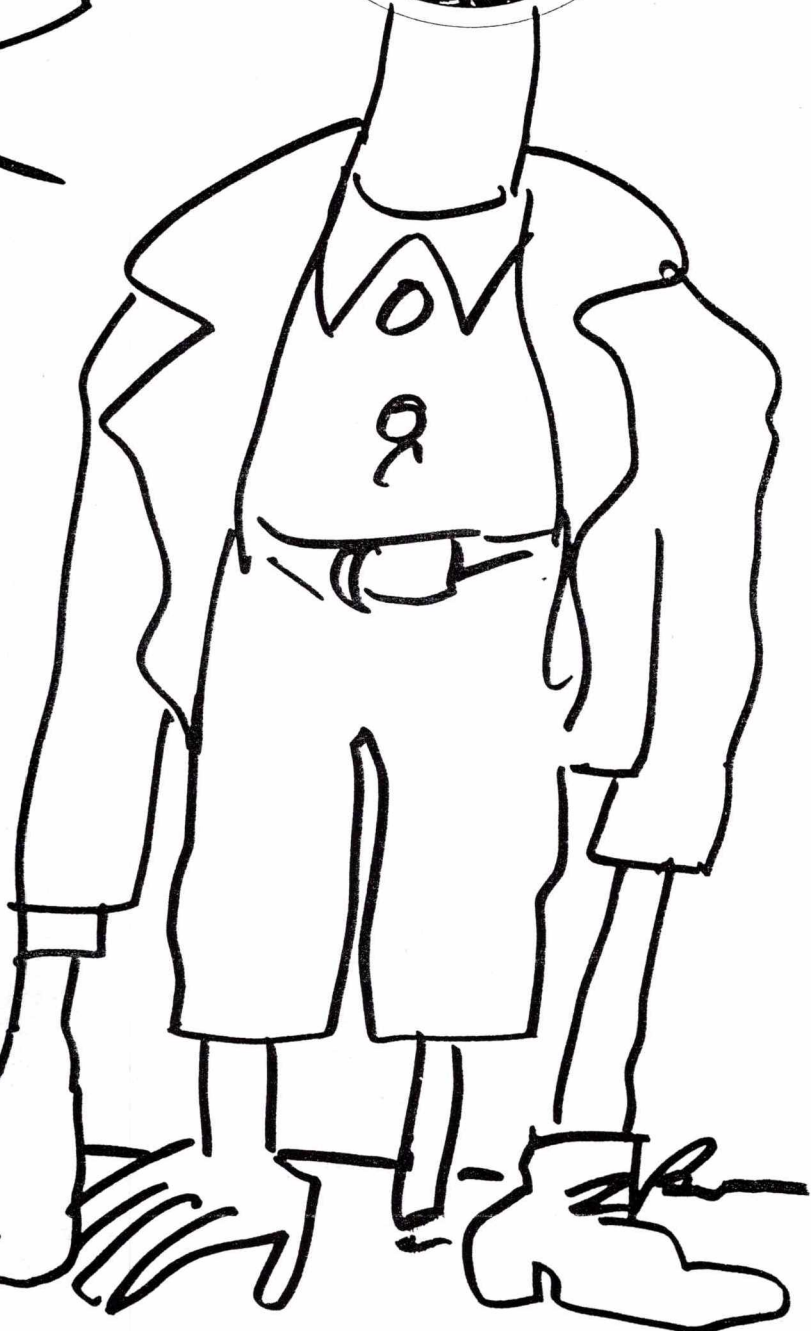


Little Lit



FOR  
BEN  
+  
JANET!



**IT WAS A DARK AND SILLY NIGHT...**





## The Nattering Voice of BEN'S BEAT 74

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### INDICKON III and emcees

The August meeting of ESFA, our little SF/F group which mostly meets monthly at artist Steve Fabian's home in Wayne, N. J. met at our home for August, inasmuch as three of us are Leos, myself, Steve's son Andrew and artist Edd Cartier, of Ramsey, N. J. I always invite more folks and this time the gathering was large enough so that it qualified as Indickon III. Guests included Barry and Joyce Malzberg, Darrell and Mattie Schweitzer, his friend Lee Weinberg and his wife, Stefan and Ann Dziemianowicz, Peter and Nan Cannon and their adorable little boy Nicholas, plus regulars Helen Delaree and Joseph Wrzos, Steve, Andrew and Dot Fabian, Gene and Ann Biancheri, and Janet and myself. I regret I forgot to take photos, but it was an active and happy group, apparently satisfied with the chow and the talk. Inasmuch as this group included preeminent talkers, there was no shortage of that. Edd Cartier and his son Dean were unable to come, as Dina, Edd's wife, has been ill and requires her family's attention. I regretted I could not show Edd his original drawing from long ago, which I recently acquired and had quickly had framed. Otherwise it was great. It had followed a preliminary party of relatives and friends, a week before, at a restaurant in Teaneck to help us celebrate our "80/50" occasion, my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. *That was a blast!*

There was an unhappy sequel to the ESFA-Indickon when Joe Wrzos, who is a dear friend, suffered a "mild" heart attack, and then, in the hospital, after an angiogram, underwent a quadruple bypass! Happily, he is doing well, and we were able to visit him at his home with Helen. He will host ESFA in September to celebrate his 74<sup>th</sup> birthday, and although it will necessarily be quieter than our triple-header, the roof will be gently raised. Joe spent a lifetime as a teacher, edited *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic* for several years, as well as a few books, and since retirement has edited more, including the great *In Lovecraft's Shadow*, plus a completion of an anthology commenced by August Derleth, for Arkham House. He has a book of Seabury Quinn fiction due from Ash-Tree Press. When we visited him, Joe, with whom I invariably engage in a talking competition, pointed out that with his history as a teacher, he is accustomed to lecturing for 58 minutes, whereas I, as a reviewer, get very few. I pointed out that while he gets 58 minutes, I get 58 words and can destroy him in those words.

