for M&M's, Tootsie Rolls, Oreos, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Craisins (of course), Ziploc bags, Tiffany & Co. jewelry, and the American version of the British TV program "The Office." The Chinese like Colgate toothpaste, Pringles, Aunt Jemima pancake and waffle mix, any Procter & Gamble shampoo, Rubbermaid products, wooden bowls, "Sex and the City," Hillary Clinton, and vitamins. A Frenchman told me that he loved American cigarettes, and a Mexican fellow said that he was partial to Dodge pickup trucks.

A Yankee Doodle Dandy would be right at home at Kaufman's Army & Navy (319 West 42nd Street), where military personnel get fifteen per cent off their purchases, the fitting rooms are called "bunkers," a genuine American-made Army tank is available for rent (cost varies by location), and the polypropylene underwear is no different from a soldier's (tops and drawers; $22). Established in 1938, Kaufman's purports to be the oldest retail operation on West Forty-second Street and one of the oldest military-surplus stores in the country. Civilians, I think you'd look swell in a handsome peacoat ($150-$250; made in Boston), sturdy government-supplied oxfords ($120 for regulars, $60 for irregulars; made in Big Rapids, Michigan), and a pair of Massachusetts-made sunglasses practically identical to those issued to fighter-pilots ($55). But good luck digging through the mounds of olive and khaki in this higgledy-piggledy hole-in-the-wall. Even finding the exit might require one of those hundred-dollar glow-in-the-dark compasses illuminated by tubes of phosphorus and tritium (a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, but you knew that).

The American apparel at American Apparel—T-shirts and T-shirty dresses, underwear, and exercise gear—is geographically correct (181 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, and lots of other locations). Their cotton is grown largely in South Carolina, and the sewing is done not in some sweatshop abroad but in a Los Angeles factory, as we are constantly reminded by the company's ads. What they fail to explain is that American cotton growers receive big government subsidies, about six times as much as dairy farmers, eleven times as much as barley

GRATER

You remember how your mother, Jocasta,
Returned from the pigsty with a gaping palm.

Inside the madness of pain a window opened.
She stepped out and stepped out of her body.

You remember how your startled father was changing a bandage,
How, mid-escape, the edges of the bandage turned red.

This time the grater's whisper is yours. The world is being whittled away.
The apple wedge is getting smaller, but who is there for whom?

Are you merely an instrument of the apple in your palm?
Silently it grates you, a ripe Buddhist, Idared samsara.

When it vanishes you, you open your eyes, like your mother
That time, on the other side of the wound.

—*Aleš Šteger*

(*Translated, from the Slovenian, by Brian Henry.*)

planters, and a hundred and fifteen times as much as wool producers. American Apparel has plain T-shirts in every color under the sun, including the color of the sun ($17-$36), a cute gray turtleneck dress ($32), men's briefs and boxer briefs ($12 and $14), and a giant polyester sack called an Emergency Bag ($30), but I think you could use it when times are good, too. And this could be the day: according to a sign on the door of the Eighth Avenue branch, they're hiring.

An American Craftsman showcases the handiwork of U.S. citizens who are decorative artists, with a preponderance of intricate wooden widgets from the boxologist Richard Rothbard, who just happens to own the gallery (branches at 60 West 50th Street and 790 Seventh Avenue, at 51st Street). The puzzle boxes, which are riddled with drawers within drawers, come in a variety of shapes and sizes and woods, ranging from abstract maple burls and animal-shaped thingamajigs to music boxes in the form of mini-pianos and receptacles that tell the story of Alice in Wonderland in mahogany ($42 and way up).

If you like craft fairs but you also like sitting down while you shop, go to Etsy.com, a Brooklyn-based Web site where you can buy and sell anything handmade. There's a lot that's terrific, there's a lot that's terrible, but mainly there's just a lot—tens of thousands of sellers—and most of it is welded, crocheted, painted, sculpted, beaded, canned, glued, nailed, inlaid, or enamelled in these fifty states. For example, a printed plastic "Plump Joe Joe" brooch of a Victorian-seeming obese gentleman (seller, Mamaslittlebabies; $20), a signed and dated clothbound copy of D. H. Lawrence's "Women in Love" onto which a web of brass wire is secured by nails (seller, TillyBloom; $47), a mock beard to keep your face warm (seller, imadeyouabeard; brown yarn for men, pink felt for women, $40), and two bronze sculptures of human ears, unfinished because the artist no longer has the required tools (seller, goncarova; $185).

What is it that looks like an American, dresses like an American, has lived through the American Revolution, and yet is a native of China? Felicity, one of the twelve historical-character dolls representing bygone eras in United States history, for sale at American Girl Place (609 Fifth Avenue, at 49th Street; dolls, $95; accessories, $6-$350). "At first, I thought it was weird that they weren't made here," a saleswoman said. "But then I thought, That's just the way it is." Another saleswoman chimed in: "What are you wearing that's not made in China? As long as we Americans have what we want, what does it matter?"

In 1950, nearly a third of employed Americans worked in factories. Today, it's about ten per cent. But, according to David Huether, the chief economist for the National Association of Manufac-

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by Bob Staake
Issue date: November 17, 2008

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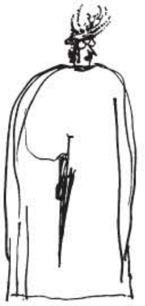
turers, we lead the world in productivity, in terms of output per worker. Throughout much of its history, New York was preëminent in the production of articles intended for the adornment of the human form. The city became rich in the rag trade by making schmattes for slaves working on Southern plantations. The need for ready-made military uniforms during the Civil War was a further boon to business. By 1910, seventy per cent of women's clothing and forty per cent of men's clothing in the United States was made in New York. In recent years, clothing manufacturing has unravelled like a snagged sweater. More than three hundred thousand New Yorkers worked in the garment industry in 1950, and today the number is about twenty thousand. "What could go to Asia went to Asia," said Adam Friedman, the executive director of the New York Industrial Retention Network, a nonprofit agency that promotes manufacturing in the city. Currently, eighty-six per cent of American wardrobe dollars is spent on clothing made abroad.



Several big-league designers who still manufacture a substantial portion of their apparel in the city are Anna Sui, Nicole Miller, Vera Wang, and Oscar de la Renta. Alex Bolen, the C.E.O. of de la Renta, told me that the company's American operations are responsible for about half its output—the haute half. Evening wear, he said, "requires talented, artistic hands. Our customers are extremely knowledgeable—we can't fob off poor-quality goods on them just because they have our label." There are approximately a hundred hands working for Oscar, if you figure two hands per person. All employees are union members, many are of Italian descent, and some have been with the company for as long as twenty-five years.

Anna Sui, a Michigan-born designer known for her exuberant dresses, lush with lace, embroidery, and prints, has been producing her line in New York since 1981. "The garment center is something I'm passionate about," she said. To prop up local merchants, she works with neighborhood venders whenever possible—small owner-operated companies that apply rhinestones and studs to garments, make snaps, pleat fabric, and sell trimmings. "We use embroiderers from a factory in New Jersey," she said, adding, "All the embroiderers are in New Jersey." This is not an attempt at New Jersey humor. (Ever see the sign as you exit the Lincoln Tunnel: "Welcome to North New Jersey—Embroidery Capital of the World Since 1872"?) She went on, "The hat industry has virtually disappeared. And there is only one place left—it's on Thirty-eighth Street—that still sells feathers, flowers, and buckram."

Many of the designers who make clothes in the city are independent entrepreneurial types. Shin Yee Man came to this country from China when she was nine, and at Lingo, her boutique in Chelsea (257 West 19th Street), you can find her label, Fresh Meat, as well as the clothing, accessories, and jewelry of other designers who are up and coming or who arrived five minutes ago. I particularly liked a smart smoky-brown shirtdress, by a line called naturevsfuture (made in Manhattan), that is architectural but wearable (on sale for $178). Prairie Underground's black below-the-knee-length zip-up dress/jacket with pronounced seams ($198), made in Seattle, is a stylish take on a sweatshirt. Of note, too, are the one-of-a-kind cuffs made from raw leather decorated with gewgaws such as a miniature resin cast of a bull's head, silver liquor-bottle tags, and tiny playing cards ($150-$200). "This has the vibe of a Brooklyn store," one customer observed, intending it as a compliment.

If you can't be a rock star, you can at least wear one on your chest. A Swiss-born New Yorker named Idil Vice designs cotton-jersey clothing silk-screened with large images of pop icons. They are cool, but do you dare to have David Bowie staring out from the front of your strapless dress? Or Elvis on your high-waisted skirt, with tulle and petticoat attached? Or Billie Holiday posed on your goth bell-bottoms? (Idilvicefashionrocks.com; $98.95, $400, and $269.)

A locavore (the New Oxford American Dictionary's word of the year in 2007) is somebody who goes out of his way to eat foods produced nearby. What sorts of thing could a hunter-gatherer find in our neck of the pavement? New York City exports more than two hundred million dollars' worth of chocolate, largely the handcrafted, fancy-packaged variety. In addition to Jacques Torres (66 Water Street), Li-Lac (40 Eighth Avenue, at Jane Street), and Kee's (80 Thompson Street), there's Verē, which bills itself as salutary and socially responsible, and proves it by adding something nutritious called a prebiotic to its Rainforest Alliance Certified line, turning out a confection that is suspiciously unsweet. Among the treats "good for the body and good for the soul" are purist caramels ($8), pink-peppercorn wafers ($7.50), and almond clusters ($8.50). Verē bars are available at City Bakery (3 West 18th Street). The first vintage of Brooklyn Buzz mead, fermented from New York State honey, has arrived in shops. It is light and crisp and has a bouquet that is reminiscent of, well, a bouquet (Astor Wines & Spirits, 399 Lafayette Street; $13).

Actually, almost everything would be made in a shop around the corner if it weren't for the existence of the shipping container. Like the wheel, the shipping container is an invention I could easily have thought of, but Malcolm McLean beat me to it, in 1956. Transporting things inside a standardized metal box, rather than via miscellaneous crates, barrels, and bags, made it possible to load and unload cargo using cranes (consequently reducing the need for longshoremen). How else, as Marc Levinson points out in his book "The Box," could it make economic sense for the American toy company Mattel to assemble a Barbie in China from Taiwanese plastic, Japanese synthetic hair, and American dye, and then ship the dolls, by the thousand, off to girls around the world? (Bob Mackie "Lady of the Unicorns" Barbie, at F. A. O. Schwarz, 767 Fifth Avenue, at 58th Street; $210.)

The Container Store (629 Sixth Avenue, at 19th Street, and other locations) is an American phenomenon, but most of what it contains is not—that is, until you reach the gift-wrap aisle, where for some reason there is a plethora of U.S.-made merchandise, such as Mrs. Grossman's stickers (made in Petaluma, California; $2.89) and Party Partners Fun Fringe (made in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania; $5.99).

Our countrymen did not coin the word "jeans" (they were named after the trousers worn by Italian sailors from Genoa) or the word "denim" (*merci à les français*), but bluejeans are to the U.S. what lederhosen are to Bavaria. A hundred and twenty-six years ago, in San Francisco, the Bavarian-born American Levi Strauss, after receiving a patent to put copper rivets on pocket seams, founded the first company to produce dungarees. However, at Dave's New York (581 Sixth Avenue, at 16th Street)—a depot of reasonably priced indigo twill—a pair of Levi's boot-cuts hails from Cambodia ($32) and a pair of Carhartt jeans was assembled in Mexico "with U.S. components" ($38). "It's annoying, and insulting to this country," a Dave's salesman who came to this country from West Africa said. He was referring to the arrangement whereby Mexican factories, usually American-owned, import duty-free materials from the U.S., piece them together, and then send the final product back, free of tariff. "It's a disgrace. If we start something here, we should finish it here," the salesman said. By the way, the ruggedly handsome Red Wing work boots that the store sells are, according to the company slogan, "built to fit, built to last," in Minnesota ($110-$250).

Did you know that Minnesota enacted a law last year requiring all American flags sold there to originate in the land of the free and the home of the sewing machine? Certain flag-wavers, it seems, were not happy that we import five million or so dollars' worth of Old Glory from China every year. Wait till they find out that at NYC, a run-of-the-mill souvenir shop in Times Square (261 West 42nd Street), the "I ♥ New York" mugs are from Thailand ($12.99), the F.D.N.Y. playing cards are from Taiwan ($5.99), and the miniature Statues of Liberty are from China ($22). The very cheesiest ones are, it turns out, made right here, in the biggest cheese-producing country of them all. If you're looking for a piece of economic news to be thankful for, try this: the United States presses one quarter of all the pressed curd eaten around the globe. ♦

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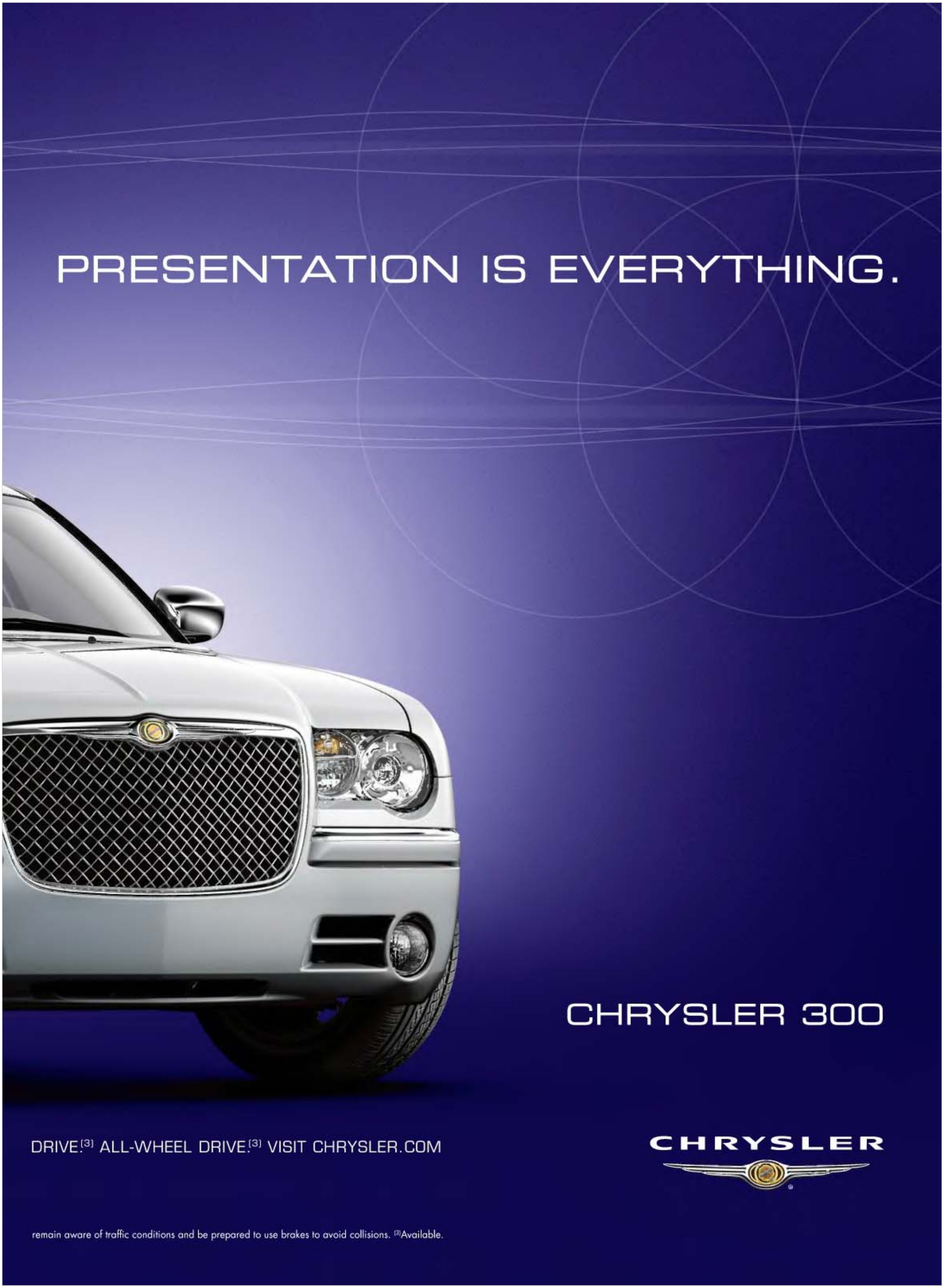
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PROFILES

LADIES' MAN

Alber Elbaz and the refinement of Lanvin.

BY ARIEL LEVY

People still have money. Some people, that is, have some money. And if they are female people they probably want to look sophisticated and attractive, but not flashy or aggressively sexy—although they may well have wanted to look that way a decade ago. "Hot" was what we called it then, if you recall. But now is not the time to be assertive about your cleavage or (what remains of) your wealth. It isn't the moment for consuming conspicuously, and that is a terrible problem for retailers, who are still reeling from the disastrous holiday season. Yet as long as women believe it is their duty to be beautiful—which, we can safely assume, will be until the end of time—there will still be a fashion industry. And women will continue to spend four figures for a dress, if they think it will make them look just right, right now.

One afternoon this winter, Alber Elbaz, the designer of the Paris fashion house Lanvin, was bounding around the second floor of Barneys on Madison Avenue, where dozens of women of means had come for the chance to meet him and place orders for his spring collection. A blonde in her early twenties was posing in front of a three-way mirror in glittering Lanvin pumps and a candy-pink strapless cocktail dress with clear plastic paillettes adorning the bodice; she was contemplating the frock for her engagement party. Her mother sat nearby, looking extremely pleased. The garment in question cost $4,525. Elbaz adjusted the fabric on the woman's pale torso. "Beautiful," he told her, and he wasn't lying.

Elbaz often describes his work as "classic with a twist." This is precisely what looks fashionable now: an elegance that reassuringly summons the past but with some funkiness around the edges that acknowledges our weird present. One dress, a modest sheath, had a knife-pleated coral satin skirt with a top knit from rosy, flesh-colored wool in a kind of waffle weave; embedded in each depression of the waffle was a mirrored silver disk. Another dress had black and navy Grecian goddess-style draping in the front and flat, unfettered aqua silk in the back—"so you can sit down," Elbaz explained. At the Golden Globes this year, Maggie Gyllenhaal wore a version of one gown, a single-shouldered sheath with a great festive pouf at its peak. She looked lovely and refined—as women tend to in Lanvin—though the garment was made of bright-turquoise fabric with pink-and-black leopard spots. Elbaz's aesthetic is a remarkable mixture of the soigné and the daffy, which has come to seem more alluring as the times have become increasingly dark.

In the eight years that Elbaz has been designing for Lanvin, the oldest surviving French fashion house, he has transformed it from a dusty artifact of the Parisian past into something influential and prominent. Cécilia Sarkozy, late of the Élysée Palace, was often photographed dressed in Lanvin. Tilda Swinton won an Oscar last year wearing a voluminous black velvet creation by Elbaz. (Elbaz went over the dress with a steamer, giving it what Swinton calls "that dappled, molten-oil look." It "was so exactly what I wanted to wear . . . sincerely comfortable, modest, superchic, profoundly modern." She looked like an extremely elegant bat.) In 2007, Lanvin posted revenues of $148.9 million, sixty per cent higher than two years earlier, and Elbaz's vision has started to trickle down to the mass market: Target has sold knockoffs of Elbaz's enormously popular pearl-and-ribbon necklaces; Club Monaco offers a version of his chiffon-trimmed cardigan.

There are many designers whose work can make women look thinner or prettier. Elbaz seems to have the power to make women appear more interesting. Several years ago, Barneys' creative director, Simon Doonan, hosted an event for Elbaz in Los Angeles, at which Doonan had imagined that models would walk around the room wearing Lanvin while the guests ate dinner. Elbaz hated the idea. He wanted twinkling chandeliers and a runway. Barneys obliged, but expended its budget, and was reduced to using "local talent" for the models. Doonan assumed that Elbaz would be horrified. But when the show began, Doonan recalls, "not only do the local girls look beautiful and stylish, they actually look like fascinating people. Alber is an alchemist: he took these California chippies and turned them into Left Bank existentialists. Instead of Tara Reid, I saw Jeanne Moreau."

"The highest compliment a woman can receive is 'My God, she looks smart!' not that 'she's sexy,'" Elbaz wrote in a foreword to "Lanvin," a lavish Rizzoli coffee-table book. The ladies at Barneys seemed to concur. Outside the dressing room, there was frenzy. People were not quite ripping the samples out of one another's hands, but it felt as though they were on the verge. "Every Lanvin trunk show we do is like a scene from 'The Day of the Locust,'" Doonan said. "Alber's clothes are like crack for women."

Looking over the menu one morning at the Carlyle Hotel, Elbaz said, "Should we be good today or bad? Maybe we start good and get bad later." He ordered the fruit salad. He wanted the pancakes.

Elbaz thinks it's a very big deal that he is overweight. Asked what he imagines life would be like if he were thin, he replied, "Amazing," with real conviction. But he isn't very big, just round, with the kind of face you want to squish in your hands. His jowls are soft, his eyes are blue and framed by long lashes and large, rectangular glasses, and his sartorial choices—too short pants, cap-toed shoes with no socks, and always a bow tie fashioned from silk or velvet or a length of grosgrain ribbon—give him the appearance of

Elbaz suspects that concern over his weight influences his designs: "My fantasy is to be skinny." Photographs by Tim Walker.

Elbaz presents a quiet, complicated conception of female sexuality in designs described by one associate as "like crack for women."

a dreamy, somewhat forlorn French schoolboy. (He is, in fact, forty-seven.) Elbaz worries constantly and openly, and there seems to be something fundamental about him in need of comforting. In 2004, Irving Penn photographed Elbaz, and the designer proudly sent a print to his mother. When she saw it, she asked her son, "Why do you look sad? And who are you scared of?"

Elbaz believes that his creations are a kind of positive to his negative. If he is melancholy and heavy, his clothes are joyful and weightless. It is his job, as he's configured it, to make women feel special, something he does not quite feel entitled to himself. "I do believe that a designer has a job that is extremely similar to a concierge's in a good hotel in Manhattan," he said. "At the end of the day, you have to go back to Brooklyn. And I know Brooklyn is very fancy now, but I mean home. You have to go back to reality. You have to go back to nothing in order to maintain the dream. The moment the dream becomes reality and you start to mingle too much with all these people..." He wrinkled his nose to indicate that it was a bad idea. It is useful, he allowed, to understand the needs of an actress facing an awards show, or a socialite with, say, an upcoming engagement party. "It's good because you kind of know what kind of dress to make her so it will fit the carpets so the whole thing will match," Elbaz said, with a smirk. "But this is not my story."

Elbaz was born in Morocco. When he was eight months old, his family, like so many other Sephardic Jews at the time, moved to Israel. They settled in Holon, just south of Tel Aviv, on the Mediterranean coast. Elbaz's father was a hairdresser, and his mother was a painter. She became a cashier to support the couple's four children after her husband died, when Alber (who was then Albert) was fifteen. She encouraged her son—who started drawing dresses at the age of seven—and gave him eight hundred dollars when he left home, in 1985, to come to New York City and pursue a career in fashion.

"I was working in the garment district making horrible mother-of-the-bride dresses," he said, moving a strawberry around his plate with his fork. "I think, For this I leave my home and my family?" He was rescued by Geoffrey Beene, who hired Elbaz as an assistant designer and served as his mentor for seven years. In 1997, Elbaz moved to Paris to become the head designer at Guy Laroche. He did four seasons there, and garnered adoring attention from the fashion press, establishing himself as a star in Paris fashion. And then, after Elbaz had spent just over a decade in the business, Yves Saint Laurent and his partner, Pierre Bergé, recruited him to be the head of ready-to-wear for Y.S.L. Elbaz was in line to be Saint Laurent's successor upon the Maestro's imminent retirement: "my dream," Elbaz called it.

But in November, 1999, the Gucci Group, headed by Domenico De Sole and Tom Ford, bought Yves Saint Laurent. Two months later, after Elbaz had shown just three collections there, he was dismissed, and Ford was installed as head designer. Elbaz was devastated. Ford could not have been a more overt and maddening foil. Where Elbaz was pudgy and Jewish and self-doubting, Ford was toned and tan and Texan. Elbaz is shy and still not exactly a household name; when Ford guest-edited an issue of *Vanity Fair*, in 2006, he put himself on the cover, flanked by Scarlett Johansson and Keira Knightley in the nude. Perhaps most significant, Elbaz has always presented in his work a quiet, complicated conception of female sexuality. One of Ford's more memorable ads as the designer for Gucci pictured a woman pulling her underwear down in front of a kneeling man to reveal the letter "G" shaved out of her pubic hair.

Ford both reflected and shaped the culture of the nineties. He made it cool to flaunt. On September 11, 2001, Ford's Y.S.L. boutique in Manhattan received forty-two calls from women interested in the designer's new black peasant blouse. But little by little, as the money and the grandiose self-assurance of that era fell away, Ford's sensibility came to seem less stylish. Ford retired from women's fashion in 2004, largely because of business disputes with the Gucci Group's parent company, P.P.R. As Ford later put it, "Gucci doesn't work as well in those moments where the world isn't in the mood for sex and speed." He was going to direct movies, he declared. He also opened a high-end men's store on Madison Avenue, a citadel of materialism with suède-quilted walls and eyeglasses made of 18k. gold. Not long ago, I asked a salesman there about a pair of cufflinks. "Thirty-four," he said. He meant that they cost thirty-four thousand dollars.

There was a time when excess of this sort might have seemed the epitome of the luxurious, the price tag for the enviable. But in our current moment Tom Ford, with his tan, and his cufflinks that cost as much as a car, and his naked-men-on-bearskin-rugs aesthetic, seems distant and comical. He has become Bijan. And Alber Elbaz has gradually won.

This is not to say that Elbaz's work is more moderately priced than Ford's—or than any other high-fashion designer's, for that matter. On the contrary. Many top designers today offer "diffusion," or secondary, lines at lower prices, which are crafted to maintain some of the primary collection's mystique while moving product. Marc Jacobs has Marc by Marc Jacobs; Alexander McQueen has McQ; Vera Wang has both her less expensive Vera Wang Lavender Label and the downright cheap Simply Vera line, at Kohl's stores. Alber Elbaz does not engage in this kind of behavior. "I have a problem to do a collection that is a secondary line," he said that morning at the Carlyle. "I mean, you don't want to be the stepsister. You want to be Cinderella. Show me one girl who wants to be the stepsister."

No, the difference is that Elbaz's brand of luxury is more sedate, less ferociously hip than Ford's was. Elbaz does not want to define trends. He wants his designs to be timeless. "To buy Lanvin is to invest in future vintage" is how the Web site for the haute Manhattan boutique Kirna Zabête puts it. Elbaz detests the idea of an "It" bag; he thinks that "there is nothing scarier than being 'the designer of the moment,' because the moment ends."

Elbaz talks a lot about creating "value," by which he does not mean a bargain. "I know that our clothes are very, very, very expensive," he said. "But they are expensive not because we will just put a price tag over them. At our atelier, I go downstairs and I see and I hear a silence when they work—it's almost like a laboratory. I know that most of the time you don't see it. Only when you wear it you understand it." For in-

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"Finally! Cheap is the new black!"

stance, he had figured out a way to make strapless dresses stay aloft while still remaining soft, but it was a discovery that had required substantial experimentation. "I'm taking out a lot of the corset that is like *syoop*," he said, making a sucking noise and holding in his cheeks. "I took all the bones out, and I stitch, and to get there, you know, it took me forever. It took me six or seven dresses to make one. And it's time and it's money and we are not doing it in offshore countries—we pay sixty-five-per-cent taxes in France! It is so much work. Doing a collection for me is almost like creating a vaccine. Once you create the one vaccine, then you can duplicate it for nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. But see if you can create it for nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, and the answer is no. In that sense, I have absolutely no problem with the prices. I don't think we do it just to do it."

When Elbaz designs a collection, or even an individual item, he starts with a "story." For example, a recent collection featured ribbons, and was, for him, "like the story of the ties between people, between generations." A new necklace made of resin and faux gems is, in Elbaz's imagination, "a collage of a broken brooch from your grandmother, a pearl from your husband, and something your daughter brought home from kindergarten." It is important to him that everything he makes has this kind of imaginary history, a Genesis myth. He believes this is what gives his creations their potent and mysterious oomph.

"I do things without décolleté, nothing is transparent," Elbaz said. "I am overweight, so I am very, very aware of what to show and what not to show, and I am sure there is a huge link with being an overweight designer and the work I do. My fantasy is to be skinny, you see? I bring that fantasy into the lightness—I take off the corset and I bring comfort and all these things that I don't have. What I bring is everything that I don't have. This is the fantasy. This is the concierge that goes home."

Elbaz assumed his post after Shaw-Lan Wang, a Chinese publishing magnate who bought a controlling interest in Lanvin in 2001, requested that he "please wake the sleeping beauty." She wanted him to take up the mantle of Jeanne Lanvin and make the company a player in the luxury market—as it had been at the beginning of the last century. "When I met Alber, I felt he is talented," Wang told me. "In ten minutes, we decided to work together."

Jeanne Lanvin, the oldest of eleven children, was born in 1867, sixteen years before Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, who came to be seen as the iconic "New Woman" of the twentieth century. Set next to Coco Chanel, "Lanvin represents an equally compelling, if less lurid, example of the self-made professional, a woman creative and entrepreneurial in equal measure," Harold Koda, the curator-in-charge of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has written.

Both Lanvin and Chanel began their careers as milliners in Paris. In 1883, Lanvin went to work at the august Maison Félix, on the corner of the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and the Rue Boissy d'Anglais, in the space that would later become her own shop. She left for a five-year apprenticeship in Barcelona, with a dressmaker who made clothing for children as well as adults. This became Lanvin's specialty, too. With the money she made in Spain, Lanvin started her own millinery in 1895, when she returned home to Paris. In 1896, she married and, a year later, she had a daughter, Marguerite Marie-Blanche, who became her muse. Lanvin created an elaborate wardrobe for her daughter that caught the eye of her millinery clients. "Lanvin creations were sophisticated, handmade, and therefore, expensive," Dean L. Merceron writes in "Lanvin." They had "an air of whimsy and childhood naïveté."

Jeanne Lanvin was a shrewd marketer. She enlisted Paul Nadar as her house photographer, and his portraits of chic, angelic little girls with their doting and elegant mothers helped create a vision of maternal glamour that drew Parisian women to Lanvin. In 1909, she was inducted into the male-dominated Syndicat de Couture, after launching her first women's-wear collection. Lanvin was a pioneer of the concept that a designer could sell not just garments but a "life style." She developed fragrances (Arpège is her most famous), bridal couture, and her own dyes. "Lanvin blue," by some accounts based on the color of the sky in the frescoes of Fra Angelico, became her trademark color, and in 1923 she opened a dye factory in Nanterre, so that she could produce this color, along with her "Velázquez green."

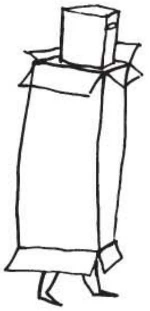
Like Elbaz, Lanvin sought to design fashion that transcended seasonal fads and could be worn by women throughout their lives. "The intention of these calculated creations was to assist in blurring the line between generations as waistlines, hemlines, and necklines rose and fell from season to season," Merceron writes. The company's logo is a picture of a mother and child, based on a 1907 photograph of Lanvin with her daughter, both dressed for a costume ball and holding hands. At first, Elbaz was put off by this image, because he felt that "there was something religious about it," a vague insinuation of a Madonna and Child, what with the mother in flowing robes and the child looking up at her, beatific. (Indeed, Catholic imagery is a persistent theme in the Lanvin archives.) But it grew on him. And it seems an appropriate emblem for Elbaz's work, too—the tenderness of it, the historicity and the modesty. Elbaz never puts women on display; he is never vulgar. He is fond of saying that he is not interested in designing the dress that will make a man fall in love with the woman who wears it. He is interested in designing the dress that a woman wears when she falls in love herself.

In the midst of the January couture shows in Paris—fantastical spectacles generally held in vast venues—Elbaz invited three small groups of editors and journalists to a Lanvin "pre-collection" presentation, at the Hôtel de Crillon, for a first look at what he would show for fall. "I like these little presentations, because in a room with couches people feel special," Elbaz told me. "They stop being journalists and they are just women."

The setting was indeed intimate: a room with grand windows, an arrangement of white roses, and waiters in vests serving espresso. "Alber, what is that fabric?" a British fashion editor called out, from her spot on a gray velvet couch under a chandelier. Elbaz stood in front of the group, with a model clad in a phenomenal coat. It was grosgrain, Elbaz explained, interspersed with mink, so the coat appeared striped. If a woman wished, she could wear the garment inside out, and then she would find herself walking down the street in a gorgeous but inconspicuous coat of overlapping deep-purple ribbons, while inside she was discreetly swaddled in fur.

The models stood, one by one, in front of an unrolled trompe-l'oeil scroll picturing a dressing room tilted askew. "Turbulent," Elbaz said. "The world, shaking." Alternating between English and French, he spoke of a recent trip to New York, where he was having a sushi lunch at a restaurant with a friend. "It was empty. I ask my friend why is it? Is it because it's Monday? Is it the restaurant? Then we realize the hotel was empty. The plane was empty. There was a war feeling . . . and I come from the Middle East, not exactly the Switzerland of the world, so I know. I felt the togetherness you feel but also the fear. I think about women in war, and how come they are so beautiful. Maybe it is the feminine instinct for survival."

It was a loopy soliloquy. But when you are in the presence of Elbaz's extraordinary creations you begin to adjust and acquire a vivid sense of the fervent and poetic way he experiences the world around him. And what he says, although it does not always technically make sense, does start to possess a consistent and comprehensible rhythm.



The clothing he showed that morning was exquisite but surprisingly, thoughtfully practical. A guipure-lace dress was lined in jersey, for comfort, and had a single zipper up the side for easy removal, hidden behind a ruffle. A column dress in gray wool was gathered at the bodice, and was modelled, Elbaz said, on a towel wrapped around a woman getting out of the shower. "If it's not edible, it's not food. If it's not wearable, it's not fashion," he said.

Jeanne Lanvin was known for elaborate ornamentation—beadwork, embroidery, and intricate overlays of tulle or metallic netting—and Elbaz retains some of his predecessor's affection for lavish embellishment. The models were heaped with jewelry and shining in sequins and bias-cut lamé. Elbaz's best friend, Joel Arthur Rosenthal, a Bronx-born jewelry designer whose shop, JAR, on the Place Vendôme, caters to the richest of the rich, came up to Elbaz on his way out. "It was like Goya," Rosenthal said. "Not goyim—Goya."

After everyone had departed, Elbaz stood on a balcony overlooking the Place de la Concorde, eating a sandwich in the cold mist and frowning. "I wish I knew how to enjoy it more," he said. "My psychologist says dissatisfaction, it's the engine that keeps me going."

That evening, Elbaz and his boyfriend for the past sixteen years, Alex Koo, ate a dinner of crêpes and smoked salmon with cold vodka at a Russian restaurant called Caviar Kaspia. Koo, a handsome Korean-American, has been the director of merchandising at Lanvin for the past three years. He wore a knee-length, dove-gray Lanvin cashmere sweater belted at the waist and round spectacles, and he had a ribbon loosely knotted into a necktie. "What do you think people were looking for at the Crillon?" Koo asked.

"To be touched," Elbaz replied.

Koo used to work for Prada. "I realized when I came here that Alber doesn't *do* marketing," Koo said. "He doesn't believe in commercial collections. He just wants the most beautiful piece. So there's value."

Elbaz bristles, for example, at the fashion concept of "groups," as in a group of dresses in several colors, which is generally an expectation among buyers. "If I do a dress in red, it needs to be different proportions than if it's in yellow," Elbaz said, a little petulantly. His refusal to adhere to certain mores of the trade seems not so much a matter of principle as a gut-level horror that fills Elbaz if things do not accord with his vision. He told a story of a handbag debacle that nearly derailed his show this past fall at the Eiffel Tower.

"Two nights before the show, the bags arrive," he said. "And I look at the bags and I hate them. Within a second, I got a migraine from depression. I thought, It's a disaster—it's just a disaster—it will never work. I go back to Alex, 'Am I not seeing right? Everybody seems to like it and I hate it.' And then it's that moment that you have two choices: either to give up or to start fighting. I said, 'Everybody, we are going to meet again at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, all of us.' Everybody came at eight o'clock—half asleep, half tired, three-quarters depressed—and we went bag by bag. We take off the chain. We put steam. We put it into water. We take off the closure. We edit the lucky charm that we have done on the bag. We took a pompom we have made out of grosgrain, we put it on the bag. I said to the girls, 'Is that the bag you are not going to be able to let go if you see it in the store?' They said yes. They say, 'Now we do another bag from the same group?' I said, Forget the groups! It's not about groups! It's not about marketing—where you need three sizes in four colors in five fabrics." Elbaz shuddered. "And it was the first time that the numbers of the bags went like that," he said, and pointed at the ceiling to indicate how well those difficult bags eventually sold. "And what was it that we added? We broke the formula. We make every mistake that you can do. I think that what we created, in the end, they were very emotional, those pieces. They didn't look like they were done in a factory, they look like they were done by a human being." He gave a bemused half smile. "Once you finish with a process like that, if they ask me to walk from here to there"—he pointed at the next table—"I have to take a taxi."

Very little is painless or undramatic for Elbaz. That evening, he was worried about a meeting the next day with his architects, who were working on a new boutique, set to open in London in late March. "The architects say you can't touch the walls," Elbaz lamented, drinking a tiny glass of icy vodka. "I say, How can you have sex if you don't touch the skin?" He was worried about the location of his next show. He was worried about this article. He was worried about where he and Koo would go for their vacation, which would start in two days and last for four. (They decided on Morocco, but then Elbaz got kidney stones.) "If I had a kid, I'd have to live in a penthouse of the hospital," Elbaz said. "Every time he sneeze I'd want him checked." On the bright side, then he'd get to live in a hospital—an oasis of care. "I like everything about hospitals," Elbaz said. "Even the food."

Fashion people tend to clump in all the same places, and Caviar Kaspia at couture time is one such. Colleagues kept coming by the table to pay their respects to Elbaz as he ate. The designer Giambattista Valli complimented him on his broken-brooch-from-your-grandmother/something-your-daughter-brought-home-from-kindergarten necklace. The former *Harper's Bazaar* editor Kate Betts told Elbaz that she'd been quoting him all day. That is, she'd been quoting Elbaz quoting Geoffrey Beene quoting Coco Chanel, who said, "It's not about what's new, it's about what's good." It was something Elbaz repeated to all three groups at the Crillon.

Though he's been at it for a while, Elbaz's job does not seem to get easier for him. "I was walking with Yves Saint Laurent one night before a show with his dogs," Elbaz said. "I said, 'How are you?' And he said, 'Scared.' I said, 'Even after all these years?' He said, 'Because of all the years.'"

There is no question that Alber Elbaz is a deeply anxious fellow. But, while worrying about everything is his nature, to a certain extent it is also his job. Lanvin is a smaller operation than its prominence would suggest, and Elbaz is ultimately responsible for almost every detail of the enterprise. The next day, he went to try to energize his merchandisers—the middlemen whose job it is to sell Lanvin to the buyers at department stores.

About a hundred people sat listening to Elbaz in a large room with a view of the Eiffel Tower, in an unused section of the Musée de l'Homme. Next door, cavemen wandered in their dioramas. "What do men want? How do men shop today?" Elbaz asked the salespeople. "Does a man want just a classic suit? Do they want maybe a pink jacket? Or maybe they want to have a pajama because they have no job?" Everyone laughed at this. "I do believe that in times like today, when fashion is where it is because of economic crisis, the role of fashion is changing and it's no longer just to make sure that we look right and professional and comfortable, but it's maybe about giving the dream and making people feel good again—making a man or a woman think, Should I go to a psychiatrist or should I go to buy a Lanvin suit?"

"This guy talks a lot about the economy," an American merchandiser in the audience whispered to the person next to him.

"Some of them act like nothing's even happened!" his friend replied. "It's insane!"

"I think that, in times like this, fashion is more important than ever," Elbaz asserted.

It was a point of view making its way around Paris just then. A few days later, a television journalist approached Catherine Deneuve in the front row at Jean Paul Gaultier's show. "Tell us, Ms. Deneuve, why we need fashion now more than ever. Do you agree?"

Deneuve appeared baffled, and said, "Certainly not."

Elbaz got in a car with his director of communications, Hania Destelle, and Daphne Karras, a senior designer, to scout a potential locale for the upcoming women's show. The driver kept going until he was deep in the Thirteenth Arrondissement, and everyone in the car said the neighborhood looked unfamiliar. They pulled up in front of a building that seemed abandoned. Elbaz gasped.

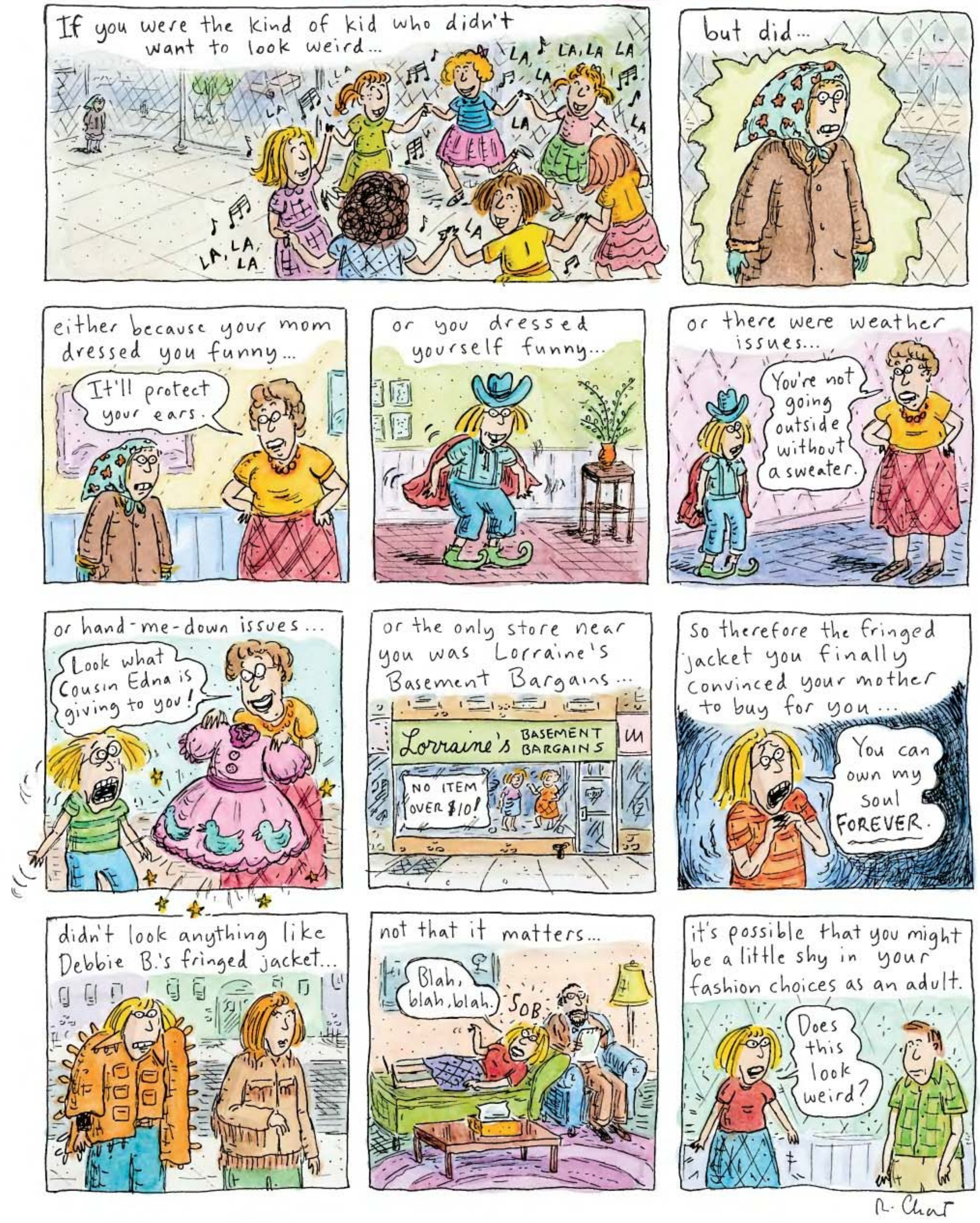
"It's like a Mafia place," he said.

The space was a former loading station for trucks and trains. Growling dogs guarded the entrance, to deter squatters. Inside, the ground was littered with crystals shaped like stars and moons and teardrops, the remainders of the last fashion show—John Galliano's—that was held at the site. It was enormous, empty, and very bright, as the ceiling was composed almost entirely of grimy panes of glass. Elbaz chatted with the manager, a man wearing a full-length white leather trenchcoat. "Vintage?" Elbaz asked him.

It was cold enough to see your breath, and Destelle took off her scarf and

SKETCHBOOK BY ROZ CHAST

STYLE


If you were the kind of kid who didn't want to look weird...
LA, LA, LA
LA, LA LA LA
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but did...
either because your mom dressed you funny...
It'll protect your ears.
or you dressed yourself funny...
or there were weather issues...
You're not going outside without a sweater.
or hand-me-down issues...
Look what Cousin Edna is giving to you!
or the only store near you was Lorraine's Basement Bargains...
Lorraine's BASEMENT BARGAINS
NO ITEM OVER $10!
So therefore the fringed jacket you finally convinced your mother to buy for you...
You can own my soul FOREVER.
didn't look anything like Debbie B.'s fringed jacket...
not that it matters...
Blah, blah, blah.
SOB
it's possible that you might be a little shy in your fashion choices as an adult.
Does this look weird?
R. Chast

wrapped it around Elbaz's neck. She noticed a pile of dog droppings interspersed with the crystals on the floor near a lattice of faded yellow lines once used to delineate parking spots for trucks. "In the morning, at the Crillon," Destelle said, stepping over the unsavory heap in her high heels. "The afternoon, here." She smiled. "It's fashion."

The dogs woofed wildly as Elbaz ambled out of the building. He did not seem happy. "I have a feeling of going to a prison for the mental patients—everything I hate," he said, getting back into the car. "Daphne, what do you say?"

"It's a weird space," she replied. "But I like that it's rough, the opposite of what we saw at the Crillon."

"I had many, many thoughts," Elbaz said. "The dogs. The black car waiting outside. The man with the white coat and the dirty hands. The crystal on the floor and the train station just in the back. I'm looking for something clean to my eyes!" He sighed. "Maybe when they put everything together, it will be perfect and lose the bad spirit. There was a time in fashion, in the eighties, when every designer was trying to find a space nobody had seen before. Maybe today people want to go somewhere familiar? Maybe I am less modern. Maybe it's time to leave fashion."

Elbaz's office is very small, and the walls are covered with his drawings, along with miniature versions of his garments. Nearly every Lanvin piece starts with a wee mockup in satin or velvet or lace. People have made Elbaz stuffed fabric dolls to wear some of these small clothes, and they hang along one wall. A blond doll wears a yellow gown. Elbaz pulled up her skirt to reveal blue bloomers. A nurse holds an IV bag full of paper hearts. "Mathilde made that for me when I was sick," Elbaz said. In the middle of these little ladies is, unmistakably, an Alber Elbaz doll. He is shorter than the rest, with a bow tie and glasses.

In a room behind Elbaz's office, eight people, all of whom looked to be in their twenties or thirties, were working. It felt like the art room at camp. One young woman sorted through a pile of jet beads, stitching one after another onto a piece of ribbon by hand. Another, Mathilde, was pinning gold lace on a mannequin. She showed Elbaz how she was trying to create petals of gold tulle to layer with black lace, to make a kind of shadowy tutu. "I love the texture going all the way up," he said, moving a row so that everything became very different. "Do you?"