Speaking of my "profession", among my recent reviews, I had a major input in one issue of *Publishers Weekly* (August 4, 2003), three items, all on L. Ron Hubbard themes. First was a review of an audio, a 3 CD set of a performance, complete and unabridged, of his 1950 SF novel

*The Kingslayer*. I did not review the novel, as that was not my subject, just the recording, and it was fun, like the radio shows I listened to as a kid, five actors undertaking numerous voices and accents (including apparently villainous and today politically incorrect Chinese and Hispanic) (it was okay – in the end they were good guys after all!). Next I reviewed *Master Storyteller*, edited by William J. Widder, which I believe I also discussed last issue, a really beautiful book of all the pulps (and books), covers (even if they were not devoted to LRH) and many interior b/ws, featuring Hubbard fiction, and a running biography as well. Finally, I interviewed Bill Widder, a likeable man hailing originally from the Bronx.

Now the difficulty with reviewing Hubbard is that he is a controversial figure, because of his philosophy, upon which I did not touch at all. Nevertheless, if the reviewer praises a book by or about him, he is accused of being a cultist and of proselytizing for those philosophies, and if he gives a negative review, he is accused of being prejudiced. We received two e-mails taking me heavily to task, for “fawning” (I called Bill’s book “gorgeous”, which it is, not as great art per se, but as a great display of pulp art, which is dear to our hearts, and for that matter, The Brooklyn Museum of Art as well.) In addition the writer sneered at what he implied was a third-rate writer (or some such expression), disdained by critics, who stated that he had never written one good book. I did not respond. There was no reason to, and for that matter, while much of Ron’s writing bears the mark of very rapid work with humdrum results, at least half a dozen novels remain superior, including *Typewriter in the Sky* and *Death’s Deputy*, and several, such as *Fear* and *Final Blackout* are immortal in the genre. Some of the Galaxy people including Bill were in town today for book signing and publicity, and, regrettably I could not get time to see them, their schedule was so tight. They had previously invited me to the Writers of the Future Banquet and Conference in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, it was too late, as I had something else on, or we might have gone. I figured we would get together when Bill and Elise Toth, the VP for PR, who must be beautiful, since all you women working for firms are, came East for book-signing that we would all meet, but their schedule was so tight, they could only be in the Big Apple for one day, and we did not meet. Maybe next year in L.A.

Good luck to FAPA and Fandom veteran inspirator **Jack Speer**! Now who is going to be first to have him recalled? Thanks to those whom voted for me in the Egopoo Poll. If only I could vote for myself I would come in first! Especially if I spread some money around. Anyone for a bribe?

## EMCEES

OK, m.c. time, and Eric Leif Davin first. Very nice essay, properly humble yet assertive, interesting, and of a kind with your fine work for Fantasy Commentator. There is still science fiction being written but much silly fantasy passes for it, all those dragons, princesses, militaristic stuff, and misch-masch kingdoms to be fought over, with countless Joe Doakeses being killed and no one cares as long as Prince so-an-so or Princess la-de-dah is okay. Bah. When will someone speak up for the ordinary schnook? Say, where is your F/C collaborator, our inimitable Norm Metcalf? Just when I have learned to spell his name without a final “e” he disappears altogether this mailing. Very unusual for Norm. \*\*\* Dale Spiers: one of the best postal card codes is simply to write like H. P. Lovecraft, so many tiny words scratched out all over one another. \*\*\* Art Hlavaty: Watch those perfidious tires – and be well. \*\*\* Tom Feller: I somehow missed your mention of an all-white Pogy and Bess, which Ray Nelson brought up. He is right that Nashville should try looking around, and might have no trouble mounting a creditable Pogy and Bess. A white version is less credible by a mile and who would accept it right from its magnificent opening song, perhaps one of the two greatest show tunes ever written in America? (The other is an easy guess.)

Ray Faraday Nelson: I love your pussycat art, but I hate to tell you that the only berets you'll see in France belong to very old men (like me) or to Basques, in the southeast, who still wear them. I first began wearing them in 1954, when we visited and loved France. I have worn them ever since. Young people however do not, nor do middle-aged people. At least during my last few visits. Unless they deliberately hid them from me. However, even Lafayette had a tough time finding some in the bottoms of the drawers. Your emcees are great. You really put the arm on our new and always unanswerably correct president, although one reason I admire him so much is just that, his omniscience, even if only self-proclaimed. You have told off Art Hlavaty uselessly but wisely. Will he be wise enough to listen? I adored Louise Brooks and her hairdo in Pandora's Box but I still put my two-bits on Abel Gance's *Napolean*. So, okay, as shown at the Radio City Music Hall by Francis Ford Coppola in Cinerama with a 60 piece symphony orchestra and a score written and conducted by his daddy Carmine Coppola, with Lillian Gish in the audience and gushing on stage how "Mr. Griffith would have loved this." The filmic experience of a lifetime. What are a few of your own favorite flick scripts, Ray?

Eric Lindsay: In spite of my aggravation in France, I still like the country and would gladly revisit it – if I felt like traveling. I don't. But I say, for France, try it, you'll like it. Just wear a money belt. I have been to many places, and do not usually care to revisit. If it is not a site new to me, generally it seems familiar. This does not count for New York City, which is our second home. I retired from pharmacy in late 1992 but continue at least once a week to dream that I am working in my pharmacy. If I were to visit Airlie Beach, which seems like a good idea, except that Janet refuses to take so long a flight, I would visit one of your two chemist shops and incorporate it into my dreams. Can't help it. Your idea about retaining mailings of FAPA to give away is good. I see few fans who would want any. But I do give some to Barry Malzberg, into his capacious mailbox, on the proviso that he not return them. What he does with them I do not know. As for gunpoint robberies, I am ambivalent about penalties. As I may have written, most of the time, these guys only wanted money for crack, usually \$20 or \$30 being enough. They would come in and when they held their gun barrel dipped downward, then the sense of threat was less. I could lecture them, and I did, about the discourtesy of robbing people, before giving them the \$20 I kept in the register. Once I gave a guy a few dollars from my wallet without being asked. I really do not want to see them receiving lengthy sentences, fatuous as it may sound. As for spacing my emcees, I just try to even off the lengths of the paragraphs. The late Harry Warner avoided this by making one long paragraph! Concerning wildlife in Airlie Beach from Gegenschein, I watched a few fine animal programs on TV about rather tamed tigers at the Queensland zoo. Not enough to make Janet undertake that 30 hour flight but she would like to pat a tiger's rump without fearing for her hand or her life. When it comes to book buying I have too many already, but I still would like to get certain books, not just books generally. Books by favorites, classic or nice editions I do not own. My book reviews are few because I read so many for Publishers Weekly, and cannot reprint my reviews. In addition, many of them are not worth commenting on – they choose my books, not me. Now books by Ray Garton and Edward Lee, my latest, it goes without saying they are not worth talking about. In addition, generally I do not care much for SF today, so I would not even read all those you discuss, however worthy.