"Yes," she said, and grinned. "Now I feel free." He held her face in his hand for a second and then walked on to the next person.

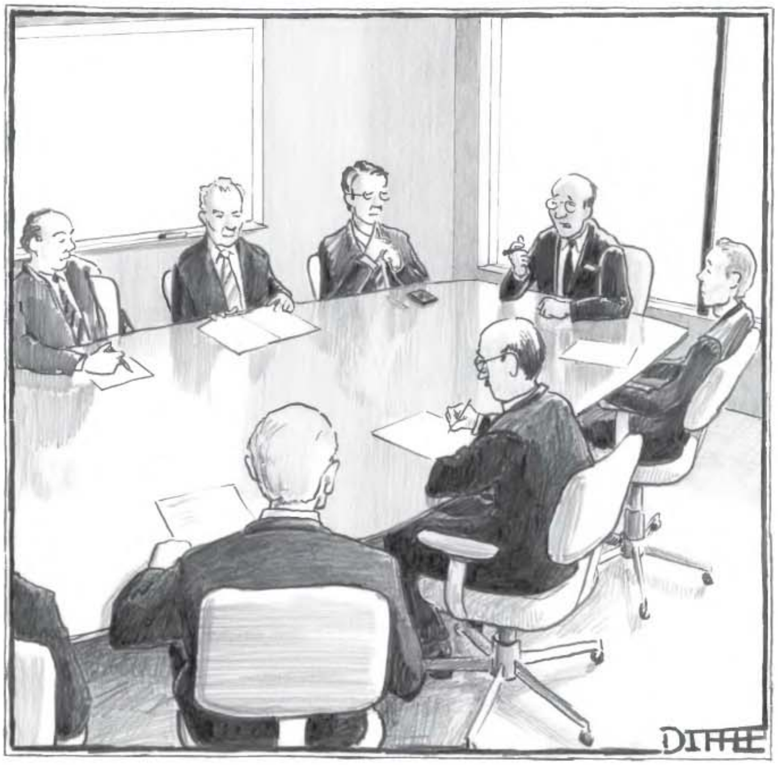
The clothes for Lanvin's runway shows are produced on the floor below. The people there were all a decade or two older than the designers on the top floor working on the prototypes, and everyone was French. It was extremely quiet—the laboratory, the scientists at work. Elbaz greeted each one by name and kissed them on both cheeks. One seamstress cried, because her father had just died, and Elbaz hugged her. His mother passed away last year, and Elbaz remains haunted by the loss. "It was the worst," he told me. "Oh! And I was, like, so close to her. She was the one person who could make me really crazy in a split second, and make me relax in a split second. It was a very difficult time."

Pinned to the wall by the seamstress's workstation—a sewing machine and a drafting table—was a pink tulle frock lined in chiffon with hot-pink sequinned trim which would fit a very chic, very lucky elf.

Even in France, architects wear funny glasses. At the dreaded meeting with them, Elbaz was becoming agitated. "It looks . . . stocky," he said, drawing on top of their drawing with a colored pencil. For the London boutique, they had designed a room that would be wallpapered with the Lanvin logo. It was Elbaz's idea, but it wasn't turning out as he had imagined. "You see, in here I need someplace clean to rest my eyes," he said, in French, motioning around the design space, somewhat desperately.

"But this space has a particular use," one of the architects, a serious, silver-haired man, replied, in French. "It is for working, not shopping."

This did not go over well. "*C'est la même!*" Elbaz yelped. He jumped up and grabbed a mannequin wearing a half-completed Art Deco-inspired gold lamé dress with black tulle layered on it like a smokescreen. "*Regardez!*" he said, and moved the mannequin forcefully to another spot in the room, where it suddenly appeared sloppy and less appealing. Then



"Sounds good. We'll just have to run it by the Hawaiian shirts."

he marched it to the back of the room, and placed it in front of the blue-gray velvet curtains.

"*C'est différent*," the architect conceded.

"Where is the dress the most beautiful?" Elbaz demanded passionately.

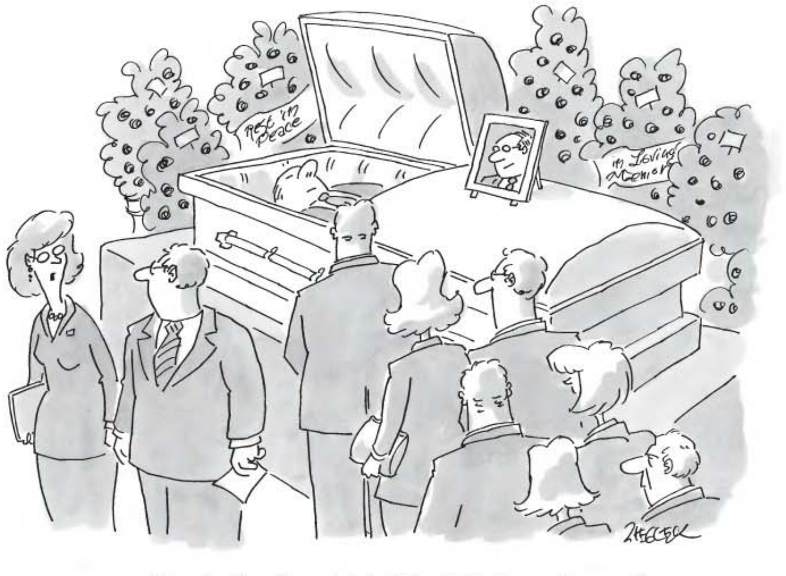
"There," they all agreed.

"If a woman comes in and it doesn't smell right or the light isn't right, she will think the dress doesn't look good!" Elbaz said. He brought a bowl of fruit and put it on the table in front of the architects. "The stress starts and we start to eat." Elbaz sat down, put his head in his hand, and moaned. "I'm depressed," he said, and started peeling a clementine. But, as he ate the fruit and stared at the architectural plan, something came into his mind. His demeanor brightened. He picked up his colored pencil again, and adjusted the drawing, moving a wall slightly. "So it's not so precisely parallel!" he exclaimed.

"Less symmetrical?" one of the architects said eagerly.

"Yes! Before, it's choking," Elbaz said, "*un petit peu* ick!" They decided that there would be a platform, like a small stage, where women could look at themselves in the mirror under chandeliers—but, crucially, only two chandeliers. "You know, if you eat caviar, you don't eat the whole plate," Elbaz said. "Just a taste. Just a touch." He was suddenly very pleased. "It's so beautiful! So feminine! *J'adore ça*," Elbaz exclaimed, and a wave of relief washed over the room.

After several hours of going over versions of wallpaper in which the size of the logo was slightly larger or smaller, slightly bluer or grayer, at last Elbaz found one that pleased him. "It will be like the inside of a lady's suitcase," he said. Somewhere safe and enclosed, where enormous thought has gone into every detail—somewhere very different from the world outside it.



"I see he finally got rid of that idiotic comb-over."

• •

"Maybe we should have the show here," Elbaz said later that evening as he walked into the Casino de Paris, a theatre that seats about thirteen hundred people and is draped with lots of tired red velvet.

"Who do you want to put in the front row?" Hania Destelle said, motioning at the balcony, which had a scalloped edge lined in round lights, the kind clowns use to put on makeup.

They had come to see a performance by the chanteuse Patricia Kaas, a Lanvin client. "I told Hania I didn't want to go out," Elbaz said, sitting down at a little table with a red lamp on it toward the front of the room. "I want to go home, I told her today."

"Today, tomorrow, yesterday," Destelle replied. "Always." She was wearing a velvet Lanvin jacket that was such a dark green it appeared almost black, with a rhinestone choker around her neck which looked like a family heirloom but was in fact a recent Elbaz design.

"You see my day? How many hats I wear?" Elbaz said. "After, what do you want to do at the end?"

"Pajamas," Destelle answered, and ordered a glass of champagne.

The lights went down and the red velvet curtain rose, and Kaas took the stage wearing Lanvin: silver pumps with ankle straps, leggings, and a black satin peplum jacket. She was holding a cane. Her band wore Venetian carnival masks. She sang "Send in the Clowns," in French, and, from the other end of the stage, a female mime approached her with a red balloon, which Kaas accepted and then released. On a screen behind her, the red balloon's fictional path through cities and villages, forests and skyscrapers, was depicted in animation.

Later, Kaas, who has short blond hair and an unbelievable figure, came out in a one-shouldered black Lanvin cocktail dress and sang "Falling in Love Again," in a mixture of English and German. "She looks great, no?" Elbaz said. (For another number, she wore a nondescript wrap dress, and Elbaz leaned over to say, "That's not mine.")

The show seemed a bit like a "Saturday Night Live" parody of French entertainment, but the audience loved it, and gave Kaas three standing ovations. After the last of her curtain calls, Elbaz and Destelle were led backstage and up a flight of steps to offer their congratulations.

Elbaz was the first person admitted into Kaas's dressing room. She was sweating profusely and looked traumatized, crushed.

"The audience was so cold!" she said.

"No, no," Elbaz said, touching her. "You were superb. They love you! And the dancing!"

"In high heels!" Kaas said. A cluster of people in the doorway laughed encouragingly. She shrugged. "No," she said. "I don't think so. *Calamité*."

"I know how you feel," Elbaz replied, patting her shoulder. "After every show, I say to Hania, 'They hated it.'" ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Audio slide show: Ariel Levy on Alber Elbaz.

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

TWISTER

How Tony Gilroy surprises jaded moviegoers.

BY D. T. MAX

It is a warm afternoon in the historic center of Rome, near Piazza Margana, and the film crew of "Duplicity," a romantic spy caper, is doing repeated takes of a fifteen-second shot. The movie's director, Tony Gilroy, who also wrote the screenplay, is at one end of an alley. The British actor Clive Owen stands near him, as does Julia Roberts. Nearby hover her makeup man and bodyguard, various assistant directors, gaffers, and carpenters, and members of the Italian crew. A black tarpaulin blocks the view of onlookers and the paparazzi. An assistant director calls for "last looks"—the final touchup by the makeup artists—and Roberts takes her mark, halfway up the street; Owen moves to the top of the alley. Gilroy calls "Action!" and is echoed by a "*Movimento!*" from the Italian assistant director who handles the extras.

Roberts begins walking down the street, and the cameraman, using a handheld steadicam, precedes her in a backward crabwalk. On cue, three children race up the alley past her, kicking a soccer ball. Roberts looks over her shoulder and continues until she is off camera. Moments later, Owen begins to walk fast; he breaks into a trot, runs past the children, decelerates, runs again. He is pursuing her. He runs until he runs out of street.

"Cut!" Gilroy cries. "That look is so strong," he says to Roberts. "That was great. That revealed a lot. Great." Roberts, who has already done several versions of this scene, is clearly exhausted. "My mojo's gone," she says. She also has the flu and an ear infection. The cast began filming at 4 A.M., outside the Pantheon. Gilroy assures her, "Even at quarter speed, you're still a thoroughbred." Roberts sits in her folding chair and removes her espadrilles; someone's hands take them from her. She sees the kids still playing with their soccer ball and adopts a mock-Chekhovian tone: "Oh, to be young and play in the heat and do it over and over and not complain about water or time or last looks." She turns to Gilroy: "O.K., I've come up with something that's really going to rock your world."

Gilroy and Julia Roberts, filming in Manhattan.

SHARKPIX/ZUMA

"I need an after-lunch pick-me-up," he says.

"Coming up."

"Let it rip!"

They shoot the scene once more. The children chase the soccer ball again; Roberts looks over her shoulder again, this time more subtly. The viewer is supposed to wonder, What, exactly, is she looking for?

"Cut! Print that!" Gilroy is pleased. The actors and crew mill. Everyone avoids eye contact with Gilroy; one can read the hope on their faces. "Let's do it one more time," he says. "This time, no steadicam." As the players take their marks again, he says to himself, "It's good to be greedy." He pauses. He wants this extra take. "Maybe, if you make a thousand films, you know what you need right away, but I can't imagine not wanting to have that."

"Yeah, that's all wrong," Gilroy is saying. "Her look falls in the wrong place." He stares in silence; Owen and Roberts are now out of frame, but the children are still kicking the soccer ball. Gilroy is watching a screen in an editing suite at the Brill Building, in New York. It is more than four months later, early October. He is watching the footage that he filmed in Rome on an Avid monitor, a series of flat-panel displays with a disconcerting number of buttons. Half-eaten takeout food is on the table, and traffic from Times Square murmurs outside. The shades are drawn.

John Gilroy, Tony's brother, is editing the film. Gilroy asks him to cue up more footage from Rome. Each take presents a small variation. In one, Roberts doesn't look back at all. In another, the children steal the scene with their ebullience. The look that Roberts casts over her shoulder actually has an important structural role in the movie. Roberts plays Claire Stenwick; Owen is Ray Koval; both are career intelligence officers. Several years earlier, at a party in Dubai, Claire, then with the C.I.A., met Ray, then with MI-6; she seduced him, drugged him, then stole some military codes from his briefcase. For Ray,

Gilroy's films evoke the Hollywood of the seventies, when thrillers featured complex characters. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

a ladies' man—the script describes him as "Ray with the good suit and the easy smile"—there were multiple humiliations in this fleecing. He has spent the intervening years nursing not only his anger but also his passion for her. Rome marks their first meeting since that entanglement, and Gilroy wants the audience to be unsure if Claire knows that she's being pursued. Perhaps she has laid another trap for Ray. Roberts's glance must instill the viewer with a tantalizing sense of uncertainty just this side of frustration.

John runs more film, and Roberts keeps gliding by, her face expressive despite dark glasses. In one shot, she twists her neck. "That look is way too strong," Gilroy says. In some takes, Roberts appears coyly amused; in others, she seems indifferent, a woman in a rush. Finally, in Take 5, Roberts gives a glance backward that is delectably ambiguous, turning back with a half smile. Is she looking at the children? Listening for Owen? Is she just enjoying Rome? A pigeon flies up behind her. The children play with fervor but don't distract. Owen deftly navigates the street, his unbuttoned Armani jacket flapping in the breeze. He looks great.

Gilroy, leaning back in his lounge chair, smiles at his brother. "See, it just works," he says. "She turns her head at the right moment. Where it falls—here."

Tony Gilroy is best known as a writer of movie thrillers. The screenwriter William Goldman says of him, "Right now, he is as good as the game." "Duplicity" will be the eleventh of his movies to be produced in little more than a decade. Among them are "Dolores Claiborne" (1995), "The Devil's Advocate" (1997), and the three movies in the Jason Bourne series (2002, 2004, and 2007). One of Gilroy's specialties is the potent, reflective, and often beleaguered action hero, a man with, as he says, "an incredible toolbox of skills that he has let rust." In 2007, "Michael Clayton," which he wrote and directed, received seven Academy Award nominations, including one for his screenplay and another for his direction. Clayton, played by George Clooney, is a fixer at a law firm; he helps the company's clients when they bump up against police inquiries or uncoöperative judges. He gets friendly cops tickets to the game. He is oddly dignified in his cynicism. "I'm not the guy that you kill!" he shouts at his prime adversary, a corporate lawyer played by Tilda Swinton. "I'm the guy that you buy! Are you so fucking blind you don't even see what I am?" Gilroy's movie was taut and intelligent, and evoked the Hollywood of the nineteen-seventies, when thrillers were anchored by complex characters.

"I suppose you're worried about your little peasant benefits."

Today, the film industry considers adult-oriented drama a small target, and one that is getting smaller. Middle-aged Americans don't go to the movies; young adults and teen-agers do, and they prefer action to talk, in part because they believe they know every possible movie character already. A screenwriter interested in human behavior can find himself ignored by big-studio executives looking for movies propelled by spectacle and superheroes. "The trend is making movies that don't need screenwriters," a top Hollywood screenwriter explained to me by e-mail. Gilroy is a canny player, though. He says that he's "not into building blueprints of buildings that will never get built." His movies follow two fundamental rules: "Bring it in within two hours" and "Don't bore the audience." Sitting in his office at the Brill Building one day, while his brother edited "Duplicity" in the next room, Gilroy picked up a copy of his script and riffled it. "It's all white space," he said to me. "It's all about *not* writing."

Gilroy loves puzzles, and "Clayton" was full of them. So is "Duplicity," with its scheming, warily passionate spies. "If I told you I loved you, would it make any difference?" Claire asks Ray at one point. "If you told me or if I believed you?" Ray responds. Gilroy calls the film "counter-programming—not the normal thing to do next." It is fast, lighthearted, and intense. " 'Michael Clayton' could have been a novel," Gilroy says. " 'Duplicity' could only exist as a movie." Yet it, too, is out of step with current Hollywood practice. It is a thriller shot almost entirely indoors. Ray and Claire do not career through Rome in a Porsche. There are no police cruisers piling up behind them at the end. Their passion is communicated largely with faces, not bodies.

The engine of "Duplicity" is the question of who is tricking whom—and, thus, where reality lies. The movie has an array of flashbacks that scramble the time frame, a complication that almost prevented the film from being made. Steven Spielberg, who, at one point, was interested in directing it, with Tom Cruise in the Clive Owen role, was so confused by the plot that he organized a table reading in his office at DreamWorks to clarify who did what to whom. Later, he jokingly suggested that the DVD include, as a bonus track, a chronological run-through of the story. (Ultimately, he dropped out.)

The core of "Duplicity" is the screenwriting trope known as the reversal. Gilroy told me, "A reversal is just anything that's a surprise. It's a way of keeping the audience interested." A camera follows a man as he goes up the stairs to an apartment; we see his wedding ring as he pulls out his keys. He pushes open the door, slowly—a husband coming home, trudging up the stairs with his briefcase. But a woman in black lingerie greets him: he's seeing his mistress! That is a reversal. In "Good Will Hunting," when Matt Damon, mopping the floor at a university, comes upon a complicated math problem on a blackboard and solves it, the audience suddenly realizes that he is not an ordinary janitor—that's a reversal, too. "Duplicity" is so crammed with reversals that Stephen Schiff, a screenwriter who is a friend of Gilroy's, says that the story "achieves a kind of meta quality."

Not only are reversals the building blocks of Gilroy's dramas; they are often how he apprehends the world. In May, 2007, he was in a taxi, on his way to pick up his eleven-year-old daughter at Chelsea Piers, the sports complex by the Hudson River. The cabdriver was talking on his cell phone and ran a red light. The cab hit another car. Gilroy, peering from the window, could see that the other car had been totalled. He did not think that he had been hurt. "So they're lifting the other guy out of the car, and I'm thinking, I'm lucky," he said. "And—it's a great shot, but it must have been done a thousand times—I'm sitting there watching them take the other guy away and I'm thinking, Great, I'm the lucky one. Then I see them come at my cab with those things, the jaws of life." Gilroy had fractured a hip and a rib.

Gilroy believes that the writer and the moviegoing public are engaged in a cognitive arms race. As the audience grows savvier, the screenwriter has to invent new reversals—madder music and stronger wine. Perhaps the most famous reversal in film was written by William Goldman, originally in his 1974 novel "Marathon Man," then honed for the movie version. Laurence Olivier, a sadistic Nazi dentist, is drilling into Dustin Hoffman's mouth, trying to force him to disclose the location of a stash of diamonds. "Is it safe?" he keeps asking. Suddenly, William Devane sweeps in to rescue him and spirits Hoffman away. In the subsequent car ride, Devane starts asking questions; he wants to know where the diamonds are. After a few minutes, Hoffman's eyes grow wide: Devane and Olivier are in league! "Thirty years ago, when Bill Goldman wrote it, the reversal in 'Marathon Man' was fresh," Gilroy says. "But it must have been used now four thousand times."

This is the problem that new movies must solve. As Gilroy says, "How do you write a reversal that uses the audience's expectations in a new way? You have to write to their accumulated knowledge." Before Gilroy wrote "Duplicity," audiences had been trained by the mixed-up time schemes of "Memento," "Amores Perros," and "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." Moviegoers got used to an aesthetic of disorientation. They also have DVDs, so they can watch a film twice to untangle its story, and the Internet, which allows them to look up a bit of jargon or insider information. Reality is a confluence of fragments, to be apprehended bit by bit; watching a movie has begun to approximate the rhythm of a Google search. Gilroy bragged to *Variety* about the nonlinear structure of "Clayton": "In theory, if I make a real world, and there are some dramatic events taking place in there, I should be able to drop the needle anywhere 28 times and make something interesting out of it."

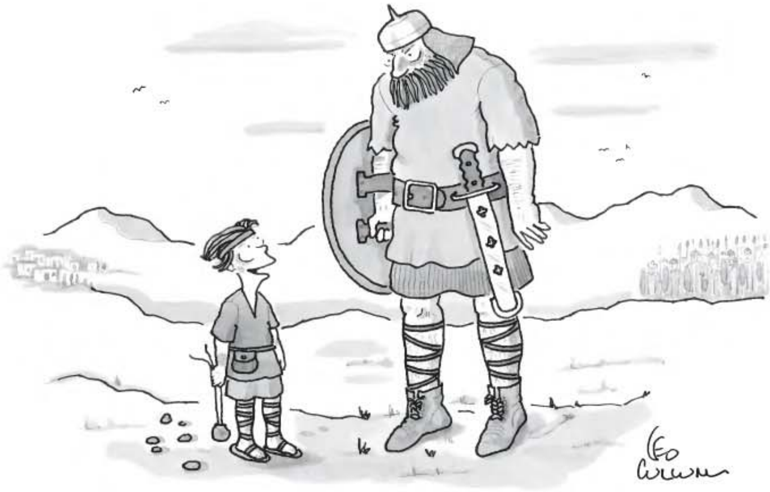
A central challenge of "Duplicity," in Gilroy's estimation, is its humorous tone. Although breaking from chronology is an established convention of the noir genre—at the start of "Sunset Boulevard," William Holden is floating dead in a pool—a comedy audience does not expect a test. Moreover, "Duplicity" is expensive. Movie stars don't come cheap, so "Duplicity" has to make money at the mall. Taylor Hackford, who directed "Dolores Claiborne" and "The Devil's Advocate," says of "Duplicity," "I'm not so sure it's a picture that's going to play to sixteen- or seventeen-year-olds, but who knows?"

If you worked in Universal's marketing department, and you wanted to make the plot of "Duplicity" sound simple, you'd probably say that it's a corporate-espionage story: two former spies work together to steal a valuable secret formula developed by a consumer-products company. A moviegoer lured in by this summary, however, will soon realize that it's equally possible that Claire is tricking Ray, or that Ray is tricking Claire, or that the company with the formula is gaming them or being gamed by a rival.

The movie makes an effort to keep the viewer off balance. The action skitters between Dubai, Rome, New York, London, the Bahamas, Miami, and Cleveland. The scammers are scammed, and those who look defeated suddenly bounce back. A whimsical score reminds you not to take any of it too seriously. Watching "Duplicity," viewers hear nearly the same conversation between Claire and Ray five times, and each time it upends what they think is going on in the movie. The first time is in New York. Ray, now working for a rival conglomerate, has just been assigned to track Claire, who has taken a job with the consumer-products company. At first glance, it's one of those happy screwball-comedy coincidences that so many movies depend on. The two confront each other at Lord & Taylor, in midtown. Claire says she doesn't know who he is. "I'm not great on names," Ray says to her. "Where I'm solid? People I've slept with. That's been a traditional area of strength for me. You charm me. Seduce me. Screw me. Then you dope me and ransack my hotel room. And how sick is this? Last thing I remember before I passed out was how much I liked you."

Claire responds that she has no idea who he is. Does she really not remember him? Is she pretending? Or are they playacting together, knowing that someone else is listening to them?

Each time this exchange is repeated, the audience feels a fresh sense of vertigo. The success of "Duplicity" hinges,



"Instead, let me be your investment adviser and get you eleven-per-cent return, year in and year out, regardless of market conditions."

in no small part, on whether the audience will experience this sensation as pleasurable. Gilroy told me that he knew of no other movie where the same dialogue gets used five times for five reversals. "What the fuck," he said. "I hope the audience thinks the film is broken."

This was Gilroy's attitude after he'd finished filming, in the early summer. But studios test the marketability of their material at screenings, many in suburban Los Angeles malls, where typical moviegoers share their responses. "We are going to get some interesting audience cards on this one," Gilroy said in June. He had final cut on "Duplicity"—his agent negotiated for it after "Clayton" received its Oscar nominations—but the studio, which controlled the production budget of sixty million dollars, could be quite persuasive.

The movie first screened in Sherman Oaks, in the San Fernando Valley. Most viewers liked it, but many were confused. "I get the same things back on every picture I've ever done," Gilroy said. "It's something about the way I write." The studio, anticipating the response, had asked Gilroy to film a scene that could be a more conventional, chronological opener—the party in Dubai, where Ray and Claire meet before sleeping together. "The studio made us shoot it," Gilroy said. At the second Sherman Oaks screening, the film began in Dubai. Gilroy says that he is happy about the change. He recalls the first time he watched the reordered sequence: "We dropped it in and we went, 'Wow!' It did all these unintended positive things." The reception of the revised "Duplicity" was stronger. "Our numbers went way up," he said.

Tony Gilroy is fifty-two years old, six feet one, and handsome—Tony of the easy smile. His father is Frank D. Gilroy, who won the 1965 Pulitzer Prize for his play "The Subject Was Roses." Tony has two younger brothers, who are twins: John, the film editor, and Dan, a screenwriter in Los Angeles. Frank Gilroy wrote a lot of scripts—some for studios, some for television networks, and some on his own—but he did not want his boys to go into the film business. He and his wife, Ruth, raised their sons far from Hollywood, in Orange County, New York. His home town, Washingtonville, was a popular community for the families of cops and firemen who worked in New York City. Frank Gilroy was home, unless he was working on a project in Hollywood. When Tony was a teen-ager, he told friends of his father's that he was being raised with "a luxurious sense of insecurity." "We'd go to Europe for the summer and then come back and work a plumbing job," he recalls.

The milieu of Washingtonville High School in the early seventies favored drugs and fighting at the expense of academics. Gilroy was intellectually curious but unfocussed. "I don't remember writing anything until I wrote my college application," he says. In 1973, he enrolled at Boston University but dropped out after two years to play guitar in local Boston bands; later, he wrote songs. For a time, he sold gray-market copier ink to pay the rent. He was talented at the work, and says that it was good training for Hollywood.

In the late seventies, he began to write fiction. He moved back into his parents' home in Washingtonville to save money and worked on short stories. Minimalist writers like Raymond Carver appealed to him, as did Robert Stone and James T. Farrell. "I was really into sentences and really into punctuation and really into rhythm, and really into compression," he remembers. He loved writers who relied on dialogue—modified tough-guy talk—to move their stories forward. "Farrell is eighty per cent dialogue," Gilroy says.

In the early eighties, Gilroy began a "rock-and-roll novel." To make money, he tended bar in various West Side restaurants, including O'Neals', on Forty-third Street. His brother John worked at the bistro Un Deux Trois, a block away. Frank Gilroy remembers, "I used to be able to go into New York and have a drink or two at Johnny's bar, then go through a parking lot and have a drink or two with Tony." He thought that Tony's writing was getting better and better. "He was getting inside the castle walls," he says.

But Tony was not finding the world of fiction very welcoming. His work sat awkwardly between the literary and the commercial worlds. "I had an open door for further rejection at a multitude of places," he says. His father had used screenwriting to support his work in the theatre; Tony decided to do the same for his fiction. "I said, 'I'll write some screenplays and make a bunch of money and I'll finish the novel and be a famous novelist.'" Soon he was selling original screenplays. One of the first to register with producers was "R.S.V.P.," written in 1985-86, a comedy about a couple who, as a joke, invite the President to their wedding and find that he accepts. In 1987 came "Tempted," a high-concept comedy about a man who steals money from the bank where he works and then tries to put it back. Gilroy found screenwriting easy: "I knew where the scenes were. I knew when to get in and out. All of a sudden, I had perfect pitch." He was by now "making a good living," though he was frustrated that none of his screenplays were actually filmed.

In 1992, M-G-M released the first movie from a Gilroy screenplay, "The Cutting Edge," a romantic comedy about a spoiled figure skater and a crude former hockey star. "'Taming of the Shrew' on ice," Gilroy calls it. The movie is an affable cliché, but Gilroy was happy to receive a writing credit. He remembers thinking, "I'm going to be the last writer on this project even if it kills me."

Gilroy bounces between two ideas of what it is to be a screenwriter: technician and artist. On one level, he is a regular guy, a union man with a job to do, just like the cops and firemen whose kids he grew up with in Washingtonville. "I hate that Paddy Chayefsky idea of a script—that it is cut in granite," he says. "Someone who directs a movie word for word—they're an idiot." And: "The most makeable screenplay idea is to write a hero part for a guy between thirty and fifty"—a pause for effect—"with a gun." He has long worked as a script doctor, and he speaks of such projects bluntly. He says, "If I come in and, say, you're going to give me the weekly"—he gets as much as two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—"I'm basically promising you that I'm going to be able to get it done. I have made a temple out of that."

In "Prater Violet," Christopher Isherwood's novel about Hollywood, a studio hire helping to write a movie says, "They torture us, and we have nothing to confess." This is part of Gilroy's self-image and part of what makes him good. But he is also a writer with ambition, and believes that his job is to create characters who are plausible, interesting, and even revelatory. "What you are really, really desperate for is for life to get out," he says. Not every movie provides this possibility. "The thing is a lot of Tony's anecdotes end with 'And then I quit,'" the screenwriter David Koepp, a friend, says. "We call him Tony (Fuck You) Gilroy," Taylor Hackford says. "He wants to do it his own way."

In 1993, William Goldman, a longtime family friend, proposed Gilroy for the job of adapting "Dolores Claiborne," the Stephen King novel, for Castle Rock. Gilroy liked the character of Claiborne, a woman suspected of murdering her husband on a small island off Maine. She had an unusual voice and a toughness that appealed to him. The problem with the story, he realized, was that "she confesses to the crime at the outset. The mystery was: Is this a reliable narrator? And that doesn't seem intrinsically very dramatic to me onscreen." Gilroy made "Claiborne" a movie by foregrounding Dolores's daughter, Selena, who was sexually abused as a child. She is a secondary figure in King's book; Gilroy made her an equal protagonist. Dolores's attack on her husband and Selena's emotional hurt are thus given the same weight—they are mutual survivors—and how they deal with their past in the present becomes the focus of the picture. This trick even impressed King, who wrote to Castle Rock to say that he wished he'd thought of it.

Taylor Hackford, who directed Gilroy's script, wanted him for his next movie, "The Devil's Advocate," starring Al Pacino as John Milton, the head of a Manhattan law firm who happens to be Beelzebub. He showed Gilroy the script. "This just sucks," Gilroy told Hackford. "It was very soapy, Satanism meets 'Dynasty,'" he remembers. Hackford pressed Gilroy, and, reluctantly, he agreed to join Hackford in Los Angeles to work for a week for free, on the condition that if he backed out of the project they would remain friends. He took a copy of "The Portable Nietzsche" and C. S. Lewis's "The Screwtape Letters," and spent the flight to L.A. thinking about how to dramatize evil.

Gilroy writes in spurts. "Dolores Claiborne" and "Duplicity" were each written in about twelve weeks. "He feels fucked up and blocked and crazy for a long time," Schiff says. "He tortures himself. Then, as it's coalescing, he sits down to outline, and when he's outlining he insists on doing it very, very fast—the

MARISA
ACOCELLA
MARCHETTO

"They finally found my lost luggage from 1972."

whole movie he sketches out in, like, four days. I'm sure that during those four days his wife doesn't see him and no one talks to him. And the reason he does that, he says, is it's a movie and it has to move fast. 'I have to write fast. I have to think fast. My fingers have to move fast.' " Back in New York, Gilroy rewrote "The Devil's Advocate," and came up with one of the more famous rants in recent movies. "God," John Milton says, "is an absentee landlord! Worship that? Never!" He goes on, "Who in their right mind . . . could possibly deny the twentieth century was entirely mine? All of it . . . all of it mine. I'm peaking. . . . It's my time now." In the draft that Gilroy inherited, the ambitious young lawyer played by Keanu Reeves—whose seduction by New York is the film's main story—was Milton's employee. Gilroy made him the Devil's son. The paternity "makes it very manifest," Gilroy explains. " 'I'm the other side of you that says, "If you want that, you can have that." ' That means I could write it and believe in it." And the movie ends with a terrific reversal that even the most jaded viewer would not anticipate.

"The Devil's Advocate" was a hit, earning Gilroy a reputation as a guy who could fix broken scripts. The "Bourne" movies confirmed that reputation. Robert Ludlum published "The Bourne Identity" in 1980. His Jason Bourne was a former career foreign-service officer targeted by the C.I.A. for assassination. (Carlos the Jackal, for some reason, also wanted him dead.) In the spring of 2000, when Doug Liman—the director of two indie hits, "Swingers" and "Go"—asked Gilroy if he would rewrite a screenplay based on Ludlum's book, Gilroy was not enthusiastic. "Those works were never meant to be filmed," he says. "They weren't about human behavior. They were about running to airports." In general, he finds the dialogue in thriller novels deficient; it often makes him laugh. "The filter that readers put on to read a certain kind of fiction is very forgiving," he says. Liman persuaded him to look at the screenplay, and Gilroy found it awful. "It was a huge, you know, fifteen-gunmen-on-the-Metro-blowing-the-fuck-out-of-everything kind of movie," he says. Liman pushed for a meeting anyway. They got together at Bubby's, a coffee shop in Tribeca. Gilroy asked Liman why he wanted to make "this absolute piece of shit," and said to count him out. Liman asked him for his ideas. Gilroy gave him one: Throw the novel out and just take the idea of an assassin with amnesia. Fill him with both doubt and an amazing set of lethal skills. Then what was interesting was how he was both like the rest of us and different from us. "If you woke up, and you didn't know who you were," Gilroy later told Liman, "you only have one way to find out, which is, like, the things you can do. What language do you speak? Do I know how to lay bricks? What do I know how to do? I guess your movie should be about a guy who finds the only thing he knows how to do is kill people."

By the time Gilroy got to his office, Liman and the executives on the movie had left him a dozen messages. He agreed to work on the film. As he put it in a letter to Matt Damon, who played Bourne, the DNA of the movie was "action with intimacy. Emotional credibility. Exotic locations treated in a completely nonglamorous way. Molecularly real people thrust into a heightened realm." He characterized Bourne's thoughts: "Who am I? If I'm a bad person, do I have to stay that way? Can I stay alive long enough to work it out?"

"The Bourne Identity" was a character-driven movie that young audiences would actually sit through: it made more than two hundred million dollars worldwide. The script was admired by other screenwriters. (Rob Kamen, a friend of Gilroy's, remembers, "I would just sit there and hate him because he was so good.") Gilroy is proud of the film, except for the parts he did not manage to rewrite. "Anything that's from the book is in the first five minutes, in which Bourne, inexplicably, has got microfilm in his ass. Why? I don't know! After that, when he steps off the boat, everything else is mine."

Gilroy did not like working with Liman, who constantly reshot scenes. "He didn't have any sense of story, or cause and effect," he says. As quickly as he would write a reversal, Liman would undo it, which angered him. "My scripts are very, very difficult to fuck with," he says. Liman, for his part, found Gilroy "arrogant." He remembers a fight with Gilroy early in the preproduction process: "I was telling Tony, I'm going to spend the next two years of my life on the movie . . . and

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PORTFOLIO BY MAX VADUKUL

BARING ARMS

When the history of this White House and its East Wing occupant comes to be written, it will be impossible to ignore the role played by fashion. Because of Michelle Obama's affection for independent designers with their own eccentric vision, and her willingness to go sleeveless in the most tradition-bound environments, her legacy may well be to show women how to move gracefully from the insecurities of youth into a sophisticated and stylish maturity. She will have proved, once and for all, that a woman can grow older without looking old.

There will also be a special footnote regarding her arms. They are not outlandishly sinewy Madonnaesque limbs. Obama's athletic arms are achievable—in between the kids' soccer practice, the executive suite, and the grocery store. Those arms represent personal time. They are evidence of a forty-five-year-old woman's refusal to give up every free moment in service to husband, kids, and all the nagging distractions that could have filled her days and left her tuning in to "Oprah," trying to figure out how she'd lost herself along the way. The arms imply vanity and power: two things that make many women uncomfortable and yet are fundamental to self-confidence.

Obama has chosen to wear dresses by the designers Thakoon Panichgul and Jason Wu (right) that show off her arms and defy the constricting traditions of the modern First Lady.

"Women should break out of molds that in some cases they've created," Panichgul says. "Mrs. Obama doesn't want to play by those rules."

Michelle Obama reminds women that they can make a place for vanity in their lives, and that, when they do, a little fashion can be supremely empowering.

—Robin Givhan

789 4'x8'

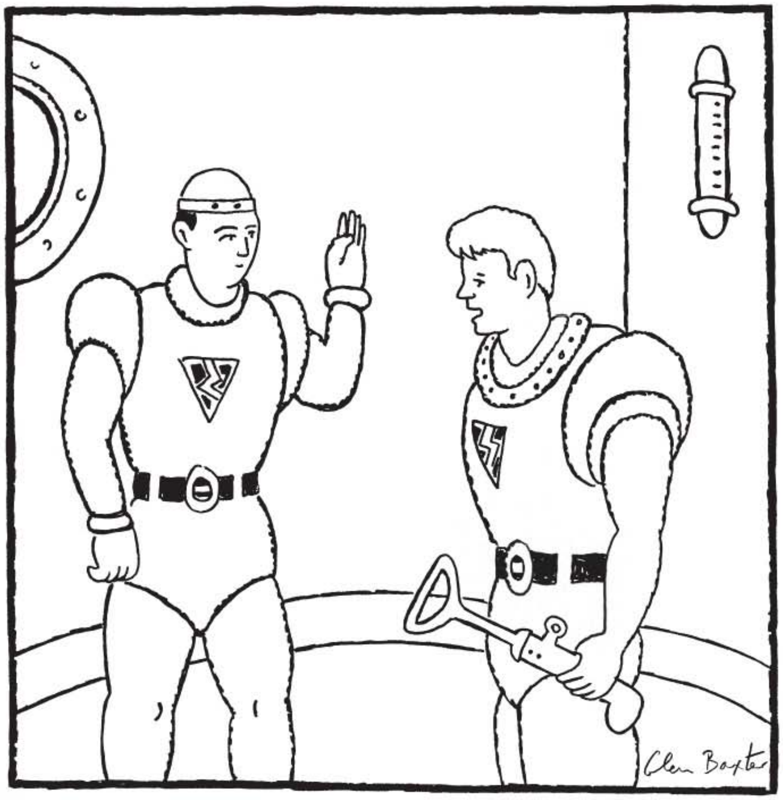
Tony's saying to me he showed the script to his friend Billy Goldman, and Billy Goldman said it was perfect, and he didn't want to change a word." At one point, Liman hired a new screenwriter; Matt Damon threatened to walk off the movie if Gilroy's script wasn't used.

For the next "Bourne," Universal invited back Damon and Gilroy but looked for a new director. The studio offered the writer three million dollars if he wrote a script good enough to be filmed. Gilroy agreed, on the condition that the second "Bourne" not be a repeat of the first. He asked himself what was wrong with "The Bourne Identity," and decided that Damon's character had got off too easy; he was a murderer, if a reluctant one, and he had to suffer for his crimes. Gilroy's new script took Bourne on a voyage to Russia to apologize to a girl whom he had orphaned. Years before, the C.I.A. had sent Bourne on a training mission. His target was a Russian politician, but his wife was in the room when Bourne arrived, and he killed them both. Afterward, he covered up the double murder as a murder-suicide. Bourne's apology to the girl would have to be deep—a true repentance. This time, Bourne would earn the affection that the audience felt for him. As he was working to get his past back, he would give the girl her past back. "I think that movie could have been 'The Searchers' of action films," Gilroy says.

The studio, with Gilroy's help, hired a new director, Paul Greengrass, who had made "Bloody Sunday," about the 1972 British massacre of Irish protestors in Derry. Greengrass's aesthetic was cinéma vérité, his trademark a constantly moving handheld camera. Greengrass made the "Bourne" sequel a visually innovative picture, one in which dialogue was scant and motivation gave way to momentum. The *Times* praised the look, the speed, and the sheen of the film, calling a chase sequence "one of the three or four most exciting demolition derbies ever filmed." There was no mention of Bourne's atonement. Gilroy is still angry about it. "It was sort of like a crime against the gods of storytelling," he says.

In 2005, the studio used another large check to persuade Gilroy to write the third "Bourne" movie. One of the conditions of his taking the money was that he would not have to speak with Greengrass. Gilroy wrote a draft of the script, and then left the project. Then Greengrass passed the script on to four other writers, among them Tom Stoppard. Frank Marshall, one of the series' producers, says that "The Bourne Ultimatum" is, at its core, still Gilroy's story. Its worldwide gross was four hundred and forty million dollars. Gilroy never saw it.

By the late nineties, Gilroy knew that he wanted to direct his own script. He wrote "Michael Clayton," which drew on his childhood in Washingtonville, and on themes he cared deeply about: morality, corruption, marginality. He saw the consequences of selling it for someone else to film: "I could wake up in five years and be sitting across from some production person, taking notes, and no one would be able to save me from that." His friends weren't surprised that he was thinking of directing. David Koepp says, "If it's a screenwriter with strong opinions, which certainly describes Tony, it's likely." Gilroy took his pitch to Castle Rock: "I want to do a movie about a lawyer who's a fixer, and it'll be in New York, and there won't be any courtrooms and someone will die and it will have a good starring part, and I want to direct it." Despite Gilroy's reputation as a writer, he could not get the backing to film "Clayton." He recalls, "No one wanted to work with a first-time director. . . . But what actor who's that kind of actor doesn't look at 'The Verdict' at three in the morning and say, 'Fuck, I'd love to play a part like that. How do I get that part?'" It took him more than five years of meetings and a change of agents—from International Creative Management to Creative Artists Agency—before George Clooney, also a C.A.A. client, committed to the title role. Clooney waived his usual fee; in return, he became one of the owners of the film. For Gilroy, it was worth it.



"I HADN'T REALIZED THE FUTURE WOULD BE SO SARTORIALLY DISASTROUS."

Here, at last, was a chance to make a movie unencumbered by the intervention of the directors and studios that had "whimmed to death" his other work.

"Clayton" is layered with reversals, some so subtle that you may not notice them. In one of the first scenes, the camera notes that Clayton's car has a malfunctioning G.P.S. unit. You think, Good set design—those things never work. But the scene runs a second time, toward the end of the movie, in its proper chronological place, and this time you realize that the reason the G.P.S. unit is broken is that someone opened up the device and spliced a bomb into it. Similarly, there is a quick shot early in the movie of Tilda Swinton having a panic attack in a ladies' room. She is sweating, practically hyperventilating. In her next scene, she has stepped out for an interview with the company's in-house camera crew. The juxtaposition leaves the viewer a bit mystified: She sure is nervous. But a careful observer might notice that Swinton wears a different outfit in each scene, and that the pink blouse from the first scene matches one she wears an hour and a half later in the movie, at a moment when she has just ordered a second murder. Now you understand her anxiety.

Gilroy's favorite scene is a delicate exchange between Swinton, who plays the attorney Karen Crowder, and Robert Prescott, an assassin named Mr. Verne, in which she may or may not be authorizing him to kill someone:

VERNE: We have some good ideas. You say move, we move. The ideas don't look so good we back off, reassess.
CROWDER: O.K.
VERNE: Is that O.K. "you understand"? Or O.K. "proceed"?

The answer is in Swinton's face—an analogue to the look that Claire throws over her shoulder in "Duplicity." In an e-mail, Swinton told me, "Tony places at the centre of a scene an unsaid—maybe unsayable—thing and then sets his characters dancing around it: some beating a path towards it, others flashing up decoys of distraction."

In "Clayton," Gilroy nailed the character that he had been chasing, with variations, for so many years—an updated version of the role Humphrey Bogart used to play, the idealistic burnout with one last fight in him. It also provided a gloss on Gilroy's own career: in the film business, who is the fixer—skilled at his work, necessary for his industry, and underappreciated, even resented, by the people who depend on him—if not the screenwriter?

In late May, the cast and crew of "Duplicity" were in a ballroom at the St. Regis Hotel in Rome, preparing to shoot another key scene in the movie. Gilroy, from his days as a script doctor, is used to rewriting scenes on the fly. He was still trying to fine-tune the relationship between Ray and Claire, the balance between passion and competition, professional admiration and mistrust. By now, the audience has heard their key exchange several times. They might not be sure who is gaming whom, but it is increasingly clear that they mean something to each other.

To shoot the scene, the lighting crew lit the ballroom beyond its norm, highlighting the hotel's nicked paint and faded curtains. Roberts and Owen sat down in overstuffed armchairs. A single camera would begin close in, and then pull away slowly. Gilroy wanted a lengthy shot, one in which the audience would have a lot of time to examine the two actors' faces and bodies for clues. There would be no second camera, meaning that, when Gilroy set to work in the Brill Building, there would be no alternative angles to choose from.

The assistant director called, "Lock it up!" Gilroy said, "Lights, camera. Action."

Roberts asked, "Does action mean talking? I'm new around here."

Gilroy said it meant action.

CLAIRE: It's really that bad, isn't it?
RAY: Kind of. Yeah.

Gilroy interrupted. He reminded the actors that they were no longer facing off. "There should be no hostility," Gilroy explained to me. They had suffered a reversal, and the effect, for now at least, was to bring them closer together. A second take: Roberts and Owen leaned toward each other as they spoke. They took each other's hands.

CLAIRE: I can't breathe.
RAY: You'll be O.K.
CLAIRE: When?
RAY: After we wake up in Rome.
CLAIRE: We might have to wake up in Rome for a long time. . . .
RAY: That sounds like a plan.

"Cut," Gilroy said. He still didn't like it. The actors tried the scene different ways. Gilroy changed Ray's line to "Sounds like a plan." After each take, the camera, the lighting, and the sound had to be fixed. The hours dragged on.

At midnight, the crew broke for a meal, and Gilroy joined them. He gets along well with technical crews. A grip distributed homemade mozzarella as Gilroy mulled. "We don't want to tee the ball up," he said. Upon returning to the ballroom, Gilroy offered a variant line. The actors tried it:

CLAIRE: We might have to wake up in Rome for a long time.
RAY: Plan on it.

The line still felt too much like a zinger. Owen looked like he'd rather be saying something else; Roberts looked like she'd rather hear something else. The techies looked pained. Gilroy quietly gave the actors notes. "Action," he said.