Earl Kemp: FAPA is worth twelve bucks. I do not save the mailings, as I have stated, but I like the camaraderie of a mostly mature group. I hope you will too. And thirty five years between issues means you have to prove to some people you are still alive. You have one hell of an autobiography and I think am better off with this summary. God knows what you'll come up with next. Hang around. \*\*\* Milt Stevens: Merritt probably had Communism in mind, to some degree at least, with *The Metal Monster*. It originally appeared, you recall, in 1920, fresh after the Revolution in Russia. And when he issued *The Moon Pool* in book form, after WWI, he altered

his German villain to a Russian villain. In addition he was working for William Randolph Hearst, a capitalist dog if ever there was one. However, I do think that it was genuine proto-SF at heart, a new concept, very difficult to handle, and he was not ready for totally abstracting it. \*\*\* Roger Wells: My artist wife likes to be in Who's Who compendia because it looks important on the resume. And I admit I have occasionally gotten some useful biographical information. Generally, though I still believe they are enormous moneymakers dealing on people's vanity. Librarian Fred Lerner tells it as it is, and much tougher than I do, but it impinges on his own profession. \*\*\* Dick Eney: That Potter kid ain't fer me. \*\*\* Janine Stinson: I loved the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> books of Carey's Kushiel Saga, (the 2<sup>nd</sup> merely marked time) and interviewed this gracious woman for PW. Have you noticed that there is another novelist named Jacqueline Carey, not the same woman? Yes, her book is entitled "The Crossley Baby" and it is not fantasy. Unlike *our* Jacqueline Carey, a big, smiling lady from the midwest who has a companion lady, this Jacqueline Carey is petite, wears eyeglasses, is married and lives in New Jersey. Perhaps there should be a Writers Equity, then, like Actors Equity it would forbid two professionals from having the same name. One *must* change it.

Helen Wesson: The Sherlock Holmes pastiche was a delight. Please continue to surprise us with such memories from your past. With your personal fan history, your collection should be very worthwhile. Brown University in Rhode Island would gladly accept Lovecraft memorabilia, if you have any, and I urge you to give it to them. I believe Univ. of Texas in Austin is a major repository too for more general fantastic fiction and fannish stuff. \*\*\* Sandra Bond! How dare you insult the erudite membership of FAPA by screwing up an easy test like a Law Exam! I think we can forgive you this time, but you must promise never to do it again and to ace it next time! As for anti-robbery precautions, we are going to Chicago for just 3 days and I shall wear a money belt! (And carry a wallet with a few quid in it.) \*\*\* Bo Stenfers: (whistle) \*\*\* Janice Morningstar: I am glad your stamps are not all identical. It assuages my sense of guilt for using different photographs in issues when we travel. \*\*\* Laurraaine: I am sorry to read you have been unwell. A young person like you *MUST* be well! I'll bet Mike has kept you busy about the appearance in our skies of Mars! I have seen those Capital Steps too often and I skipped their latest, but here they called it "Between Iraq and a Hard Place." Your praise for Jason Alexander, used brilliantly by Jerry Seinfeld but otherwise a fat dud for my taste, makes me think twice. His joke is well publicized. Referring to audience comment, he says about himself, in George-style, "He may not be another Nathan Lane but he isn't bad." He'd have to prove it to me. But then, he has to prove it to each audience, and from your reaction, apparently he does! Good luck with First Fandom. Vote for me. Recall all others! Your intellectual art joke was not bad, and your zine was beautiful! Great drawing you made for the cover.

Fred Lerner: I mentioned you above to Roger Wells, about Who's Who books. You are altogether correct. Anyway, Barcelona is one of our favorite cities. We visited there several years ago, confined to a tour which gave us too little time there, but enough to know that we loved it. (Afterward we bussed half way across Spain to Madrid! A long, long ride.) I regretted your brief treatment of Gaudi's masterpiece, the symbol of the city, the Church of the Sagrada family. Revisionistic religionists (the curse of Torquemada never leaves beautiful Spain) are bent on turning it into a cathedral and one day his art nouveau inspiration will barely be evident, under the weight of chapels. However, that is a long time away yet. Inevitably his "family chapel" will indeed be a church. I first was astonished by it in a Museum of Modern Art book on Dada and Surrealism nearly half a century ago, and always dreamed of it. You may imagine what a treat it was for me to see it, albeit 40 years later. The apartment houses should be safe, but his Parc Guell will at least remain unchanged. It was being repaired and restored when we were there and the workers were replacing worn bits of mosaic, throwing the brightly colored chips aside. Janet asked and received permission to take a batch with her, incorporating them later within a metal

sculpture. I do not recall your mentioning the great Picasso Museum. There are tributes to Dali and I think Joan Miro as well. Off the Ramblas (and its bird-sellers and mimes) there was a structure incompletely described by a guide as a hospital or school, I forget – it is five years at least. Actually, whatever its function, this was the site of a famous medieval “disputation” between a bishop and a rabbi, about the truth of the Bible, New Testament in particular. Imagine how cautious the rabbi had to be, in a no-win contest, to try to make a point without creating antagonism and endangering his life and the lives of his people! Most of the Jewish sites you mention we were unable to see. Today one might marvel at the entire scene. One day we shall return, I hope. As for First Fandom, you have such a sage quality that I assumed you were one of the old codgers like some of us, and here you are not even on Medicare yet! Did I mention last time that each year there is a vote for First Fandom Hall of Fame, and many writers and such luminaries are nominated. When the letter asking for candidates arrived, I jokingly responded How come I never get nominated! The editor swore she would do it, and although I quickly assured her I was joking, she held firm, and there I am, competing with such nobodies as Philip Jose Farmer (whom I suggested.) Too bad you aren’t a member. You might skip the old “Lovers” man for my unknown eminence.