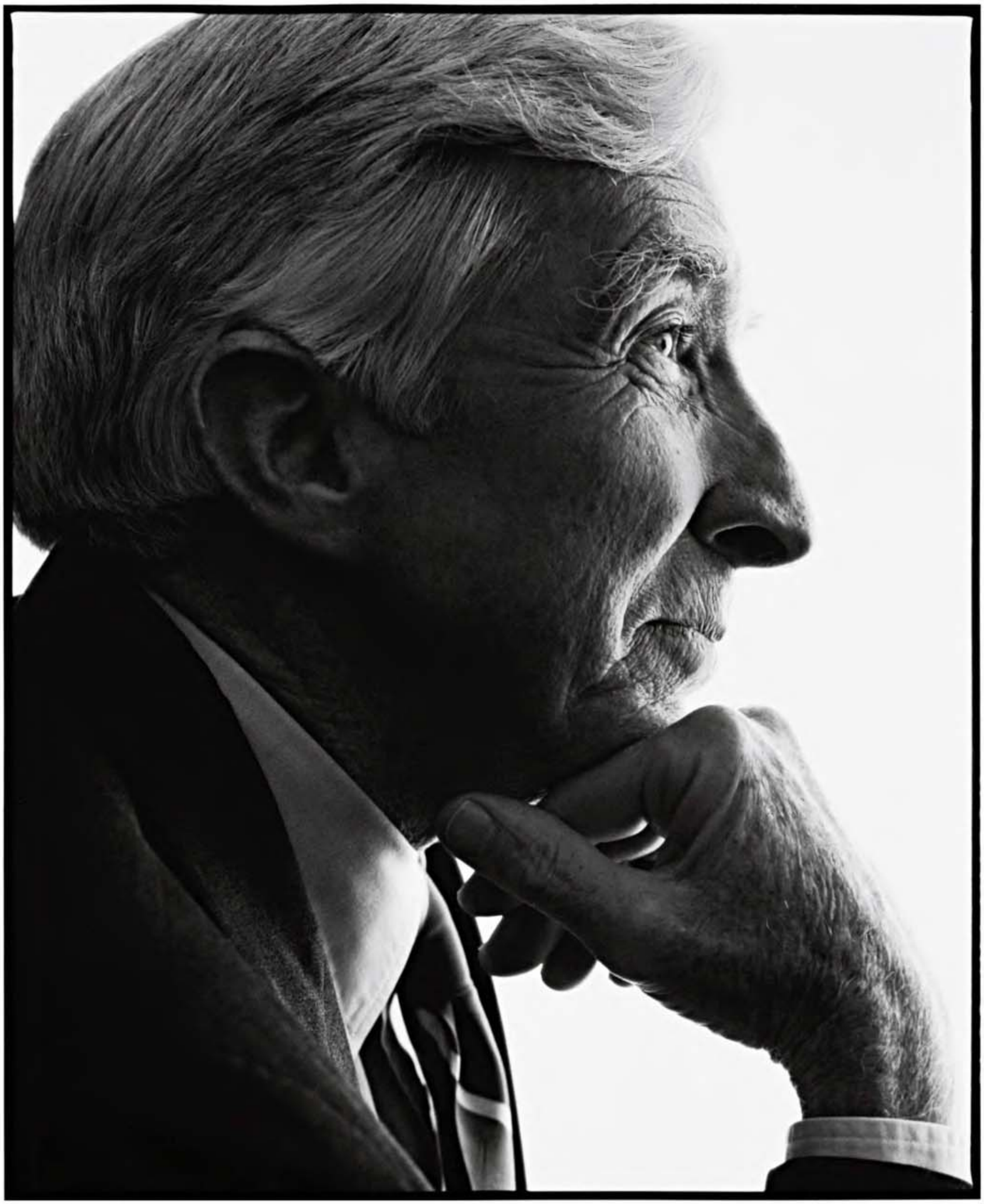
CLAIRE: I can't breathe.
RAY: You'll be O.K.
CLAIRE: When?
RAY: After we wake up in Rome.
CLAIRE: We might have to wake up in Rome for a long time.
RAY: That's the plan.

The flatness of the line worked against Owen's British accent, eliminating the whiff of effortful wit. The more serious tone suggested that running a "triple game" had been difficult for Ray; it humanized him. He was no longer just a man with a good suit and an easy smile. The actors had given the scene a useful tentativeness: the sexual bond between Ray and Claire was clear, but now something deeper was at stake. At the same time, the underlined intimacy of the scene—the silence around the dialogue, the sustained shot—would make the viewer suspicious. Hadn't we fallen for this sort of thing many times before? Was a new trick coming? This was a movie about acting, after all. The camera slowly pulled back, all the way out of the room, teasing the audience.

"Cut. Star it!" Gilroy said. ♦

POEMS BY JOHN UPDIKE

ENDPOINT



MICHAEL O'NEILL/CORBIS OUTLINE

SPIRIT OF '76

Cypresses have one direction, up,
but sometimes desert zephyrs tousle one
so that a branch or two will stick straight out—
a hatchling fallen from the nest,
a broken leg a limp will not forget,
a lock of cowlicked hair that spurns the comb.
Aspiring like steeples inky green,
they spear the sun-bleached view with nodding tips.

How not to think of death? Its ghastly blank
lies underneath your dreams, that once gave rise
to horn-hard, conscienceless erections.
Just so, your waking brain no longer stiffens
with careless inspirations—urgent news
spilled in clenched spasms on the virgin sheets.

Here in this place of arid clarity,
two thousand miles from where my souvenirs
collect a cozy dust, the piled produce
of bald ambition pulling ignorance,
I see clear through to the ultimate page,
the silence I dared break for my small time.
No piece was easy, but each fell finished,
in its shroud of print, into a book-shaped hole.

Be with me, words, a little longer; you
have given me my quitclaim in the sun,
sealed shut my adolescent wounds, made light
of grownup troubles, turned to my advantage
what in most lives would be pure deficit,
and formed, of those I loved, more solid ghosts.

Our annual birthday do: dinner at
the Arizona Inn for only two.
White tablecloth, much cutlery, décor
in sombre dark-beamed territorial style.
No wine, thank you. Determined to prolong
our second marriages, we gave that up,
with cigarettes. We toast each other's health
in water and a haze of candlelight.

My imitation of a proper man,
white-haired and wed to aging loveliness,
has fit me like a store-bought suit, not quite
my skin, but wearing well enough until,
at ceremony's end, my wife points out
I don't know how to use a finger bowl.

A LIGHTENED LIFE

Beverly Farms, April 14, 2008

A lightened life: last novel proofs FedExed—
the final go-through, back-and-forthing till
all adjectives seemed wrong, inferior to
an almost glimpsed unreal alternative
spoken perhaps on Mars—and taxes, state
and federal, mailed. They were much more this year,
thanks to the last novel's mild success,
wry fruit of terror-fear and author's tours.

Checks mailed, I stopped for gas, and plumb forgot
how to release the gas-cap door. True,
I'd been driving a rented car for weeks. But, too,
this morning I couldn't do the computer code
for the *accent grave* in *fin-de-siècle*, one
of my favorite words. What's up? What's left of me?

EUONYMUS

November 2, 2008

My window tells me the euonymus
arrives now at the last and deepest shade
of red, before its leaves let go. One of
my grandsons leaves a phone message for me;
his voice has deepened. A cold that wouldn't let go
is now a cloud upon my chest X-ray:
pneumonia. My house is now a cage
I prowl, window to window, as I wait

for time to take away the cloud within.
The rusty autumn gold is glorious.
Blue jays and a small gray bird, white-chested,
decline to join the seasonal escape
and flit on bushes below. Is this an end?
I hang, half-healthy, here, and wait to see.

OBLONG GHOSTS

November 6, 2008

A wakeup call? It seems that death has found
the portals it will enter by: my lungs,
pathetic oblong ghosts, one paler than
the other on the doctor's viewing screen.
Looking up "pneumonia," I learn
it can, like an erratic dog, turn mean
and snap life short for someone under two
or "very old (over 75)."

Meanwhile, our President Obama waits
downstairs to be unwrapped and I, a child
transposed toward Christmas Day in Shillington—
air soft and bright, a touch of snow outside—
pause here, one hand upon the bannister,
and breathe the scent of fresh-cut evergreens.

HOSPITAL

Mass. General, Boston, November 23-27, 2008

Benign big blond machine beyond all price,
it swallows us up and slowly spits us out
half-deafened and our blood still dyed: all this
to mask the simple dismal fact that we
decay and find our term of life is fixed.
This giant governance, a mammoth toy,
distracts us for the daytime, but the night
brings back the quiet, and the solemn dark.

God save us from ever ending, though billions have.
The world is blanketed by foregone deaths,
small beads of ego, bright with appetite,
whose pin-sized prick of light winked out,
bequeathing Earth a jagged coral shelf
unseen beneath the black unheeding waves.

My visitors, my kin. I fall into
the conversational mode, matching it
to each old child, as if we share a joke
(of course we do, the dizzy depths of years),
and each grandchild, politely quizzing them
on their events and prospects, all the while
suppressing, like an acid reflux, the lack
of prospect black and bilious for me.

Must I do this, uphold the social lie
that binds us all together in blind faith
that nothing ends, not youth nor age nor strength,
as in a motion picture which, once seen,
can be rebought on DVD? My tongue
says yes; within, I lamely drown.

I think of those I loved and saw to die:
my Grampop in his nightshirt on the floor;
my first wife's mother, unable to take a bite
of Easter dinner, smiling with regret;
my mother in her blue knit cap, alone
on eighty acres, stuck with forty cats,
too weak to walk out to collect the mail,
waving brave goodbye from her wind-chimed porch.

And friends, both male and female, on the phone,
their voices dry and firm, their ends in sight.
My old piano teacher joking, of her latest
diagnosis, "Curtains." I brushed them off,
these valorous, in my unseemly haste
of greedy living, and now must learn from them.

Endpoint, I thought, would end a chapter in
a book beyond imagining, that got reset
in crisp exotic type a future I
—a miracle!—could read. My hope was vague
but kept me going, amiable and swift.
A clergyman—those comical purveyors
of what makes sense to just the terrified—
has phoned me, and I loved him, bless his hide.

My wife of thirty years is on the phone.
I get a busy signal, and I know
she's in her grief and needs to organize
consulting friends. But me, I need her voice;
her body is the only locus where
my desolation bumps against its end.

THE CITY OUTSIDE

December 11, 2008

Stirs early: ambulances pull in far
below, unloading steadily their own
emergencies, and stray pedestrians
cross nameless streets. Traffic picks up at dawn,
and lights in the skyscrapers dim.
The map of Beacon Hill becomes 3-D,
a crust of brick and granite, the State House dome
a golden bubble single as the sun.

I lived in Boston once, a year or two,
in furtive semi-bachelorhood. I parked
a Karmann Ghia in Back Bay's shady spots
but I was lighter then, and lived as if
within forever. Now I've turned so heavy
I sink through twenty floors to hit the street.

I had a fear of falling: airplanes
spilling their spinning contents like black beans;
the parapets at Rockefeller Center or
the Guggenheim proving too low and sucking
me down with impalpable winds of dread;
engorging atria in swank hotels,
the piano player miles below his music,
his instrument no bigger than a footprint.

I'm safe! Away with travel and abrupt
perspectives! Terra firma is my ground,
my refuge, and my certain destination.
My terrors—the flight through dazzling air, with
the blinding smash, the final black—will be
achieved from thirty inches, on a bed.

Strontium 90—is that a so-called
heavy element? I've been injected,
and yet the same light imbecilic stuff—
the babble on TV, newspaper fluff,
the drone of magazines, banality's
kind banter—plows ahead, admixed
with world collapse, atrocities, default,
and fraud. Get off, get off the rotten world!

The sky is turning that pellucid blue
seen in enamel behind a girlish Virgin—
the doeskin lids downcast, the smile demure.
Indigo cloud-shreds dot a band of tan;
the Hancock Tower bares a slice of night.
So whence the world's beauty? Was I deceived?

PEGGY LUTZ, FRED MUTH

December 13, 2008

They've been in my fiction; both now dead,
Peggy just recently, long stricken (like
my Grandma) with Parkinson's disease.
But what a peppy knockout Peggy was!—
cheerleader, hockey star, May Queen, RN.
Pigtailed in kindergarten, she caught my mother's
eye, but she was too much girl for me.
Fred—so bright, so quietly wry—*his*

mother's eye fell on me, a "nicer" boy
than her son's pet pals. Fred's slight wild streak
was tamed by diabetes. At the end,
it took his toes and feet. Last time we met,
his walk rolled wildly, fetching my coat. With health
he might have soared. As was, he taught me smarts.

Dear friends of childhood, classmates, thank you,
scant hundred of you, for providing a
sufficiency of human types: beauty,
bully, hanger-on, natural,
twin, and fatso—all a writer needs,
all there in Shillington, its trolley cars
and little factories, cornfields and trees,
leaf fires, snowflakes, pumpkins, valentines.

To think of you brings tears less caustic
than those the thought of death brings. Perhaps
we meet our heaven at the start and not
the end of life. Even then were tears
and fear and struggle, but the town itself
draped in plain glory the passing days.

The town forgave me for existing; it
included me in Christmas carols, songfests
(though I sang poorly) at the Shillington,
the local movie house. My father stood,
in back, too restless to sit, but everybody
knew his name, and mine. In turn I knew
my Granddad in the overalled town crew.
I've written these before, these modest facts,

but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.
The fragments in their jiggled scope collide
to form more sacred windows. I had to move
to beautiful New England—its triple
deckers, whited churches, unplowed streets—
to learn how drear and deadly life can be.

NEEDLE BIOPSY

December 22, 2008

All praise be Valium in Jesus' name:
a CAT-scan needle biopsy sent me
up a happy cul-de-sac, a detour not
detached from consciousness but sweetly part—
I heard machines and experts murmuring about me—
a dulcet tube in which I lay secure and warm
and thought creative thoughts, intensely so,
as in my fading prime. Plans flowered, dreams.

All would be well, I felt, all manner of thing.
The needle, carefully worked, was in me, beyond pain,
aimed at an adrenal gland. I had not hoped
to find, in this bright place, so solvent a peace.
Days later, the results came casually through:
the gland, biopsied, showed metastasis.

CREEPER

With what stoic delicacy does
Virginia creeper let go:
the feeblest tug brings down
a sheaf of leaves kite-high,
as if to say, *To live is good*
but not to live—to be pulled down
with scarce a ripping sound,
still flourishing, still
stretching toward the sun—
is good also, all photosynthesis
abandoned, quite quits. Next spring
the hairy rootlets left unpulled
snake out a leafy afterlife
up that same smooth-barked oak.

FINE POINT

December 22, 2008

Why go to Sunday school, though surlily,
and not believe a bit of what was taught?
The desert shepherds in their scratchy robes
undoubtedly existed, and Israel's defeats—
the Temple in its sacredness destroyed
by Babylon and Rome. Yet Jews kept faith
and passed the prayers, the crabbed rites,
from table to table as Christians mocked.

We mocked, but took. The timbrel creed of praise
gives spirit to the daily; blood tinges lips.
The tongue reposes in papyrus pleas,
saying, *Surely*—magnificent, that "surely"—
goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, my life, forever.

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THE CRITICS

POP MUSIC

THE WINDS

Neko Case is the horn section.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

The title of Neko Case's new album, "Middle Cyclone," is a reference to "mesocyclone," the core rotational structure of a thunderstorm, which can produce a tornado. This was not my interpretation of the phrase, which I took as a commentary on age, and on how Case turned thirty-eight last year: hair flying, throat open, poorly secured items be damned. Case's work on "Middle Cyclone"—the best of her career by a generous margin, and every song her own except for two covers—addresses youth, aging, marriage, death, change, and all that knobby stuff you run over on the way to your midpoint.

Nature and violence are the forces at work in "Middle Cyclone." Mockingbirds sing, ants march, and the sky drops marbles on Case's characters. The Sistine Chapel is "painted with a Gatling gun," and the characters in "People Got a Lotta Nerve" are all types of trouble—one is a "man-eater," another eats "hearts of sharks." Case sums up this scenario—after a long pull on a cheap cigarette, one hopes—by singing, "It will end again in bullets, friend."

"Middle Cyclone" isn't an album that breaks apart the world with new sounds. It has the same feel as R.E.M.'s "Murmur," Meat Puppets' "Up on the Sun," or X's "Under the Big Black Sun," perfectly formed rock albums from the eighties that emerged from the nest of punk rock, steeped in a love of older music and newer sounds, with self-indulgences held in check by a quick pulse.

The wide-open spaces and narrow hopes of the characters in "Middle Cyclone" could come from any of the many stages of Case's life. Born in Virginia, Case spent most of her youth in and around Tacoma, Washington, leaving home at fifteen for Vancouver, where she played drums in punk-rock bands. She lived for five years in Tucson, and recently moved to Vermont, where she bought a farmhouse and a defunct post office, to use as a rehearsal space. She is an avid defender of animals (the song "I'm an Animal" is not all that metaphorical, apparently) and has lived much of her life in places where cars and guns usually go together, and fast. If you can't tell how far Case is throwing her voice as a writer, she gives you a big cue in "Vengeance Is Sleeping," when she sings, "I'm not the man you think I am."

Case began recording in the nineties, with a revolving band of musicians billed as Neko Case and Her Boyfriends. Their sound, as Case described it, was like "a bunch of kids trying to reproduce some sort of Owen Bradley magic." Case and her band took elements—pedal-steel guitar, loads of reverb on the voice—of the so-called "Nashville sound" that Bradley helped create for singers like Patsy Cline. At first, Case's take on country was engaging, mostly because of her voice, which Case herself describes as "breathing through a fire hose." "I've never really listened to my voice and gone, That is a quality instrument," she told me. "It's more like, O.K., that's good and fucking loud." She added, "I'm kind of the horn section of any band I'm in."

Without Case's voice, the Boyfriends records would have been fairly unremarkable country-rock albums. It is ironic that Case, of all people, would be so fond of reverb, an effect whose metallic curve can sometimes obscure a truly great voice but is a boon to modest singers. (The Jesus and Mary Chain would be a couple of links short without the reverb.) Case's tone has the glint and the bruised shading of well-handled brass, her pitch is merciless, and when the throttle is open her chest voice is more than a mere horn section: Case is an event, a force that sets off things around it.

One of the Vancouver groups that Case has worked with is the energetic pop-rock band the New Pornographers. The band's principal songwriters are A. C. Newman, who has a knack for twisting melodies which recalls that of Squeeze's Glenn Tilbrook, and the prolix Dan Bejar, who writes mainly for his band Destroyer. Case's role with the New Pornographers has been largely as a voice—she does not write with the band. But a song like Newman's "The Laws Have Changed," a magnificent and clever work from 2003 that implicitly likened the Bush family to ancient-Egyptian rulers, does not peak fully until Case enters, singing, in chorus with her own voice, "Introducing for the first time, Pharaoh on the microphone." You can't help cheering along with the royalty for three minutes.

As the New Pornographers grew in popularity, so did Case, who made her first full-length Boyfriendless record, "Blacklisted," in 2002; it was her last and best iteration of the countrified middle ground. The attraction to mid-century country music, especially when it goes a-waltzing, makes sense. Like Nashville ballads, Case's songs tend toward long, luxurious phrases that suit her voice. (By contrast, she cites "nimble" vocalists, like her backup singer

Nature and violence are the forces at work in "Middle Cyclone"—easily Case's best album. Photograph by Elinor Carucci.

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Kelly Hogan, as people with voices as precise as "coping saws." "They're like little mountain goats—they're just hopping up the cliffs," she said.)

Case's change in writing style began with "The Tigers Have Spoken" (2004), an album of songs recorded live. The material is mostly covers—several traditional numbers, Loretta Lynn's "Rated X," and "Loretta," by the obscure late-seventies Boston group Nervous Eaters—combined with four Case originals, including "Favorite." It's a waltz, a time signature that Case leans on a little heavily, and though the textures are country, the melodies have become longer, the chord changes a little stranger, and the themes more Case's own. (She hits a deer with her car, but only in a dream.)

The next release, "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood," from 2006, is in some ways the first Neko Case album. Country music is mostly perceptible in the reverb, now dialled back. Case's words are more like passages from novels than like country lyrics. "Girl with the parking-lot eyes, Margaret is the fragments of a name. Her bravery is mistaken for the thrashing in the lake of the make-believe monster whose picture was faked" are several lines from the languorous and stately "Margaret vs. Pauline," a song I hear as a description of the sisters from Marilynne Robinson's "Housekeeping." "Fox Confessor" was a relatively big success for an independent act, selling around two hundred thousand copies in this country. (It does not hurt that Case tours constantly. "Touring is the greatest thing in the world," she told me.) The mood of the album is intense but cool—a long, meditative, slightly bumpy hum.

"Middle Cyclone" may be the place Case has been driving to. Working with the New Pornographers has clearly affected her pacing, which has picked up. There's nothing as straight-ahead as, say, the punk-rock "Loretta," but Case has moved out of the Nashville ballroom. Another difference between this and her previous records is that she has a steady, full-time band now, and they woodshed the tunes before recording them. Case arranged the songs with the guitarist Paul Rigby, a trained jazz musician who, as she put it, "is really savvy about bizarre transitions or chords or how to shift from one time signature to another." The opening number, "This Tornado Loves You," moves steadily forward on Barry Mirochnick's train-track beat and a quickly echoing guitar that could be a quieter figure from a U2 album. Case fuses the personal and the natural instantly: "My love, I am the speed of sound. I left them motherless, fatherless, their souls dangling inside out from their mouths. But it's never enough—I want you." The singer carves with "bloody hides" and leaves "broken necks" in the ditch, clearing an area "sixty-five miles wide." There is no obvious tipoff—is this Case's heart or her countryside come to life?

There are dozens of moments of vocal delight here: Case soaring on the words "blue, blue baby" in "The Pharaohs"; blending her voice with Paul Rigby's rapid fingerpicking and the singing of Lucy Wainwright Roche and Kelly Hogan on "Vengeance Is Sleeping"; building steadily on "I'm an Animal," one of her best rock songs to date. It's almost certainly about sex, and if it's not it's certainly about something that has to happen soon.

When Case returns to her comfort zone—mid-tempo to slow—the music has a different feel, slightly wilder and heavier than before. "Prison Girls" could be a story about the assassin Anton Chigurh, from Cormac McCarthy's "No Country for Old Men": "Who am I tonight? My hotel room won't remember me." Or maybe this singer has been captured: "The prison girls are not impressed, the ones who have to clean this mess. They've traded more for cigarettes than I have managed to express." When Case and her backup singers join for a group chant of "oh, oh, oh," there is more than a hint of the chain gang amid all the reverb. But this outlaw doesn't return to guilt, or vengeance; the song's recurrent phrase is "I love your long shadows and your gunpowder eyes." And since we're switching among the human, animal, and physical worlds, it seems fair to say that shadows in "Middle Cyclone" remain even when the light moves. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Sasha Frere-Jones's pop-music blog.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

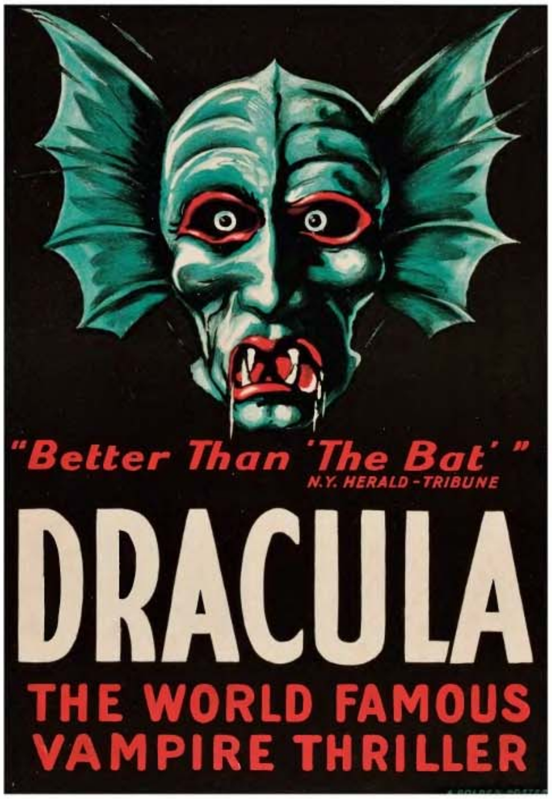
IN THE BLOOD

Why do vampires still thrill?

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

"Unclean, unclean!" Mina Harker screams, gathering her bloodied nightgown around her. In Chapter 21 of Bram Stoker's "Dracula," Mina's friend John Seward, a psychiatrist in Purfleet, near London, tells how he and a colleague, warned that Mina might be in danger, broke into her bedroom one night and found her kneeling on the edge of her bed. Bending over her was a tall figure, dressed in black. "His right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink." Mina's husband, Jonathan, hypnotized by the intruder, lay on the bed, unconscious, a few inches from the scene of his wife's violation.

Later, between sobs, Mina relates what happened. She was in bed with Jonathan when a strange mist crept into the room. Soon, it congealed into the figure of a man—Count Dracula. "With a mocking smile, he placed one hand upon my shoulder and, holding me tight, bared my throat with the other, saying as he did so: 'First, a little refreshment to reward my exertions . . .' And oh, my God, my God, pity me! He placed his reeking lips upon my throat!" The Count took a long drink. Then he drew back, and spoke sweet words to Mina. "Flesh of my flesh," he called her, "my bountiful wine-press." But now he wanted something else. He wanted her in his power from then on. A person who has had his—or, more often, her—blood repeatedly sucked by a vampire turns into a vampire, too, but the conversion can be accomplished more quickly if the victim also sucks the vampire's blood. And so, Mina says, "he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he . . . seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some of the—Oh, my God!" The unspeakable happened—she sucked his blood, at his breast—at which point her friends stormed into the room. Dracula vanished, and, Seward relates, Mina uttered "a scream so wild, so ear-piercing, so despairing . . . that it will ring in my ears to my dying day."

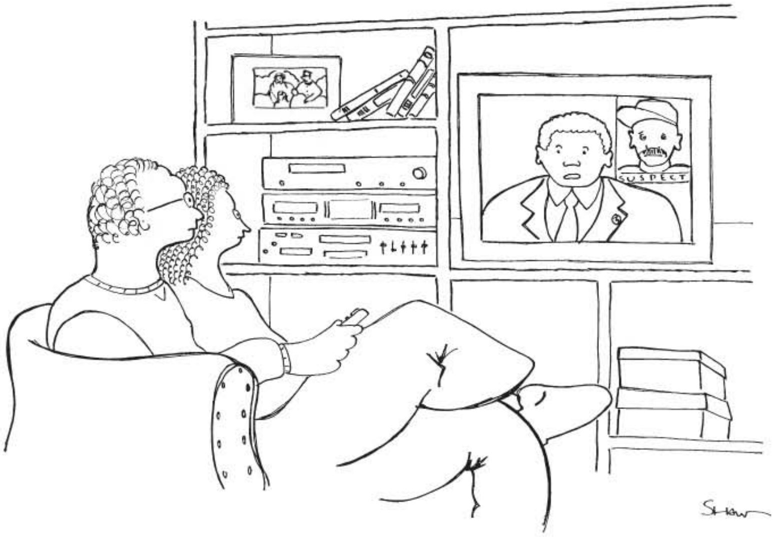


A 1928 advertisement for a play of Bram Stoker's story.

HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERIES

That scene, and Stoker's whole novel, is still ringing in our ears. Stoker did not invent vampires. If we define them, broadly, as the undead—spirits who rise, embodied, from their graves to torment the living—they have been part of human imagining since ancient times. Eventually, vampire superstition became concentrated in Eastern Europe. (It survives there today. In 2007, a Serbian named Miroslav Milosevic—no relation—drove a stake into the grave of Slobodan Milosevic.) It was presumably in Eastern Europe that people worked out what became the standard methods for eliminating a vampire: you drive a wooden stake through his heart, or cut off his head, or burn him—or, to be on the safe side, all three. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there were outbreaks of vampire hysteria in Western Europe; numerous stakings were reported in Germany. By 1734, the word "vampire" had entered the English language.

In those days, vampires were grotesque creatures. Often, they were pictured as bloated and purple-faced (from drinking blood); they had long talons and smelled terrible—a description probably based on the appearance of corpses whose tombs had been opened by worried villagers. These early undead did not necessarily draw blood. Often, they just did regular mischief—stole firewood, scared horses. (Sometimes, they helped with the housework.) Their origins, too, were often quaint. Matthew Beresford, in his recent book "From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth" (University of Chicago; $24.95), records a Serbian Gypsy belief that pumpkins, if kept for more than ten days, may cross over: "The gathered pumpkins stir all by themselves and make a sound like 'brrl, brrl, brrl!' and begin to shake themselves." Then they become vampires. This was not yet the suave, opera-cloaked fellow of our modern mythology. That figure emerged in the early



"The suspect was described as wearing totally pedestrian bluejeans, an indifferent gray sweatshirt, and a trucker's cap, without the slightest sense of irony."

nineteenth century, a child of the Romantic movement.

In the summer of 1816, Lord Byron, fleeing marital difficulties, was holed up in a villa on Lake Geneva. With him was his personal physician, John Polidori, and nearby, in another house, his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley; Shelley's mistress, Mary Godwin; and Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont, who was angling for Byron's attention (with reason: she was pregnant by him). The weather that summer was cold and rainy. The friends spent hours in Byron's drawing room, talking. One night, they read one another ghost stories, which were very popular at the time, and Byron suggested that they all write ghost stories of their own. Shelley and Clairmont produced nothing. Byron began a story and then laid it aside. But the remaining members of the summer party went to their desks and created the two most enduring figures of the modern horror genre. Mary Godwin, eighteen years old, began her novel "Frankenstein" (1818), and John Polidori, apparently following a sketch that Byron had written for his abandoned story, wrote "The Vampyre: A Tale" (1819). In Polidori's narrative, the undead villain is a proud, handsome aristocrat, fatal to women. (Some say that Polidori based the character on Byron.) He's interested only in virgins; he sucks their necks; they die; he lives. The modern vampire was born.

The public adored him. In England and France, Polidori's tale spawned popular plays, operas, and operettas. Vampire novels appeared, the most widely read being James Malcolm Rymer's "Varney the Vampire," serialized between 1845 and 1847. "Varney" was a penny dreadful, and faithful to the genre. ("Shriek followed shriek. . . . Her beautifully rounded limbs quivered with the agony of her soul. . . . He drags her head to the bed's edge.") After "Varney" came "Carmilla" (1872), by Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu, an Irish ghost-story writer. "Carmilla" was the mother of vampire bodice rippers. It also gave birth to the lesbian vampire story—in time, a plentiful subgenre. "Her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses," the female narrator writes, "and she would whisper, almost in sobs, 'You are mine, you *shall* be mine.' " "Varney" and "Carmilla" were low-end hits, but vampires penetrated high literature as well. Baudelaire wrote a poem, and Théophile Gautier a prose poem, on the subject.

Then came Bram (Abraham) Stoker. Stoker was a civil servant who fell in love with theatre in his native Dublin. In 1878, he moved to London to become the business manager of the Lyceum Theatre, owned by his idol, the actor Henry Irving. On the side, Stoker wrote thrillers, one about a curse-wielding mummy, one about a giant homicidal worm, and so on. Several of these books are in print, but they probably wouldn't be if it were not for the fame—and the afterlife—of Stoker's fourth novel, "Dracula" (1897). The first English Dracula play, by Hamilton Deane, opened in 1924 and was a sensation. The American production (1927), with a script revised by John L. Balderston and with Bela Lugosi in the title role, was even more popular. Ladies were carried, fainting, from the theatre. Meanwhile, the films had begun appearing: notably, F. W. Murnau's silent "Nosferatu" (1922), which many critics still consider the greatest of Dracula movies, and then Tod Browning's "Dracula" (1931), the first vampire talkie, with Lugosi navigating among the spiderwebs and intoning the famous words "I do not drink . . . wine." (That line was not in the book. It was written for Browning's movie.) Lugosi stamped the image of Dracula forever, and it stamped him. Thereafter, this ambitious Hungarian actor had a hard time getting non-monstrous roles. He spent many years as a drug addict. He was buried in his Dracula cloak.

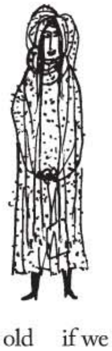
From that point to the present, there have been more than a hundred and fifty Dracula movies. Roman Polanski, Andy Warhol, Werner Herzog, and Francis Ford Coppola all made films about the Count. There are subgenres of Dracula movies: comedy, pornography, blaxploitation, anime. There is also a "Deafula," for the hearing-impaired: the characters conduct their business in American Sign Language while the lines are spoken in voice-over. After film, television, of course, took on vampires. "Dark Shadows," in the nineteen-sixties, and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," in the nineties, were both big hits. Meanwhile, the undead have had a long life in fiction. Anne Rice's "The Vampire Chronicles" and Stephen King's " 'Salem's Lot" are the best-known recent examples, but one source estimates that the undead have been featured in a thousand novels.

Today, enthusiasm for vampires seems to be at a new peak. Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" novels, for young adults (that is, teen-age girls), have sold forty-two million copies worldwide since 2005. The first of the film adaptations, released late last year, made a hundred and seventy-seven million dollars in its initial seven weeks. Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse novels ("Dead Until Dark," plus seven more), about a Louisiana barmaid's passion for a handsome revenant named Bill, were bought by six million people, and generated the HBO series "True Blood," which had its début last year and will be back in June. Also from last year was the haunting Swedish movie "Let the Right One In," in which a twelve-year-old boy, Oskar, falls in love with a mysterious girl, Eli, who has moved in next door. She, too, is twelve, she tells Oskar, but she has been twelve for a long time. A new Dracula novel, co-authored by the fragrantly named Dacre Stoker (a great-grandnephew of Bram), will be published in October by Dutton. The movie rights have already been sold.

The past half century has also seen a rise in vampire scholarship. In the nineteen-fifties, Freudian critics, addressing Stoker's novel, did what Freudians did at that time. Today's scholars, intent instead on politics—race, class, and gender—have feasted at the table. Representative essays, reprinted in a recent edition of "Dracula," include Christopher Craft's " 'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' " and Stephen D. Arata's "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization."

Other writers have produced fantastically detailed annotated editions of Stoker's "Dracula." The first of these, "The Annotated Dracula" (1975), by Leonard Wolf, a Transylvanian-born horror scholar, dealt, for example, with the scene of Dracula's assault on Mina by giving us the Biblical sources of "unclean, unclean" and "flesh of my flesh"; by cross-referencing "my bountiful wine-press" to an earlier passage, about Transylvanian viniculture; by noting, apropos of Dracula's opening a vein in his chest, that this recalls an old myth about the pelican feeding its young with blood from its bosom; by telling us that the vein Dracula slashed must have been the superficial intercostal; by exclaiming over the sexual ambiguity of the scene ("Just what *is* going on here? A vengeful cuckoldry? A *ménage à trois*? Mutual oral sexuality?"), and so on. None of this information is needed by the first- or second-time reader of "Dracula." Indeed, it would be a positive hindrance, draining away the suspense that Stoker worked so hard to build.

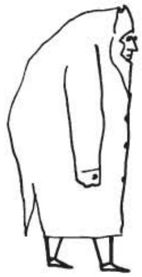
The fullness of Wolf's commentary did not discourage others. In 1979, a second annotated edition came out, and in 1998 a third. Last October, a fourth—"The New Annotated Dracula," by Leslie Klinger, a Los Angeles tax and estate lawyer who has a sideline editing Victorian literature—was published by Norton ($39.95). What could Klinger have found to elucidate that his predecessors didn't? Plenty. In the scene of Mina's encounter with Dracula, for example, he honorably cites the earlier editions, and then he goes on to alert us to a punctuation error; to conjecture, revoltingly, about the source of the mist in which Dracula enters Mina's bedroom ("Perhaps this was not a vapor but rather a milky substance expressed from Dracula's body"); to speculate that Jonathan Harker's excitement, upon awakening from his swoon, may be a form of sexual arousal; and to question the medical accuracy of Stoker's claim that Harker's hair turns white as he listens to Mina's story: "In fact, whitening is caused by a progressive decline in the absolute number of melanocytes (pigment-producing cells in the skin, hair, and eye), which normally decrease over time." Even that old sentimental convention does not get past him.



What is all this about? Why do publishers think that readers will care? One could say that "Dracula," like certain other works—"Alice in Wonderland," the Sherlock Holmes stories (both, like Klinger's "Dracula," published in Norton's Annotated Editions series; Klinger was the editor of the Holmes)—is a cult favorite. But why does the book have a cult? Well, cults often gather around powerful works of the second rank. Fans feel that they have to root for them. What, then, is the source of "Dracula" 's power? A simple device, used in many notable works of art: the deployment of great and volatile forces within a very tight structure.

The narrative method of "Dracula" is to assemble a collage of purportedly authentic documents, most of them in the first person. Many of the materials are identified as excerpts from the diaries of the main characters. In addition, there are letters to and from these people—but also from lawyers, carting companies, and Hungarian nuns—plus telegrams, "newspaper" clippings, and a ship's log. This multiplicity of voices gives the book a wonderful liveliness. A long horror story could easily become suffocating. (That is one of the reasons that Poe's tales are tales, not novels.) "Dracula," in a regular, unannotated edition, runs about four hundred pages, but it is seldom tedious. It opens with four chapters from the diary of Jonathan Harker describing his visit, on legal business—he is a solicitor—to the castle of a certain Count Dracula, in Transylvania, and ending with Harker howling in horror over what he found there. Then we turn the page, and suddenly we are in England, reading a letter from Mina—at that point, Harker's fiancée—bubbling to her friend Lucy Westenra about how she's learning shorthand so that she can be useful to Jonathan in his work. This is a salutary jolt, and also witty. (Little does Mina know how Jonathan's work is going at that juncture.) The alternation of voices also lends texture. It's as if we were turning an interesting object around in our hands, looking at it from this angle, then that. And since the story is reported by so many different witnesses, we are more likely to believe it.

In addition, we are given the pleasure of assembling the pieces of a puzzle. No one narrator knows all that the others have told us, and this allows us to read between the lines. One evening, as Mina is returning to a house she is sharing with Lucy in Whitby, a seaside resort in Yorkshire, she sees her friend at the window, and by her side, on the sill, “something that looked like a good-sized bird.” How strange! Mina thinks. It’s not strange to us. By then we know that the “bird” is a bat—one of the Count’s preferred incarnations. (Dracula will destroy Lucy before turning to Mina.) Such counterpoint, of course, increases the suspense. When are these people going to figure out what is going on? Finally, most of the narration is not just first person but on-the-moment, and therefore unglazed by memory. “We are to be married in an hour,” Mina writes to Lucy as she sits by Jonathan’s bed in a Budapest hospital. (That’s where he landed, with a brain fever, after escaping from Castle Dracula.) He’s sleeping now, Mina says. She’ll write while she can. Oops! “Jonathan is waking!” She must break off. This minute-by-minute recording, as Samuel Richardson, its pioneer (in “Pamela”), discovered a century and a half earlier, lends urgency—you are there!—and, again, it seems a warrant of truth.



But the narrative method is not the only thing that provides a tight receptacle for the story. Most of this tale of the irrational is filtered through minds wedded to rationalism. “Dracula” has what Noël Carroll, in “The Philosophy of Horror” (1990), called a “complex discovery plot”—that is, a plot that involves not just the discovery of an evil force let loose in the world but the job of convincing skeptics (which takes a lot of time, allowing the monster to compound his crimes) that such a thing is happening. No people, we are told, were more confident than the citizens of Victorian England. The sun never set on their empire. They were also masters of science and technology. “Dracula” is full of exciting modern machinery—the telegraph, the typewriter, the “Kodak”—and the novel has an obsession with railway trains, probably the nineteenth century’s most crucial invention. The new world held no terrors for these people. Nevertheless, they were bewildered by it, because of its challenge to religious faith, and to the emotions religion had taught: sweetness, comfort, reverence, resignation.

That crisis is recorded in work after work of late-nineteenth-century fiction, but never more forcibly than in “Dracula.” In the opening pages of the novel, Harker, on his way to Castle Dracula, has arrived in Romania. He complains of the lateness of the trains. He describes a strange dish, paprika hendl, that he was given for dinner in a restaurant. But he is English; he can handle these things. He does not yet know that the man he is going to visit has little concern for timetables—the Count has lived for hundreds of years—and dines on something more peculiar than paprika hendl. Even when the evidence is in front of Harker’s face, he cannot credit it. The coachman driving him to Castle Dracula (it is the Count, in disguise) is of a curious appearance. He has pointed teeth and flaming red eyes. This makes Harker, in his words, feel “a little strangely.” Days pass, however, before he forms a stronger opinion. The other characters are equally slow to get the point. When Professor Abraham Van Helsing, the venerable Dutch physician who becomes the head of the vampire-hunting posse, suggests to his colleague John Seward that there may be a vampire operating in their midst, Seward thinks Van Helsing must be going mad. “Surely,” he protests, “there must be *some* rational explanation of all these mysterious things.” Van Helsing counters that not every phenomenon has a rational explanation: “Do you not think that there are things in the world which you cannot understand, and yet which are?” Throughout the novel, these self-assured people have to be convinced, with enormous difficulty, that there is something beyond their ken.

According to Nina Auerbach, in “Our Vampires, Ourselves” (1995), Dracula’s crimes are merely symbols of the real-life sociopolitical horrors facing the late Victorians. One was immigration. At the end of the century, Eastern European Jews, in flight from the pogroms, were pouring into Western Europe, thereby threatening to dilute the pure blood of the English, among others. Dracula, too, is an émigré from the East. Stoker spends a lot of words on the subject of blood, and not just when Dracula extracts it. Fully four of the book’s five vampire-hunters have their blood transfused into Lucy’s veins, and this process is recorded with grisly exactitude. (We see the incisions, the hypodermics.) So Stoker may in fact have been thinking of the racial threat. Like other novels of the period, “Dracula” contains invidious remarks about Jews. They have big noses, they like money—the usual.

At that time, furthermore, people in England were forced, by the scandal of the Oscar Wilde trials (1895), to think about something they hadn’t worried about before: homosexuality. Many scholars have found suggestions of homoeroticism in “Dracula.” Auerbach, by contrast, finds the book annoyingly heterosexual. Earlier vampire tales, such as Polidori’s story and “Carmilla,” made room for the mutability of erotic experience. In those works, sex didn’t have to be man to woman. And it didn’t have to be outright sex—it might just be fervent friendship. As Auerbach sees it, Stoker, spooked by the Wilde case, backed off from this rich ambiguity, thereby impoverishing vampire literature. After him, she says, vampire art became reactionary. This echoes Stephen King’s statement that all horror fiction, by pitting an absolute good against an absolute evil, is “as Republican as a banker in a three-piece suit.”

According to some critics, another thing troubling Stoker was the New Woman, that turn-of-the-century avatar of the feminist. Again, there is support for this. The New Woman is referred to dismissively in the book, and the God-ordained difference between the sexes—basically, that women are weak but good, and men are strong but less good—is reiterated with maddening persistence. On the other hand, Mina, the novel’s heroine, and a woman of unquestioned virtue, looks, at times, like a feminist. She works for a living, as a schoolmistress, before her marriage, and the new technology, which should have been daunting to a female, holds no mysteries for her. She’s a whiz as a typist—a standard New Woman profession. Also, she is wise and reasonable—male virtues. Nevertheless, her primary characteristic is a female trait: compassion. (At one point, she even pities Dracula.) Stoker, it seems, had mixed feelings about the New Woman.

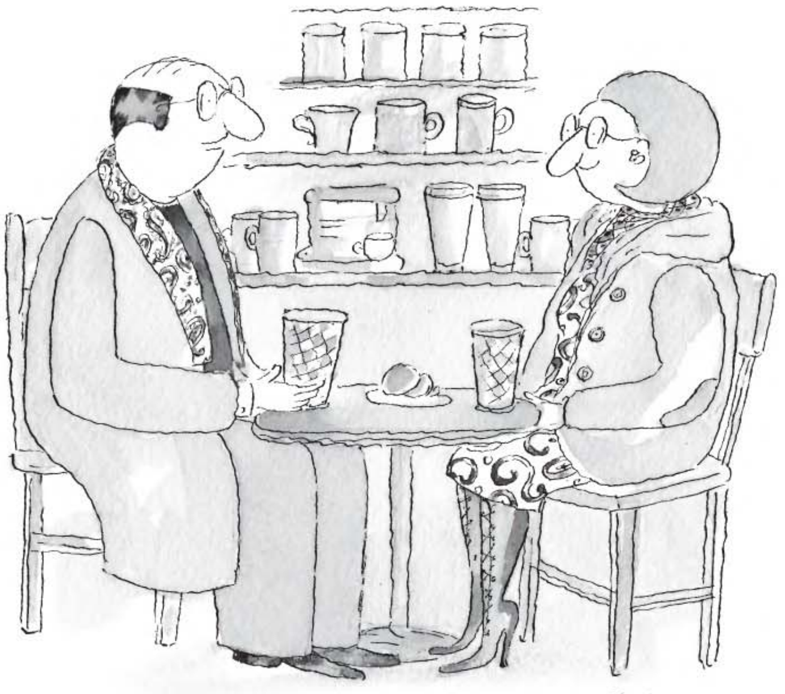
Whether or not politics was operating in Stoker's novel, it is certainly at work in our contemporary vampire literature. Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse series openly treats vampires as a persecuted minority. Sometimes they are like black people (lynch mobs pursue them), sometimes like homosexuals (rednecks beat them up). Meanwhile, they are trying to go mainstream. Sookie's Bill has sworn off human blood, or he's trying; he subsists on a Japanese synthetic. He registers to vote (absentee, because he cannot get around in daylight). He wears pressed chinos. This is funny but also touching. In "The Vampire Chronicles," Anne Rice also seems to regard her undead as an oppressed group. Their suffering is probably, at some level, a story about AIDS. All this is a little confusing morally. How can we have sympathy for the Devil and still regard him as the Devil? That question seems to have occurred to Stephenie Meyer, who is a Mormon. Edward, the featured vampire of Meyer's "Twilight," is a dashing fellow, and Bella, the heroine, becomes his girlfriend, but they do not go to bed together (because of the conversion risk). Neither should you, Meyer seems to be saying to her teenage readers. They are compensated by the romantic fever that the sexual postponement generates. The book fairly heaves with desire.

But in Stoker's time no excitement needed to be added. Sex outside marriage was still taboo, and dangerous. It could destroy a woman's life—a man's, too. (Syphilis was a major killer at that time. One of Stoker's biographers claimed that the writer died of it.) In such a context, we do not need to look for political meaning in Dracula's transactions with women. The meaning is forbidden sex—its menace and its allure. The baring of the woman's flesh, her leaning back, the penetration: reading of these matters, does one think about immigration?

The novel is sometimes close to pornographic. Consider the scene in which Harker, lying supine in a dark room in Dracula's castle, is approached by the Count's "brides." Describing the one he likes best, Harker says that he could "see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips," and hear "the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth." It should happen to us! Harker is not the only one who does not object to a vampire overture. In Chapter 8, Lucy describes to Mina her memory of how, on a recent night, she met a tall, mysterious man in the shadow of the ruined abbey that looms over Whitby. (This was her first encounter with Dracula.) She speaks of her experience frankly, without shame, because she thinks it was a dream. She ran through the streets to the appointed spot, she says: "Then I have a vague memory of something long and dark with red eyes . . . and something very sweet and very bitter all around me at once; and then I seemed sinking into deep green water, and there was a singing in my ears, as I have heard there is to drowning men . . . then there was a sort of agonizing feeling, as if I were in an earthquake." This is thrilling: her rushing to the rendezvous, her sense of something both sweet and bitter, then the "earthquake." But Lucy is a flighty girl. The crucial testimony is that of Mina, after Dracula's attack on her. "I did not want to hinder him," this honest woman says. Her statement is echoed by the unsettling notes of tenderness in Seward's description of the event: the kitten at the saucer of milk; Mina's resemblance, with her face at Dracula's breast, to a nursing baby. The mind reels.

"Dracula" is full of faults. It is way overfull. Many scenes are superfluous. The novel is replete with sentimentality, and with oratory. Van Helsing cannot stop making soul-stirring speeches to his fellow vampire-hunters. "Do we not see our duty?" he asks. "We must go on," he urges them. "From no danger shall we shrink." His listeners grasp one another's hands and kneel and swear oaths and weep and flush and pale.

To these tiresome characteristics of Victorian fiction, Stoker adds problems all his own. The on-the-spot narration forces him, at times, into ridiculous situations. In Chapter 11, Lucy has a hard night. First, a wolf crashes through her bedroom window, splattering glass all over. This awakens her mother, who is in bed with her. Mrs. Westenra sits up, sees the wolf, and drops dead from shock. Then, to make matters worse, Dracula comes in and sucks Lucy's neck. What does she do when that's over with? Call the police? No. She pulls out her diary, and, sitting on her bed next to



"The only thing that's never going away is Joni Mitchell."

the rapidly cooling body of her mother, she records the episode, because Stoker needs to tell the reader about it.