Robert Sabella: Oops, sorry about my error on the LotR essay! As the foreword to these emcees tells, I had a number of SF/F (but non-FAPA)folks here in August, my summer home at home. I had decided perhaps to have only the ESFA group itself next year, assuming I am not blubbering yet. Still, since Janet enjoyed this one, maybe not. There are not many FAPAns in N. J., only you, two hours away. But I have other names in mind. Think about it. You can see my Egyptian fragment of a stele. And Janet’s work. I enjoyed Fei Fei’s trip report in #96. I stayed 3 weeks in Cambridge, England, in 1945, a medic working in a swamped U. S. army post office and felt the same way. In Paris, the Louvre is too much, and we finally decided that many of its so-called classic paintings are boring wall-fillers. Mona Lisa is not one of those. I would caution your bright alumna that one does not judge da Vinci’s masterpiece but is judged by one’s reaction. Pei’s pyramid is not for “loving” but it is admirable for its purpose. I liked “The Girl With the Pearl Earring”, although my eyebrows raised at the thought that a serving-wench presumed to teach Jan Vermeer. In Gregory Maguire’s wonderful “Confessions of An Ugly Stepsister” (see Recently Read) a girl also helps an artist, but he is not a Vermeer! \*\*\* Arnie Katz: You probably have more first-issues than anyone. I refer to the collection of remotes on my bedside table as “flickers”. \*\*\* Joyce Katz: Pretty issue! I am sucker for color.

Gordon Eklund: Metal Monster probably left as many uncompleting readers as Silmarillion, but I think it is the better of the two and indeed many other unreadable books, Merritt’s claim on posterity as well. (Another is Finnegans Wake, my nemesis through six attempts to storm it, none of which surpassed 20 pages – but I still respected and liked it. The problem was I do not have a lifetime to devote to uncoding its amusing jokes and such. In fact, at 80, a heck of a lot less lifetime. Ulysses, which took you a week I also breezed through, but only on my second attempt. \*\*\* Michael Waite: I eagerly await Trial and Air, your superb, nothing less, apazine! On pg. 1, here, that is “fare as well”. Perfection we demand. \*\*\* Pres. Speer, neatly encompassing in one paragraph the change of hands, I never cared about costuming at Cons (the SCA is pitifully ludicrous) but a sixty year old page about them is a treat! Our night skies in this area are tainted by light from New York City, and we see very few stars, but I think I saw Mars, the only sparkling “star” of the few visible. Yes, HPL did not create fandom, but he saw its importance in his creative life. “A. Merritt’s Fantasy Magazine” published work by other authors during its brief run. See my Recently Read for a review of E. B. White’s wonderful book on the Model T. The most embarrassingly silly thing about Aida as done at the Met is the procession of Nubian slaves, all burnt cork-painted with dreadfully similar, silly wigs, obviously bought at Joe’s Curly Wig Parlor for a quarter a dozen. Good luck!



## *Journeys*

### Edna

(Seeing the play "Sylvia" by A. R. Gurney made me remember fondly, to the point of tears, our family pooch, Edna, and to write some of my recollections, dimmed and chaotic now by the intervening years.)

Janet had grown up with a dog, as much a companion to her as her younger brother Fred was. Peggy was a white wire-haired terrier, frisky and friendly, and when I first began calling on her, half a century ago, Peggy would always trot up to me and curl up for my admiration and petting. She was no youngster but she had the heart of a puppy. Janet is fond of remembering, when she was a child, that the family car had a rumble seat. For you youngsters, instead of a trunk, that meant a two-seater, with a trunk whose lid went up providing an open-air back seat. Janet, Fred and Peggy were back there one day when a squirrel dashed by. Peggy launched herself from the car and pursued the animal, before they could stop and drag her back in. Years later, one day when Janet and I were out on a date, she called home, knowing her dog had been unwell, and burst into inconsolable tears. Peggy, she was told, had quietly died that afternoon.

The scene passes into the future. Janet and I were married by now, with two children. A son and a daughter, both of whom were campaigning for a dog, and their mother provided a third voice. I was not agreeable, doubting that they would care for the animal, but one day they called me at my pharmacy, their voices bursting with excitement. "Guess what?" they asked. I knew at once. Not even a doubt in my mind. "You bought a dog," I said. "Yes!" they responded eagerly, assuring me, among other blandishments, that I would love her.

As a kid my brothers and I had had a cat, Whitey, a nice pet, which, like most cats, tolerated us, at least as long as we allowed her to have her way. Finally, she mothered a litter of cute little kittens, which my father unceremoniously placed into a bag and got rid of, not providing details. I believe Whitey eventually ran away, and was not replaced. What could I say to my new generation? "Okay," I told the kids, "I'll see her". I came home and here was a frisky and, regrettably for my sternness, altogether irresistible. A little bundle of white and mostly brown fur, with long ears, my dread as such dogs so easily pick up infections. She was obviously partly cocker spaniel, which had caught my children's attention, but she was also of beagle extraction. Not a bad mix really. "And have you thought of a name?" I asked. Foolish question. They beamed. "Edna!" Michael crowed. And I laughed. The name had come from my first children's play, *Ice Cream in the Soup*, which I had based upon my two children, using their actual names and their styles of life, all their bickering and all their love for each other. To balance the two off, I had added a third child, older than either of them, a sensible and serene take-charge girl, and I thought "Edna" was perfect for such qualities. Michael had taken advantage of her and appropriated her name. Edna it was, and many a friend laughed and scratched their heads over such an inappropriate name for a dog, but we knew it was perfect, and

completed the trio. Edna easily melted our hearts immediately. It was a love, and it was mutual, that would never dim, over eighteen and a half years.