None of this, however, outweighs the strengths of the novel, above all, its psychological acuity. The last quarter of the book, where the vampire-hunters, after the attack on Mina, go after Dracula in earnest, is very subtle, because at that point Mina's dealings with the fiend have rendered her half vampire. At times, she is coöperating with her rescuers. At other times, she is colluding with Dracula. She is a double agent. Her friends know this; she knows it, too, and knows that they know; they know that she knows that they know. This is complicated, and not always tidily worked out, but we cannot help but be impressed by Stoker's representation of the amoral contrivances of love, or of desire. In this bold clarity, "Dracula" is like the work of other nineteenth-century writers. You can complain that their novels were loose, baggy monsters, that their poems were crazy and unfinished. Still, you gasp at what they're saying: the truth.

Each of the annotated editions of "Dracula" has had its claim to attention. Leonard Wolf's "The Annotated Dracula," with six hundred notes, was the first, and it also did the job—which somebody had to do eventually—of picking through the psychoneurotic aspects of the novel. The next version, "The Essential Dracula," edited by Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu, had its own originality. These two history professors from Boston College had unearthed Stoker's working notes for the novel. They drew no important conclusions from that source, but never mind. They had a sexy new theory: that Stoker based the character of Dracula on a historical personage, Vlad Dracula—also known as Vlad Tepes—a fifteenth-century Walachian prince who, in defending his homeland against the Turks, acquired a reputation for cruelty unusual even among warriors of that period. Tepes means "the Impaler." Vlad's preferred method of dealing with enemies was to skewer them, together with their women and children, on wooden stakes. A fifteenth-century woodcut shows him dining at a table set up outdoors so that he could watch his prisoners wriggle to their deaths. McNally and Florescu's theory gave journalists a lot of exciting things to write about, and their articles were featured: if it bleeds, it leads. As a result, "The Essential Dracula" was very popular. (To add to the fun, Florescu claimed that he was an indirect descendant of Vlad.) The Vlad hypothesis has since been discredited. As scholars have figured out, Stoker, while working on "Dracula," read, or read in, a book that discussed Vlad, whereupon he changed his villain's name from Count Wampyr to Count Dracula, and moved him from Austria to Transylvania, which borders on Walachia. He picked up other details, too, but not many. This has not put later writers off Vlad's story. Matthew Beresford, in "From Demons to Dracula," acknowledges that Stoker's character "was not modeled, to any great extent, on Vlad Dracula." Yet he offers a whole chapter on the Walachian prince, including a long description of impalement methods, complete with illustrations. After reading this, you could impale someone yourself.

In 1998 came "Bram Stoker's Dracula Unearthed," by Clive Leatherdale, a Stoker scholar. This book did not get much attention, but it holds the record for annotation: thirty-five hundred notes, totalling a hundred and ten thousand words. Leatherdale's edition was also remarkable for its practice—common among fans, if not editors, of cult books—of treating the novel as if it were fact rather than fiction. When Harker, invading the cellar of Castle Dracula, finds the Count sleeping in his dirt-filled coffin, Leatherdale's note asks, "Is he lying on damp earth in his everyday clothes, or in his night-clothes, with no sheeting to prevent earth-stains?" This is a creature who has lived for centuries, and can fly, and raise storms at sea, and Leatherdale is worried about whether he's going to get his clothes dirty? The practice of "Dracula" annotation is both quite serious (Leatherdale, like the others, did a lot of work) and also, unashamedly, an amusement. It is an exercise in showing off—a demonstration of the editor's erudition, energy, interests—and a confession of love for the text.

Leslie Klinger, in his new annotated edition, claims that he has fresh material to go on. He has examined Stoker's typescript, which is owned by a "private collector." This source, he says, has yielded "startling results." In fact, like McNally and Florescu with Stoker's working notes, Klinger draws no important conclusions from his archival discovery, and he admits that he spent only two days studying the typescript. As with the McNally-Florescu version, however, the real sales angle of this edition is not a new source but a new theory. Klinger not only assumes, like Leatherdale, that all the events narrated in the novel are factual; he offers a hypothesis as to how Stoker came to publish them. Here goes. Harker, a real person (with a changed name), like everyone else in the book, gave his diary, together with the other documents that constitute the novel, to Bram Stoker so that Stoker might alert the English public that a vampire named Dracula, also real, was in their midst. Stoker agreed to issue the warning. But then Dracula got wind of this plan, whereupon he contacted Stoker and used on him the methods of persuasion famously at his disposal. Dracula decided that it was too late to suppress the Harker documents entirely, so instead he forced Stoker to distort them. He sat at the desk with Stoker and co-authored the novel, changing the facts in such a way as to convince the public that Dracula had been eliminated. That way, the Count could go on, unmolested, with his project of taking over the world.

Many of Klinger's fifteen hundred notes are devoted to revealing this plot. When Stoker makes a continuity error, or fails to supply verifiable information, this is part of the coverup. The book says that Dracula's London house is at 347 Piccadilly, but in the eighteen-nineties the only houses on that stretch of Piccadilly that would have answered Stoker's description were at 138 and 139. Clearly, Klinger says, Stoker is protecting the Count. Then, there's a problem about the hotel where Van Helsing is staying. In Chapter 9 it's the Great Eastern; in Chapter 11 it's the Berkeley. Again, Klinger concludes, Stoker is covering his characters' traces. He altered the name of the hotel—presumably, he had to prevent readers from running over to the place and checking the register—but then he forgot and changed the name again.

At first, you think that maybe Klinger's book is not actually an annotated edition of "Dracula" but, rather, like Nabokov's "Pale Fire," a novel about a paranoid, in the form of an annotated edition. But no: Klinger, in his introduction, lays out his conspiracy theory without qualification. So are we to understand that he himself is a maniac, whose delusions the editors at Norton thought it might be interesting to publish?

No again. Preceding Klinger's introduction there is a little note, titled "Editor's Preface"—exactly the kind of thing that readers would skip—in which he tells us that his great hypothesis is a "gentle fiction." (He used a similar contrivance, he says, in his Sherlock Holmes edition.) Recently, in a book-tour appearance at the New York Public Library, Klinger again admitted that his theory was a game. "If you like that sort of thing, there's a lot of that in there," he said. April fool!

That's too bad, first, because it means that a serious novel has been taken as a species of camp, and, second, because it discredits Klinger's non-joke, scholarly footnotes, of which there are many, and carefully researched. Even after the other annotated editions, this volume gives us useful information. Maybe we didn't need to be told what Dover is, or the Bosporus, but when Klinger writes about the rise of the New Woman, or about the popularity of spiritualism in the late nineteenth century, this gives us knowledge that Victorian readers would have brought to the novel, and which could help us. It won't, though, because readers, having had their chain pulled by the conspiracy theory, will disregard those notes, if, improbably, they have bought the book. Every generation, it seems, gets the annotated "Dracula" that it deserves. This is the postmodern version: playful, "performative," with a smiling disdain for any claim of truth. It found the perfect author. A tax attorney would know about gentle fictions.

Whoosh! Why is the curtain blowing so strangely? Oh, my God! There is a man in my study, with a briefcase—he claims he is a lawyer, from Los Angeles—and, by his side, another, taller figure, in black, with pointy teeth. They say they want to help me revise my article. I must break off! ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
An audio interview with Joan Acocella.

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Vagrants, *by Yiyun Li (Random House; $25).* Li's searing début begins and ends with an execution, in 1979, in a small city in China, where democratic reform movements are beginning to ripple through the nation. Gu Shan is a former Red Guard leader turned counter-revolutionary, whose execution, at the age of twenty-eight, devastates her parents and entwines their lives with those of a crippled twelve-year-old girl, the feckless nineteen-year-old son of a Communist hero, an elderly street-cleaning couple, and a radio announcer who comes to question her role in the spread of government propaganda. Li offers both a bleak view of a historical moment when "people were the most dangerous animals in the world" and a meditation on the act of martyrdom, which is presented both as a duty and as a "luxury that few could afford."

The Fire Gospel, *by Michel Faber (Canongate; $20).* In Faber's novel, a Canadian linguist is visiting an Iraqi museum when the place blows up. A bas-relief cracks open, revealing nine papyrus scrolls, which turn out to be the Gospel of Malchus, a man mentioned only once in the New Testament, when his ear is cut off by Peter in Gethsemane. Unlike other recently discovered early Christian testimonies, this one is not of an especially lofty character: Malchus seems as interested in his own troubles ("My innards make noises when all else is quiet") as in Jesus'. He reports no Resurrection; the disciples, he says, had a vision of Jesus making some gestures, but that was it, and drugs may have been involved. The publication of the gospel gives Faber the chance to satirize a number of sitting ducks (book tours, fundamentalists, Amazon reviews), plus some less likely targets (anti-Semitism, disputes among early Christian sects). Unsettlingly, the book at times rises to a great pitch of exultation, or just of sorrow.

The Big Rich, *by Bryan Burrough (Penguin Press; $29.95).* When a huge oil reserve was discovered at Spindletop, in southeast Texas, in 1901, the state was an inward-looking "hell with cows" built around lumber, cotton, and cattle. In this riveting history, Burrough charts the decades-long rush that made Texas oil into a political and economic powerhouse through the lives of the four great barons: Hugh Roy Cullen, Clint Murchison, Sid Richardson, and H. L. Hunt. Each began his foray into oil as a wildcatter, striking it rich through a combination of intuition and bravado. The fortunes of the Big Four swelled during the Second World War, when the United States was the world's leading producer of crude, but by the nineteen-eighties Middle Eastern oil was ascendant, and the barons' legacies had "dissolved into a sordid litany of debauchery, family feuds, scandals, and murder." Burrough brings each of his outsized subjects brilliantly to life, pitching their individual epics against a grand narrative of rise and decline.

Down at the Docks, *by Rory Nugent (Pantheon; $24.95).* Nugent, whose previous books took him to India and the Congo, describes his sometime home of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Long famous for whaling—Melville set sail from there—the city remains a major fishing port and produces the most valuable annual catch of any in the country. But in the past two decades consolidation and legislation have shackled what Nugent eulogizes as the fleet's "frontier mentality." This canny self-reliance took a variety of forms; Nugent documents two kinds of insurance fraud and a "night menu" of drugs smuggled to supplement the legitimate catch. Nugent strings together his subjects' boasts, banter, and laments into an engagingly anecdotal social history, fleshed out by strokes of fine description: on a windless day, boat exhaust "flattens as it exits each stack, forming oily pancakes which curl heavenward at the edges."

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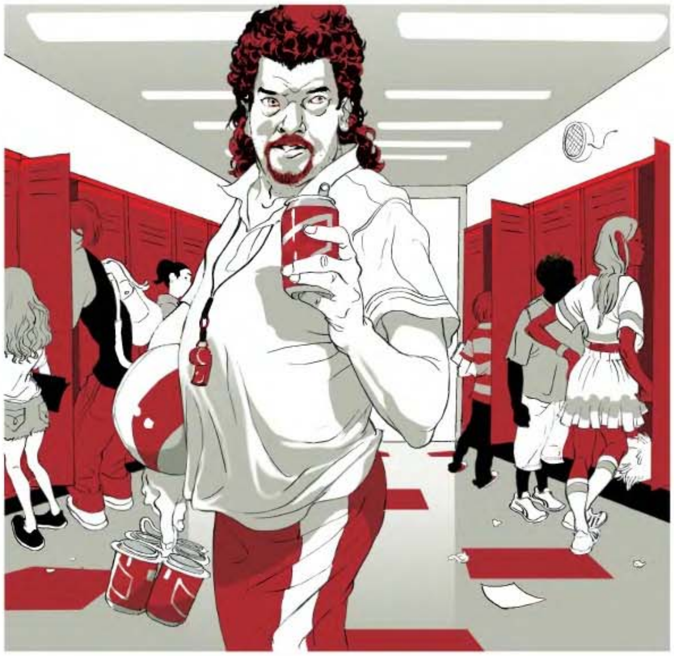
BY NANCY FRANKLIN



Danny McBride as the fallen baseball star Kenny Powers in "Eastbound & Down."

The six-part HBO comedy series "Eastbound & Down," now just past its halfway point, appears, on the face of it, to be another prefab house of laughs of the kind that's been extruded, over and over, in the past couple of years by the belching adolescent-humor factory of Apatow, Ferrell, Stiller & Rogen. Will Ferrell is the only one of those comedy *machers* who's directly involved in "Eastbound & Down." (He and his partner, Adam McKay—who co-wrote and directed a couple of Ferrell's vehicles and started the Web site Funny or Die with him—are two of the show's executive producers.) Still, the many interconnections among "Eastbound" 's producers, writers, directors, and performers and the members of the funny firm would require a seminar to enumerate; they and a half-dozen or so others—including Owen Wilson, Vince Vaughn, and Jack Black—form an omnipresent happy band, a sort of Boobsbury group, who create and play characters that range across the spectrum from slacker to jackass, and the body odor emanating from "Eastbound & Down" will be recognizable to anyone who has seen such films as "Superbad," "Drillbit Taylor," "There's Something About Mary," and "Tropic Thunder."

One of the newer inductees to the core group of funnymen is Danny McBride, the star of "Eastbound & Down"; in the show, he's Kenny Powers, onetime Major League star reliever with a fastball of a hundred and one miles an hour, a speed that steadily decreased as his self-destructiveness—a combination of bad attitude, bad habits, and bad karma—accelerated. Kenny, profane and bombastic, sees his own story as epic: in a voice-over at the beginning of the first episode, he says, "When my ass was nineteen years old, I changed the face of professional baseball." As a rookie, he helped his team win the World Series, but eventually his careless ways caught up with him. "Sometimes when you bring the thunder you get lost in the storm," he explains. Even this early in the series, we sense that a good character has entered our midst. Kenny Powers, we're delighted to discover, is totally full of it.

If you've seen any of the half-dozen movies that McBride has appeared in over the past few years, his playing this kind of role, and being so good in it, won't surprise you. For one thing, he looks the part of a pitcher gone to seed, with a puffy body that comes complete with gut and double chin, and baggy eyes that suggest both not enough sleep and too much sleeping it off. But he was new to me, and at first I didn't quite know why he held my attention; I just knew that there was something about Danny. His film roles have mostly been small—he is a movie-pyrotechnics specialist on location in "Tropic Thunder"; a slovenly bum with too much self-esteem in "Drillbit Taylor"; and has a cameo in "Superbad"—and all spring out of his starring role in a 2006 movie called "The Foot Fist Way," in which he played a small-town Tae Kwon Do instructor. I think that part of what enables McBride to seem so at home in his own skin is the fact that he's also a writer and has control of much of his material, and he isn't working alone. He and his two collaborators, Jody Hill and Ben Best, were students together at North Carolina School of the Arts. They wrote "The Foot Fist Way" and "Eastbound & Down" (another college mate, Shawn Harwell, substituted for Best on three episodes); Best appears in both; and Hill appears in "The Foot Fist Way" and directed that movie and two episodes of "Eastbound." The three amigos, now in their early thirties (though they could, and do, play characters who are older than that but have the maturity level of people who are younger than that), are also executive producers of both projects. In this company, McBride is comfortable improvising, and in "Eastbound" there's a lot of pleasurable tension in watching Kenny create difficult situations with his poor judgment and get out of them with his escape artist's quick brain.

After Kenny's baseball career dies, he goes back to his North Carolina home town, moves in with his brother and his family, and gets a job as a substitute gym teacher at his old high school—not because he wants to but because the I.R.S. needs to garnish his wages and he doesn't have any wages. On his first day at work, he runs into a former girlfriend, April (Katy Mixon), who is now a teacher at the school and clearly ambivalent about Kenny's return. She's engaged to the principal, a smiley, sexless straight arrow (Andrew Daly, a former "MADtv" cast member), who clearly isn't right for her. It's a classic romantic-comedy situation, with—standing in for Cary Grant—a pasty Tar Heel who sports a mullet, rides a Jet Ski with a topless companion, says that "the best part about being a celebrity is cashing in on it," and vomits at a high-school dance. The band teacher, Stevie (Steve Little), also went to school with Kenny; he idolizes Kenny—needless to say, Kenny doesn't remember him—and jumps at the chance to be his "assistant," a job that basically means taking the blame for Kenny's antics. Over time, the nerdish Stevie starts to resemble his idol, angry and reckless and even a little dangerous. It's funny, and disturbing, to watch Stevie's transformation, and to see that Kenny doesn't care what the consequences are for Stevie. But that's what's good about McBride and about the character. There's cruelty and meanness in "Eastbound & Down" (the title is an homage to Jerry Reed's theme song for "Smokey and the Bandit"), and the show's creators don't pander to Kenny or use him just for laughs. The comedy is broad but not freewheeling.

"Eastbound" doesn't make too many claims for itself. It has a grass-roots feeling to it, and would seem even more organic if Will Ferrell had absented himself; he's in a couple of episodes, playing a local car dealer who is alternately impressed with Kenny and contemptuous of him. The performance, however useful it may be in calling attention to the series, calls an unwarranted amount of attention to itself. There are only six episodes of "Eastbound," and supposedly the creators are open to the idea of continuing the story. It's complete now, though, and should be left alone, just as Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant left "The Office" alone after a relatively small number of episodes. In both cases, the main character was a perfect depiction of a real jerk who wasn't *just* a jerk. We all know such people; to some degree, we all *are* those people. Like David Brent, Kenny Powers will live on in our minds after he's left the screen. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

SOUND CHECK

The reopening of Alice Tully Hall.

BY ALEX ROSS

What makes a great concert hall isn't simply a matter of acoustics. Unpredictable variables come into play: the façade, the décor, the buzz of the crowd, the smile of a familiar usher, your memories of past concerts, your entire inner world as it stands at a few minutes after eight. The golden glow of Carnegie Hall puts listeners in a welcoming mood before the music begins. The silvery brilliance of Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Hall engenders a state of bright alertness. The tangy air of the East Anglian coast seeps into concerts at Snape Maltings, an old malthouse that Benjamin Britten reinvented as a near-perfect space for music. Over time, such places can acquire the aura of a warmly remembered childhood home.

Then there are halls that project, on account of acoustics or aesthetics, a negative ambience. For years, my bête noire was Alice Tully Hall, the chamber-music venue in the Lincoln Center complex. The acoustics weren't terrible: you could hear clearly from most parts of the room. But the sound was dull and dry, flopping down in front of your ears instead of floating around them. A distant hum of ducts, vents, and subway noise intruded. The interior design, an arrangement of brownish walls and reddish seats, had the soothing facelessness of an upscale funeral home. More than once at Tully, I had the experience of being vaguely disappointed by an artist who had thrilled me elsewhere. Passionless performances, in turn, seemed par for the course, somehow less offensive than they might have been at a vibrantly intimate space such as the music room at the Frick Collection, or Wigmore Hall, in London.

Tully has now undergone a hundred-and-fifty-nine-million-dollar renovation—the opening move in a scheme to transform Lincoln Center's public image. When the complex opened, in various stages throughout the nineteen-sixties, it embodied a big-box approach to the presentation of the performing arts: orchestras, chamber groups, opera, dance, and repertory theatre were bundled into a multipurpose package of Art That's Good for You. The idea now is to break up that blandly grand configuration and restore individuality to the resident organizations. How far the plan proceeds will depend on the outcome of the current economic crisis. The money for Tully arrived just in time; on opening night, several people in the audience joked that the Morgan Stanley Lobby and the Citi Balcony might have to be renamed for President Obama.

The visual dimension of the new Tully—the towering glass façade, the seductively curved bar and café, the rich-hued moabi wood on the auditorium walls, the high-tech L.E.D. system that makes the wood glow from within—has drawn wide acclaim. My first impression was that I had been transported to some cool new space in Copenhagen. New Yorkers are intrigued, which is not easy to accomplish. Every performance in the first week was packed, partly as a result of a generous decision by Lincoln Center to sell all tickets for twenty-five dollars or less. Curiosity-seekers filled the lobby on weekend nights, creating an atmosphere that could be described as (I type this unfamiliar word with care) hopping.

The sound is greatly improved, although I'm not ready to join the musicians who, for a news story in the *Times*, described it as "heaven." The figurative film of grime that used to cover everything is gone; the music is bright and alive, with the softest dynamics perfectly audible. The pianist Wu Han—the co-director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, which is Tully's principal tenant—happily told the audience on the second night that the hall was "the quietest place in New York City," and she may be right. Lincoln Center persuaded the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to install rubber pads beneath nearby subway tracks in order to mute the rumble of trains. Throughout the opening week of concerts, artists savored the emergence of sound from silence: Leon Fleisher gave a daringly meditative rendition of Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue; David Robertson led the Juilliard Orchestra through the vast, still regions of Olivier Messiaen's "From the Canyons to the Stars" (premièred at Tully in 1974); and, most strikingly, Philippe Herreweghe and the Collegium Vocale Gent drew a Sunday-evening audience about as far into the sacred realm of Bach's Mass in B Minor as humans are currently allowed to go. When the countertenor Damien Guillon sang an eerily pure Agnus Dei against a fragile latticework of violins and continuo, a thousand people holding their breath, I felt stirrings of love for the new Tully.

Arnold Roth

The pianist Wu Han happily told an audience at

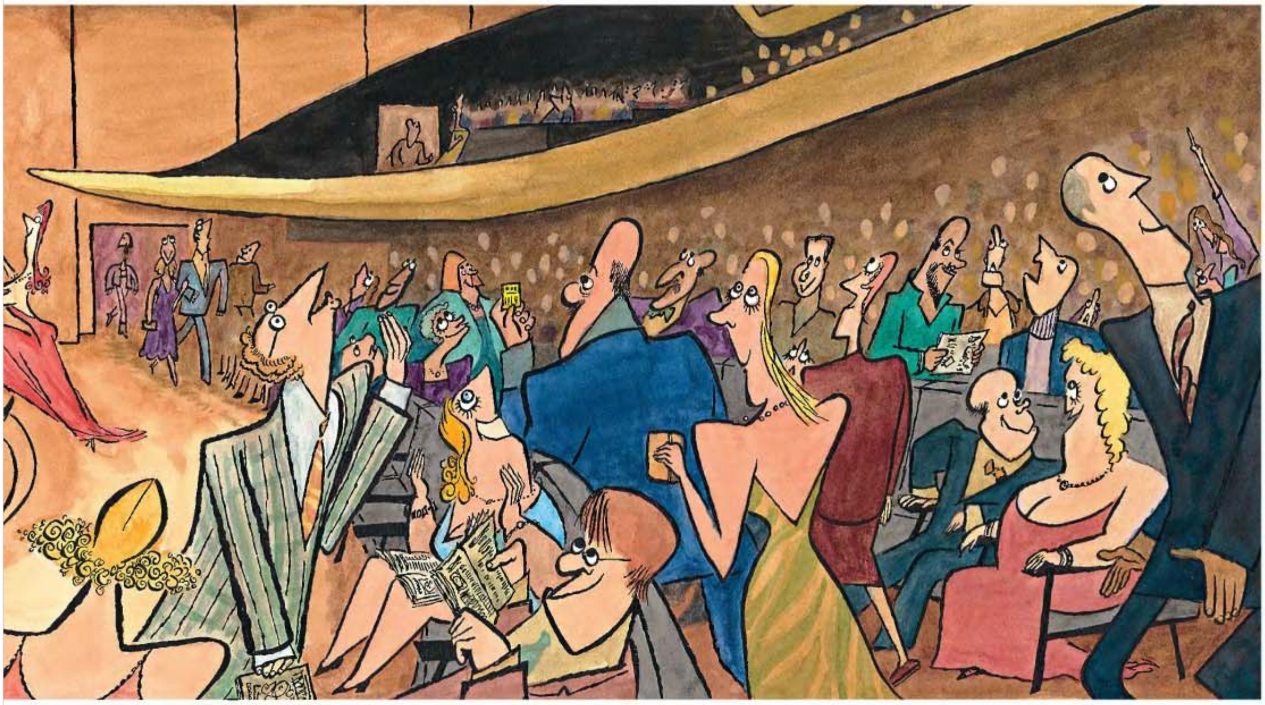
ARNOLD ROTH

For all the added clarity and focus, though, the acoustics remain dry, meaning that sounds decay quickly as they come off the stage and fail to generate an afterglow of resonance. On opening night, when I was seated in the center orchestra, some way back from the stage, I found that string timbres, in particular, were a little pale and thin. The Brentano Quartet dug into Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge" with customary ferocity, but the music seemed frustratingly constricted. On other nights, when I was seated closer, or when the stage was extended farther out, this problem diminished. Large ensembles have no trouble creating brilliant, buoyant climaxes; yet conductors will have to make allowances for the fact that musicians seated near the rear and side walls project much more easily than those in the middle. A performance of Stravinsky's "Pulcinella," with Chamber Music Society veterans and Juilliard students under Robertson's exacting direction, threatened at one point to become a concerto for trombone and orchestra, although the precise and vital playing of the young trombonist Nicholas Hagen made it a winning proposition.