The little puppy fell in love with a large, elderly dog that lived a few houses away. She would happily play with the dog for hours, running wide circles about her, and the dog, which sat still enjoying the *puppy love*, loved her in return and tolerated this frenetic newcomer. Like any dog, Edna inofficiously made herself at home, the owner of the property and all of us. No self-respecting dog would do less. She was quickly house-trained, and loved roaming in our small yard. The kids, filled with love for their dog, left such menial tasks as taking care of her, feeding her and walking her all to us. We could only sigh. Some one had to do it, and what else are parents for? I found a path Edna grew to love and would walk her there daily for many years, through a narrow woods running along a nearby railroad track. I nicknamed it Sagamore National Forest, and it was a never-ending source of fascinating exploration for her, in which I was happy to comply. I liked it myself, although I did not sniff at each tree trunk. She was a small dog, at full growth, and the beagle influence grew stronger, in her appearance, the cocker spaniel much less, although the ears were always long, and occasionally infected. Edna, never one to be quiescent, also took over the car when we drove somewhere, and although she loved to put her snout out the window, she never leaped out of the car. She quickly recognized certain spots out of town, which we visited with some frequency. One was 45 minutes away, and we drove along highways, to my brother's home, with his own two kids, close in age to my own. Far away as it was, without clues for her, Edna would begin howling and keening when we were within a mile. We laughed. "She must smell Aunt Sue!" the kids said ungallantly of my loving and wonderful sister-in-law. While Sue really loved cats, and would later have one, she was very accommodating to Edna and made a to-do over her.

One of my unpardonable delights was teasing Edna. Janet loved cuddling up with her furry and warm bundle. Perhaps if I were furry she might have cuddled up with me, but Edna easily outdid me for hair, and Janet never went to bed without her. It happened that Edna loved to play with a small rubber duck, growling fiercely at it and chewing it, carrying it with her. Sitting upstairs in bed, watching television, I would grab the duck away from her and hurl it out the door and down the stairs. Edna would leap from the bed and retrieve it, then come scampering back up, curling up into her position, her long, bushy tail swishing and growl at the toy, although she tried to keep it away from me. After a while, I perfected my tease. I would grab it and throw it. Edna would scamper after it, but once she was out I would close the door behind her. She would come up and wait patiently. When I did not reopen the door she would whine until I surrendered, and then come trotting triumphantly in. After she had suffered a few times with this mean trick, she perfected her own revenge. I would grab and throw the duck. Edna would begin her leap from then bed but would stop short. She just sat, her long red doggie tongue out and wagging. She was no sucker. I had to get up and go downstairs and retrieve the toy. Perhaps, in consideration thereof, she did not close the door against me. At least I interpreted it that way, but what a touché that would have been!



Another trick I had involved both her acute hearing and her love of tidbits. When I went downstairs late at night to get myself a bite, the crinkle of cellophane inevitably awakened her, lying in my wife's arms, and brought her charging down the staircase for her share. I got into the habit of merely rattling cellophane and then demonstrating the bare sheet to her when she came down. Of course, her crestfallen look had to be assuaged and inevitably I gave her a tidbit. Some people say dogs are dumb. Not always, I would reply.

Doggie years are compressed about 7 to 1 compared to an average human lifetime, and after some years, one day we found Edna downstairs and looking helplessly at us. She did not get up or move at all, and we realized she could not move the back half of her body. We carried her to the veterinarian and were told she had suffered a stroke. Hopefully, she would recover but there was nothing we could do except care for her. This we did, feeding her and carrying her out for bowel movements, which she could manage still. I carried her to her beloved woods, and gently placed her down. Slowly she regained the use of her limbs, and after a while had fully recovered. The next turn, somewhat later, would be mine.

Edna became a mother, once, for we had her spayed afterward. We generally allowed her to go out unescorted to relieve herself, in our back yard, but on one occasion, she made better use of her time. Up the street there lived a proud purebred black-haired French poodle and Edna, who was in heat, was undoubtedly aware of him. He no doubt would later have thought of the incident as a mere dalliance, and Janet initially thought she had arrived just in time to prevent any sexual hanky-panky. Actually, she was just too late. Soon she was showing signs of motherhood. The owner of the poodle requested the pick of the litter, something he later was disinterested in, as the pups were not purebred. However, as her date arrived, we prepared a nice cushioned carton for her and her brood. On the day itself, we discovered her in the yard, digging a broad hole. We felt our preparations were cleaner and better, and unceremoniously picked her up and brought her to the carton. There she gave birth, one after another, to four little puppies, one black and white, one brown and white, one jet-black puppy, and one, alas, still-born. All the neighborhood kids were around watching a real-live Nature show and marveling. Later they asked me what I had done with the dead pup. I told them I had buried it, and this satisfied them but actually its disposal was regrettably less dignified. The puppies combined all the best features of their parents, and Edna allowed us and even all the kids of the area to fondle them, except during nursing. We soon gave them the run of selected portions of the house, pursuing the mouse-sized creatures with zest, and occasionally cleaning up small messes.

They, like their mother, remain with us today only in photographs. We could not keep all the pups, and gave them away. With one exception, none was able to live very long, as their new owners were careless watching them when they dashed in to streets. The one survivor had gone to a farm, where I assume he lived a long and happy life and enriched the lives of his new owners just as his mother enriched ours.

When I was only a little past forty, I suffered a heart attack. It was a mild myocardial infarction, a tear in the hearty wall. The initial pain had been severe, and when I described my symptoms to a physician, he had me hospitalized immediately. Although after an injection of Demerol, I was never again subjected to such pain, I was kept immobile. I was on Librium, the predecessor of Valium, constantly, and prone to fall asleep in the middle of conversations. For three weeks, I was kept in bed, doing all my eating, reading and excretory functions right there. Only after those 21 days was I allowed to dangle my legs over the edge of the bed. Not to get up, just to dangle. Then, after a day, I was allowed to get up on my feet. I discovered that my legs had turned to jelly, and had to support myself, but strength gradually returned. In all that time, while Janet could visit me, the children could not. She began bringing in a tape recorder with messages from the children, and I would respond to them. It was a satisfactory mode of communication, but often I heard Edna barking. Janet explained that when she heard my voice, she recognized it and began looking for me, and barking, then was frustrated when she could not find me. After 28 days, I was allowed to leave the hospital and return home.

My wife and my children recall the dramatic sequel. I came into the house and sat down on a living room chair. Edna came over at once, not barking, just keening. She sat down at my side and would not leave. Of all the many remembrances I have of our dog, this is the most haunting and unforgettable of all. She gave up whatever games she usually played, forgot her toys, and just stayed, without a sound, without looking for attention, not even the loving stroke of my hand on her fur, just stayed next to me.

I had always said I would never put my dog to sleep, simply to save the efforts of caring for an elderly animal. As she grew older, she became weaker. Often, on our walks, I had to carry her home. We still walked. When we left the house, she stood atop our stoop of four brick steps, peering down with eyes increasingly clouded by cataracts, as though it were the Grand Canyon. I carried her down and we slowly walked. When she was seventeen, she could not control her bowels any longer. We kept her on the linoleum floor of the kitchen, day and night, and closed the doors. Nighttime accidents however, became regular, and each day required our cleaning her and the room. She was not resistant to our efforts, or to anything else. At eighteen and a half, a very long life for a dog, even a mutt, we went to the veterinarian, just a regular visit, still hoping he could help. He took the matter out of our hands, and gave us papers to sign. He explained that the dog was old, blind, helpless, living only to eat and excrete, that it was no kindness to keep her alive, and he was putting her to sleep, finally, the long sleep. We left the office alone, silently, and drove home. In the car Janet abruptly cried out just once, in the pain of loss, no more, and that was all. We did not replace her.

Over the many subsequent years I have often had dreams in which my loving dog, which, on that unforgettable day would not leave my side, strolled through. Strangely, Edna appeared reincarnated in a dog of a neighbor a few blocks away. She looks so much like her, complete even to that air-conditioner of a tail. However, she is a bit leaner in the legs, a tad taller, but most significantly far from the amiability and loving sweetness of Edna, our once and future and forever beloved mutt.

## Recently Read

### Books of Gregory Maguire

Recently I reviewed Maguire's latest novel, *Mirror Mirror*, for PW. It was an eye-opener. I knew he had written *Wicked*, a novel based on themes from *The Wizard of Oz*, and assumed he was simply an exploiter, using predigested notions. However, the novel (1995) was a success and had recently been adapted into a musical, which was premiering in San Francisco. My visiting brother and sister-in-law saw it there but were not overly impressed. Nor, for that matter, were the critics. It will officially open on Broadway on Oct. 30, 2003. As I write, early in October, I have not yet seen it. When the novel first appeared, it appeared to fit the mold that had been mined ten or so years ago, in *Was*, another Ozian story, by Geoff Ryman, which I disliked quite intensely. I had therefore skipped reading *Wicked*, but I had to read *Mirror Mirror*, as it was assigned. And, I discovered, Maguire is a brilliant writer who uses his theme and constructs a story around it. Thus, just as he used the Oz themes, so in this latest, the basis is Snow White, and in another, *Confessions of An Ugly Stepsister*, well, you can guess which children's story he used.

Children's fiction is part of his regular writing regimen. He has written more than half a dozen, for various childhood ages, and has taught the genre as well, in high school and in university. He has published both more or less from the beginning, books for 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> graders and *Wicked* as well, as far back as 1995. I would guess he liked the genre, and initially at least, had not thought of rewriting classics. Nor does he follow the pattern precisely. *Wicked* goes all over the lot, inventing witches L. Frank Baum did not catalog, not does he make Dorothy Gale a villain, even though her house landed kerplunk on one of them. *Mirror Mirror* is set in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, in beautiful Tuscany, and you can see it before you, at least if you have ever been there, in the beautifully written prose, for Maguire is in essence a masterful writer. The sinister Lucrezia Borgia is a primary, indeed *the* primary character, and her beautiful and innocent nemesis is Bianca, his Snow White. Lucrezia makes an easy witch, and Maguire gets his apples from an unusual source, the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, nothing less. He says a legend exists of such a branch but without the living apples he has still attached. The story, however, while following the parameters of the classic Grimm tale, is not hidebound by them. Bianca is not kissed and rescued by a handsome knight, although a kiss does awaken her in her glass-lined tomb (the glass is from the infamous mirror), and Lucrezia finally gets her deserts in a place as glamorous as she, Venice. When I spoke to him, interviewing him, I said that his Venice is so glamorous I suspected it would be the site of his next such adaptation. He laughed and asked how I knew! The dwarfs (he employs Tolkien's spelling as "dwarves" but Disney's are still pre-Tolkien "dwarfs"). They have no names until Bianca, freed by the huntsman ordered by Lucrezia to kill her, but too sympathetic, gives them some, and even then, one is not too certain they are ordinary living creatures, not merely stones to which she has intuited life. He also agreed with this.

*Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, the Cinderella story, of course, is set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland, to which the mother of the two unattractive girls returns, fleeing, from England where her husband had been killed. She goes to work for a well-to-do man, his wife and their beautiful daughter. One suspects immediately, to fit the framework of the original, that the wife will die, the housekeeper will replace her and her girls will become stepsisters to the somewhat surly child. Eventually the girl, Clara, is more comfortable

doing servant's work and sitting in the ashes around the hearth. However, when Marie De Medici comes to Haarlem, announcing a great ball, to which her nephew, the handsome French prince will come, the wheels are in motion. There are surprises, and in the end one is not too certain of anything, or even which ugly stepsister was "confessing." It is a wonderful book, although without the beautiful fantasy suffusing *Mirror Mirror*. Sorry, there are no mice, no pumpkin, not even a fairy godmother. Well, there actually is one, in a sense, but not Walt Disney's version.

At the same time, he has a running series, titled numerically, but starting from 7 and working down, for 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> graders. 7 is *Seven Spinning Spiders*, 6, 5, 4 (etc., *Four Stupid Cupids*, I love that) and he has currently completed 3. Unlike Harry Potter and his friends, these classroom kids and their teacher never age, just have some new kids join them. Each book has a fantastic theme, which quietly peters out, cloning, aliens, etc. They are influenced by Raold Dahl's kid books, but lack the bite, the delightful nastiness of his, and none comes close to Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (not to be confused with the trite movie version.)

I finally got to *Wicked* and *Lost*, but I discovered there was a difference. These were actually more or less straight novels, not dependent on other stories, except that *Wicked* took place in Oz and its protagonist was Glinda's sister, Elphaba, a green baby with dangerously long and sharp teeth who grows up to be the Wicked Witch of the West, much maligned, perhaps unfortunately so. Nevertheless, most of the characters and situations are original and not dependent upon any preexisting Oz framework. Dorothy and her tornado-tossed house eventually land upon Elphaba, but Dorothy is dismissed as an ordinary, not terribly attractive child and plays no major role. Her beloved companions are also more or less dismissed. Inasmuch as the book hews to its own path within Oz, it should be considered as another belated attempt at an Oz novel, of which many mostly amateur examples now abound, few touching the obvious literary quality, at least, of this one. Considering its sometimes mildly horrendous content, it would nevertheless scarcely qualify as belonging to the cycle. However, it has had its success, perhaps with Oz fans too, although my son and I both disliked it. It simply does not have that particular quality of Baum, not even in the slightest degree, and when he was at his best, he was unmatched. Truthfully, I ask for nothing less, and otherwise see no justification for intrusion. Maguire is conscious of this and deliberately avoided it. *Lost* concerns a novelist, who has had great success with an astrology book, but wants to do serious writing. Again, it is unlike the novels I liked which ingeniously were adapted into historical frameworks, but is an independent novel instead. It involves to some degree Ebenezer Scrooge and Jack the Ripper although my surely too hasty perusal was unfair and I saw precious little mention of them, and instead, much useless chatter and pointless incident. Nevertheless, what I liked by Maguire I liked immensely. My interview with him for PW revealed a very pleasant and ambitious man. He tells me that although *Wicked* was intended as a story of evil (he first thought of Hitler as a subject, but the ramifications are too immense, whereas the Wicked Witch is as well known without that baggage. Despite its being an adult book, he says he gets letters from admiring youngsters as young as 12 who like it. Co-incidentally, I noted another book, non-fiction, entitled "Mirror Mirror"! Titles cannot be copyrighted. Perhaps authors should have a union, like Actors Equity, which forbids two actors from using the same name. One must be altered.

Barry N. Malzberg and Bill Pronzini have been long-time collaborators, on novels and stories. An amusing new book of generally very short, very varied and always sardonic

stories is *Problems Solved*, and I recommend it as a good occasion piece. I read one or two of them when I wake up, as I almost always do, about 2 a.m., although it easy to surrender to the temptation to read more. They usually afford a wry chuckle and help clear the mind. The stories date from the 1970s and 1980s. These are often in the tradition of Saki and Dahl, diverting, nastily funny, just what you need in the middle of the night. The title story is a man who is a self-styled professional problem solver, and Night Rider, another good one, is about a henpecked man who drives at night and is closely followed one night by another car. It is no act of prescience to guess that the body of his wife will be in his trunk and that the car following is being driven by himself, in an accusatory phase. When a guy spells everything correctly in an epistolary story except for "perruze" you know the word will be the tip-off, but it still does not hurt "A Matter of Life and Death". Poe is the inspiration for "Clocks", in which a man is unable to sleep because his new neighbor has so many clocks their ticking and bonging keep him awake. In the absence of a book like this he must kill the man. Think "The Tell-tale Heart" and "The Bells". There are science fiction stories, set in an immigration station on the moon, and sports stories as well. Plus a fine, characteristically snappy afterword by Barry, sincere and touching, on the collaboration itself. The stories may be lightweight perhaps, but who needs sumo stories? The publishers, Crippen and Landru, the names of famous murderers, offer a large list of criminous reprints and I wish I were young again, say, seventy, so I could commence on them

Barry gave me several books of science fiction stories, for one of which he had written a preface and an afterword. This is *The Cold Equations and Other Stories* (compiled and edited by Eric Flint). It contains a short novel, "The Survivors", Flint's proclaimed favorite, another eight short stories and another afterword, this by David Drake. The two postscripters each proclaim the title story (published in 1954 in *Astounding*) to be a masterpiece. Drake calls it one of the 10 finest *horror* stories, while Barry includes it within the "five most famous science fiction stories." Each is high praise, but, despite the inexorable and terrible conclusion, I would not call it "horror" as such. It is science fiction after all, and let's keep the twain apart. "Famous" is a peculiar word. I am not as encyclopedic by a fraction as Berry, but I know a little and had never heard of the story, although it turns out to have been "famous" indeed and frequently anthologized. At the least, I never had heard it mentioned in conversation with knowledgeable other fans. Nevertheless my friend and neighbor includes it with such truly famous, *frequently mentioned* classics as Ray Bradbury's "Sound of Thunder", Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall", Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" and Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon." Mighty company indeed.