When Alice Tully Hall first opened, in September, 1969, it served up such meat-and-potatoes fare as Schumann's "Dichterliebe" and Schubert's Quintet in C. Lincoln Center is now less inclined to play it safe, as a two-week festival titled "Opening Nights" demonstrated. The first sound heard before a paying audience in the new Tully was symbolic: Jordi Savall, the great Catalan viola da gamba player and early-music explorer, picked up a rebab, an ancient Middle Eastern fiddle, and launched into an old Sephardic romance of Moorish Spain. Other events included "War and Pieces," a conceptual evening on the theme of war, by the British violinist Daniel Hope; "Vita Nuova," an operatic setting of Dante's early work, by the contemporary Russian composer Vladimir Martynov, courtesy of Vladimir Jurowski and the London Philharmonic; and a post-minimalist marathon with Steve Reich and Musicians, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, and Alarm Will Sound.

Not all these ventures worked. Hope's war concert started strongly, with a raucous, topsy-turvy arrangement, by the German composer Jan Müller-Wieland, of Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture, but it lost steam during Stravinsky's "Histoire du Soldat," which featured an alternately hammy and indecipherable recitation by the actor Klaus Maria Brandauer. Martynov's "Vita Nuova" turned out to be an excruciatingly protracted excursion through other people's musical ideas, although the composer's knowledge of Russian Orthodox chant produced moments of austere beauty. Still, I'd rather endure an unsuccessful new piece than a dreary run-through of standard repertory. The Chamber Music Society has made great strides under the leadership of Wu Han and David Finckel, foregrounding new music and offbeat repertory, but a desultory reading of Beethoven's Septet on the second night of concerts brought me back to the Tully doldrums of earlier years. The livelier acoustics demand livelier playing.

Will the new hall acquire more warmth as it ages, or will dryness take over? It's worth remembering that everyone professed to love the original Tully in 1969. Critics called it "musical heaven," a "beautiful, acoustical dream of a small hall," a place with a "fine aura of luxury." This magazine pronounced the acoustics "perfect." Perhaps in forty years the latest incarnation of Tully will no longer give much pleasure, but, for the moment, this handsomely tailored, sharp-toned venue is exactly what Lincoln Center needs. You no longer walk into the hall with the clammy sensation of having arrived in classical-music limbo. ♦



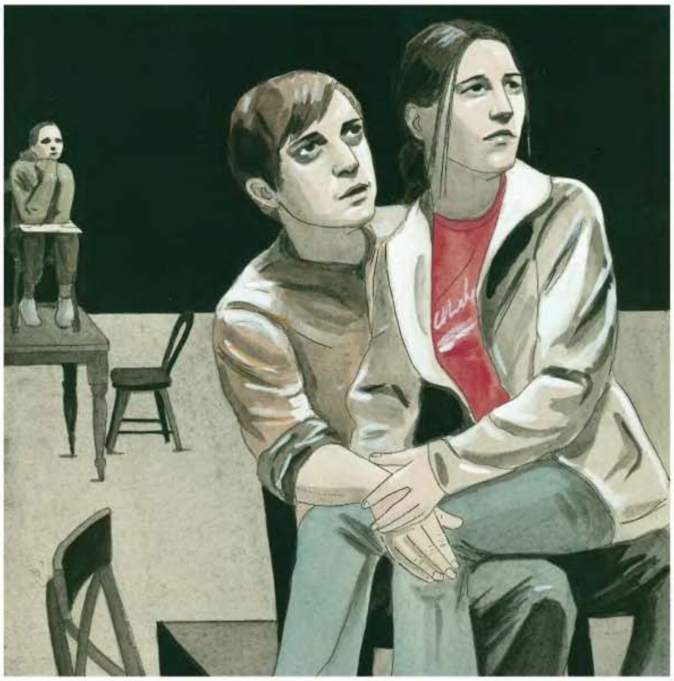
the renovated hall—Lincoln Center's chamber-music venue—that it was "the quietest place in New York City."

THE THEATRE

HIS TOWN

A fresh look at Thornton Wilder.

BY HILTON ALS



Jennifer Grace, James McMenamin, and Ronete Levenson in "Our Town."

LARA TOMLIN

In his memoir, Tennessee Williams, one of the greatest caricaturists this country has ever produced, recalls two meetings with his fellow-playwright Thornton Wilder. After "A Streetcar Named Desire" opened in New Haven, in 1947, Williams notes:

> We were invited to the quarters of Mr. Thornton Wilder, who was in residence there. It was like having a papal audience. We all sat about this academic gentleman while he put the play down as if delivering a papal bull. He said that it was based upon a fatally mistaken premise. No female who had ever been a lady (he was referring to Stella) could possibly marry a vulgarian such as Stanley. . . . I thought, privately, This character has never had a good lay. I got back at him years later when a bunch of theatre people were invited, during the Kennedy administration, to a banquet at the White House. All of us theatre folk were told to line up in alphabetical order. . . . And here was Thornton Wilder bustling about like a self-appointed field marshal, seeing that we were arranged. . . . Mr. Wilder rushed up to me with the radiant smile of a mortician and shrieked, "Mr. Williams, you're a bit out of place, you come behind me." Well, I was just stoned enough to say to him, "If I am behind you it's the first and last time in my life."

Of course, that "self-appointed field marshal" was not at all Williams's type—ideologically or physically. The buttoned-up, emotionally parsimonious Wilder was, by then, a kind of elder statesman of American letters, the winner of three Pulitzer Prizes. A graduate of Yale and Princeton, he was also a respected member of the American and European academic communities and a frequent lecturer. Industrious, and conscientious to a sometimes crippling degree (he supported his mother and two of his sisters, with whom he also lived, off and on), Wilder worked within the margins of literature's prevailing taste. If he strayed, it was only through formal means. (He was inspired by the intellectual boldness of such artists as Luigi Pirandello, as well as by James Joyce and Gertrude Stein.) The sadness that one feels at times when reading Wilder arises from his loyalty to a status quo to which he both did and did not belong. Instead of exploring what it meant to be an outsider, Wilder, who was, by some accounts, gay, made a fetish of the straight life, elevating heterosexual marriage and revealing an anarchic, campy side only twice: in the hilarious, sometimes mystifying 1942 play "The Skin of Our Teeth" (which some claimed was partially lifted from Joyce's "Finnegans Wake") and in "Shadow of a Doubt" (1943), a screenplay that he co-wrote for Alfred Hitchcock.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" opens with a performance about performing. Sabina is a maid who works in a typical American household in New Jersey, except that it's the Ice Age. Dinosaurs not only roam the land; they take up residence in the protagonists' drawing room. After describing the family she works for, the actress who plays Sabina is stumped by another actor's failure to respond to his cue. She tries to carry on but finally gives in to her frustration, saying directly to the audience:

> I can't invent any words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it. As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway,—all about the troubles the human race has gone through, there's a subject for you. . . . Oh—why can't we have plays like we used to have—*Peg o' My Heart*, and *Smilin' Thru*, and *The Bat*—good entertainment with a message you can take home with you? I took this hateful job because I had to. . . . And look at me now: I—I who've played *Rain* and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and *First Lady*—God in Heaven!

Similarly, in "Shadow of a Doubt" Uncle Charlie (played by Joseph Cotten) stands outside the immediate action. A handsome sociopath who is hampered by the truth of his irrefutable sadness—that the world is awful and has made him awful—he offers a sardonic commentary on the subject of normalcy in America. To his niece, he says, in Wilder's version of the script:

> What do you know?—all of you who live in places like this? Nothing. What are you all?—sleepwalkers—blind. You might as well learn once and for all, that the whole

> world's crooked. It's one big foul sty. Rip down the fronts of houses and in every room you'll find liars and swine and cheats.

Remarkably, David Cromer, who directed last year's assured musical version of Elmer Rice's "The Adding Machine," has now managed to find some of that irony and strangeness in "Our Town" as well (at the Barrow Street Theatre). I had not thought it possible; the play, a staple of the American theatre—not to mention high-school drama clubs across the country—has been performed to within an inch of its life since it premièred, in 1938. One can see why: "Our Town" is a message play, elegiac but not heavy-handed. The dialogue follows the familiar patterns of American speech, meandering and sincere. And whether you recognize some of the lines because you like to watch the saccharine, albeit moving, 1940 film version, starring William Holden, or because you've read the script aloud in a classroom, "Our Town," which is set in a theatre in a fictional New Hampshire town at the turn of the last century, is as much a part of the American consciousness as Grant Wood's iconic 1930 painting, "American Gothic."

How does Cromer make it different? By not ignoring Wilder's notes on the play, for one thing. In " 'Our Town': Some Suggestions for the Director," Wilder writes, "It is important to maintain a continual *dryness* of tone,—the New England understatement of sentiment, of surprise, of tragedy." This we hear and see from the opening of Cromer's minimalist production. The audience sits in bright light, surrounding the small stage on three sides. The Stage Manager (incredibly well played by Cromer himself) enters, holding out a cell phone, not saying a word—it's time to turn ours off. Dressed in a button-down shirt and casual pants, he is our contemporary, not a character trapped in the amber of nostalgia. Looking around at the audience, he tells us who he is, then takes a breath before launching us into the life of the play. "Well, I'd better show you how our town lies," he says, with a dry-as-a-bone delivery. As he points out the post office and the school, the principal characters enter and set about miming their daily activities. ("Our Town" is a famously propless show.)

In short order, we're watching Mrs. Julia Gibbs (Lori Myers) and Mrs. Myrtle Webb (Kati Brazda) as they prepare breakfast for their families in the kitchens of their neighboring houses. Mrs. Gibbs is married to a doctor (Jeff Still), and Mrs. Webb is married to a newspaper editor (Ken Marks). Dressed in sensible shirts and trousers, their hair combed away from their wide faces, the women have the look of city dwellers who have decided to return to the land. Stern and unsmiling, they think of their lives as an exercise not in sacrifice but in hope and possibility. We eventually see how much of their hope—which they modestly fail to reveal in the first act of the play—has been bound up in their children, the sweet George Gibbs (James McMenamin) and the plucky but whiny Emily Webb (Jennifer Grace), who fall in love and, in Act II, marry.

We've grown so accustomed to the glitz of acting—the special effects, the makeup, the lighting—that we sometimes forget that the best part of it comes from the performer's soul, the desire to express the truth through a fantasy. By doing away with the effects, along with the self-important sentimentality that has marked so many productions of "Our Town," Cromer provides us with a master class in the fundamental art of *making believe,* of transforming the body and the voice and becoming something other than oneself. No one is more brilliant at conveying the layers of a character than Lori Myers. With her severity and her resolve—she holds her face very tight, and expresses her emotions only through her eyes—she reminded me of Agnes Moorehead and her grave, almost Noh-like performance as the mother in "Citizen Kane." Her Mrs. Gibbs is ascetic, though not without humor. Whether she's preparing breakfast or snapping beans—these domestic activities constitute much of the play's drama—we believe everything that Myers does, because *she* believes in the play, because she believes in the inner life of her character. There's something frozen in Wilder's view of heterosexual men here; aside from the Stage Manager, they're mostly white, middle-aged fuddyduddies, the least interesting characters in the play. The emotional energy belongs to their female counterparts. Myers has understood this, and run with it. ◆

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

YOUTHQUAKE

Mumblecore movies.

BY DAVID DENBY

You're about twenty-five years old, and you're no more than, shall we say, intermittently employed, so you spend a great deal of time talking with friends about trivial things or about love affairs that ended or never quite happened; and sometimes, if you're lucky, you fall into bed, or almost fall into bed and just enjoy the flirtation, with someone in the group. This chatty sitting around, with sex occasionally added, is not the sole subject of "mumblecore," a recent genre of micro-budget independent movies, but it's a dominant one. Mumblecore movies are made by buddies, casual and serious lovers, and networks of friends, and they're about college-educated men and women who aren't driven by ideas or by passions or even by a desire to make their way in the world. Neither rebels nor bohemians, they remain stuck in a limbo of semi-genteel, moderately hip poverty, though some of the films end with a lurch into the working world. The actors (almost always nonprofessionals) rarely say what they mean; a lot of the time, they don't know what they mean. The movies tell stories but they're also a kind of lyrical documentary of American stasis and inarticulateness. The first mumblecore film, by general agreement, was Andrew Bujalski's 2002 "Funny Ha Ha," a sweet-natured account of a young woman's post-college blues. But the style wasn't named until 2005, when the sound mixer Eric Masunaga, having a drink at a bar during the South by Southwest Film Festival (SXSW), in Austin, used the term to describe an independent film he had worked on. The sobriquet stuck, even though the filmmakers dislike it. In the films I've seen, however, the sound is quite clear. It's the emotions that mumble.

Apart from the yearly festival in Austin, where many of the movies are first shown, the movement has never developed a geographical center. The directors live in Chicago, Boston, Portland, Brooklyn. What makes them part of a movement is the technology they use and the paucity of their funds, which, together, help create a subject matter and an aesthetic. A typical low-budget independent film with professional actors and a good cinematographer may cost upward of two or three million dollars. The budget for a mumblecore movie may be as low as fifteen hundred dollars. The films are usually shot with a digital camera, in somebody's apartment, and run about eighty minutes. The filmmaking ensemble gathers around a writer-director-editor figure; they act in the movie, add ideas or lines of dialogue, write music, play or sing onscreen. Few people get paid much, if they get paid at all. Youth is the subject of mumblecore and also the condition of its existence. But these sociable movies exist at a lower level of intensity than comparable youth-loving movies of the past. The young people in the quickly made Godard movies of the sixties dreamed of becoming gangsters, thieves, revolutionaries—characters, so to speak, in a movie. The studs and the female "superstars" of the Warhol films played at Hollywood glamour while enacting the ceremonies of decadence and self-destruction. Mumblecore disdains flamboyance; its reigning mood is diffidence.

Justin Rice and Jess Weixler in Joe Swanberg's "Alexander the Last."

ADRIAN TOMINE

The critic Amy Taubin, in *Film Comment,* once referred to the director Andrew Bujalski—now thirty-one, and perhaps the most fluent and talented of the group—as "a poet of demurral, hesitation, and noncommitment." In Bujalski's engaging "Mutual Appreciation" (2005), there's a potentially dangerous conversation on the edge of a bed between a young musician, Alan (Justin Rice), and Ellie (Rachel Clift), the girlfriend of Alan's longtime best friend. Ellie hints that she's attracted to Alan, a sweet, rather hapless guy with an enchanting smile, then retracts what she started to say, and apologizes. Alan reassures her that it's cool, it's all right, no problem. So she tries, haltingly, to say it again. Starting and stopping, she's like a puppy shyly nosing a toy into a room and looking up to see who's watching. The scene is a comic duet for two affably passive-aggressive people, each of whom wants the other to take responsibility for anything that might happen. In conventional terms, nothing does happen. For Bujalski, however, the passing desire, the impulse not acted on, is a major dramatic event, and a good part of the rest of the movie is devoted to discussing this ineffable conversation. The edge-of-the-bed scene is partly improvised, which gives the hesitations and silences a tone of exquisite embarrassment. The moment plays like Cassavetes, without the high-pressure acting.

Some critics have deplored mumblecore movies as smug portraits of a new generation of privileged white slackers. But a critic, I think, should grant a filmmaker his subject. When the material is emotionally raw, and the nonprofessional actors show some strength, mumblecore delivers insights that Hollywood can't come close to. Aaron Katz's "Dance Party, USA" (2006) has a sequence that may be the most moving and effective in the modest mumblecore canon: a good-looking seventeen-year-old boy (Cole Pensinger), who is rapidly becoming a lout, confesses to an aimless young woman who interests him that he once raped a drunken fourteen-year-old girl. The confession moves forward, but with innumerable pauses. The boy enjoys boasting of his ruthlessness, yet he also feels ashamed; the woman's silence goads him, finally, into completing the confession, which for him becomes an act of purgation. The movie tracks his gradual passage from smarmy adolescence to something like decency.

The characters in mumblecore may lack ambition, but the directors are clear enough in their desire to make full-length movies. Bujalski, the director in the group whose work most resembles European art films (he even shoots on film), has made three features since 2002; the earnest and lyrical Aaron Katz has made five films of one sort or another in the past four years; and Joe Swanberg, the most sexually explicit of the directors, who sometimes appears in mumblecore movies sporting a tuft of devilish red beard, has made six features and three shorts in five years. This kind of busy-beaver, spontaneous activity is, of course, a de facto rebuke to Hollywood's elephantine methods and inane formulas—the snippy-snappy Kate Hudson comedies, the digital-action films that whirl into nowhere. Is there a revolution brewing, a rattling of the gates? One might like to fantasize about mumblecore and other independent directors taking over the studios and junking all the dumb projects, but no such thing will happen. Theatrical attendance for commercial movies is on the rise; the executives are not about to abandon their movies or their methods. At the same time, the theatrical distribution of small movies has become commercially hazardous—the land of high ideals and broken hearts—and many young filmmakers are looking to shake up distribution patterns. Some of them hawk their movies themselves, selling DVDs on the Internet. (You can buy Bujalski, Swanberg, and Katz movies that way.) But a larger audience can probably be built in the future through video on demand or by direct Internet download. For instance, "Alexander the Last," the most recent picture written and directed by the prolific Swanberg, will be shown at the SXSW festival in Austin, on March 14th, and made available the same day as a video on demand.

It turns out that Swanberg, now twenty-seven, is changing his game. In his earlier movies, there was usually a project of sorts going on amid the sexual encounters—a set of taped interviews with people whose love affairs had gone bad in "Kissing on the Mouth" (2005); an audio montage of people making funny noises which a musician assembles into a rhythmically charged composition in "LOL" (2006). In "Alexander the Last," the project is a local theatre production. A married actress (Jess Weixler) attracted to a good-looking actor she's working with contemplates an affair with him, only to discover that her sister, with whom she's very close, is already sleeping with him. The story, in its formal symmetries, suggests one of Éric Rohmer's narratives of advance and retreat in "Six Moral Tales." In the past, people in Swanberg's movies slept with one another without much consequence—the plots were not fully worked out, and many implications, not to mention relationships, were left hanging. The slapdash style of storytelling was part of Swanberg's cool contempt for mainstream filmmaking. But in "Alexander the Last" he's advancing toward a firmer structure and more emotionally explicit scenes. He has a producer this time, and sets, or at least a theatre, and he uses trained actors, who work up an emotion much more clearly than the earlier casts of amateurs did, though without the surprises. In brief, Swanberg is giving up some of the methods of mumblecore.

It remains to be seen, in fact, whether mumblecore's ethos can survive in a period of violent economic downturn. Those penny-budget movies were made in a time of prosperity. Now that the parental check or the roommate's job may be drying up, the movies could dry up, too, or turn from dithering to rage. Of course, fresh young directors, willing to work cheaply, will emerge. But will they mumble if their bellies are beginning to growl? The new distribution channels may be the key to keeping this low-key but cheering movement alive. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

The Front Row, a new blog about movies.

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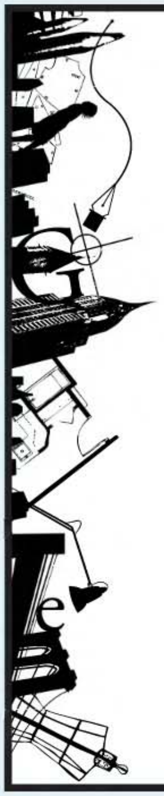

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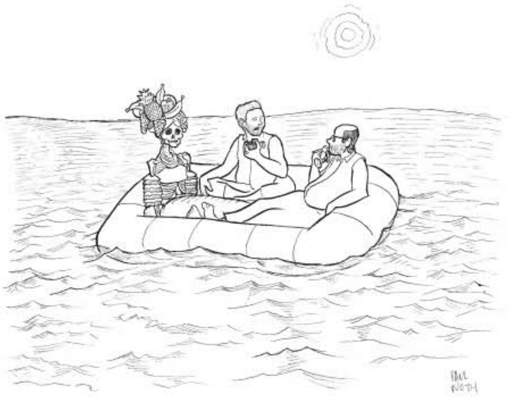
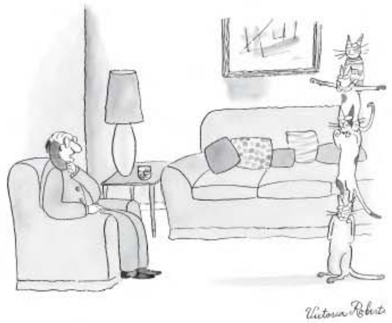
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by David Sipress, must be received by Sunday, March 15th. Finalists in the March 2nd contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 30th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Here's to Little Miss 'Don't You Touch My Hat.' "
Kevin Forhan, Seattle, Wash.



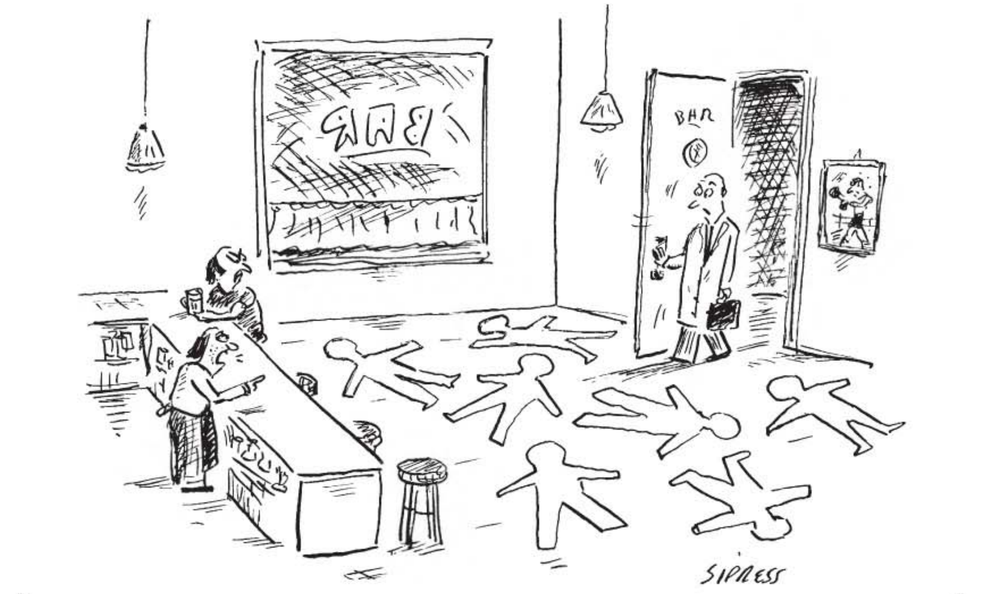
THE FINALISTS

"Yes, Officer, they say he was about six feet four, with pointy ears and abnormally short arms."
Alexia Kauffman, Arlington, Va.

"I wasn't laid off—I just decided to pursue other interests."
Christy Yoest, New York City

"Hello, YouTube? I've got something you might be interested in."
Judy Goldberg, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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