Even now, I am uncertain I would place it on their level, and yet I must, for it is a tightly written, absolutely credible story, one which justifies science fiction itself as a literary base for philosophy, for it could have taken place nowhere else. In fact, one of the members of FAPA this very mailing mentioned it, saying he was shocked to hear someone had given it a "happy ending." Here is some mystery. The story appeared along more or less its present lines in a 1952 comic book first, in *Weird Science* as "A Dangerous Situation." Each commentator mentions it, but never says positively that Godwin wrote that story also. Presumably, he did, but if not, why give him the credit for transcribing it into words? There is an apocryphal story Barry mentions that Godwin offered to revise the ending and that John W. Campbell would not allow it. Such would destroy the story, indeed. It concerns a pilot of a rocket pod sent on an errand; his craft is so calibrated he cannot waste an ounce of fuel. Aboard his craft there is a young girl, a stowaway whose only wish is to visit her brother on the planet to which he is headed. If

he accommodates her, his mission will be ruined, as he will not have the fuel to accomplish it. He must jettison this healthy, likeable girl, must send her to death in space. Furthermore, knowing she will die, she must accept it. The parameters are firm, and the story, which was, I believe, televised by "Twilight Zone", must be left intact. It became widely controversial in its time, as many readers refused to accept its point, but it remains a classic, Godwin's claim to a place in the pantheon, like Keyes, for one brilliant and moving story. I have now read a number of the other stories, all capably written, typical of but none rising above the level of science fiction of the time, mostly plodding earnestly in the style JWC preferred for Analog which drove me away. Godwin quit writing and never produced a story with the effect of *The Cold Equations*.

Flint has also edited another collection, *The Creatures of Man*, by Howard L. Myers, a writer forgotten today. One story was published in 1952, then not until 1967 did he resume writing. He poured out several dozen from then until 1971 but died very young. Some stories appeared as by "Verge Foray". All were forgotten. I would agree with Flint that they are capable, but I found them unexciting in the long run. Some characteristic ironies, best exemplified by the title story, in which Man has filled a new planet uncomfortable for human beings with other creatures and especially insects of Earth, more sentient now. They retain a vague memory of man as a traveler who would return. When he does they do not recognize him. Nor does he remain, yet we realize, along with the Butterfly that Man was not a failure, as the insect "marvels at the boundless wonder of Man." Myers is inventive in theme, as with a story in which an epileptic child is saved by creating a separate self within him, a "Partner". Another has fun dealing with the universal human craving for chocolate. Competence is not genius, however.

A far more remarkable collection is *The Dedalus Book of Austrian Fantasy, 1890-2000*, 43 stories edited and translated by Mike Mitchell. A number of the writers were already familiar to me, Gustav Meyrink, Artur Schnitzler, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Max Brod (Kafka's inevitable shadow!), Franz Werfel and Yakov Lind, among many other presumably distinguished but unfamiliar names. The book, which filled air transport hours for me, was a delightful surprise, not only for the older writers, who were as one might guess filled with weltanschmerz and elements of the surreal, sometimes a sickly sweet air, sometimes grotesque, heavily influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, but for the younger writers, some of whom were often amusing takeoffs of Kafka, although few could match his quality, achieved by directly forthright simplicity over mad themes, and some doing remarkably funny science fiction. In the latter, very poker-faced and hence even funnier, "The Trouble With Time Travel," by Martin Auer, which is not bothered by the mechanics of the art, only by the results. People selfishly take advantage, such as one person who travels back to the time of the sculptor of the Venus de Milo and buys it, hot off the pedestal, complete with arms, resulting in two of them in today's world, the usual one without arms glumly sitting in the Louvre. Others travel ahead not merely to bring back tomorrow's inventions for today's world (and get it hopelessly messed up) but tomorrow's song hits, etc. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* emphasizing the absurd. Another is "In the Gulf of Carpentaria" a satire on the old pulp-style adventures, the platinum blonde, the seven foot tall, wild-eyed blue-skinned native – with a tail, the cursing sailors and the Malay, all revealed finally as a film being watched, only to have one of its characters appear in the flesh (cute but better if it had been left as satire.) Perhaps I laughed most at "An Up-and-Coming Concern" by Erich Fried, which treats marriage like a used car business. Men can trade in their wives for younger, nicer versions. As I was laughing and told Janet about it, she grew annoyed. However, she got the last laugh, because the women open up the same business and get rid of the men, much to the



annoyance of the men who see their sense of superiority and dominance uprooted. This could be a tough book to find, p/b, \$18.00, Dedalus, a British concern, distributed in the USA by SCB Distributors, Calif.

Little Lit # 3 is titled "It was a dark and silly night" and the contributors must start their stories this way. Like its predecessors it is a very large, hard-covered comic book, printed wholly in color on heavy paper and is delightful. The excellent cover is by Art Spiegelman, editor along with Francois Mouly, his wife. (See Chez Ondique for more about Spiegelman.) The terrific endpapers are by Martin Handford. The contributors include people well known in the comic art field and in children's literature, although this book is for all ages. (I enjoyed it as did my granddaughters, and it even has games for the kids.) Neil Gaiman, Gahan Wilson, Lemony Snicket, Basil Wolverton (a classic reprint – prior books have had Walt Kelly and Crockett Johnson's "Barnaby") and more writers and artists grace its pages. Art drew a personalized cartoon in each copy, and I shall use this for the cover, although he wrote his name in a dark section at the base. Neil signed with the "RIP" and doodled, and Francois also signed the page.

Not fantasy but very enjoyable is a slim book containing two essays by the inimitable E. B. White (author of *Stuart Little*) This is *Farewell to Model T and From Sea To Shining Sea*. His memories of the old Ford flivver restore to life what even old duffers like myself did not know, that the car was purchased in very simple shape, requiring what we would consider automatic items such as windshield wipers! There was no gas gauge; one put a stick into the tank and estimated. Floor pedals were three, and were confusing, and also came without cloth or rubber covers. All in all, driving one was an adventure, and it comes through with warmth and love, just as his descriptions of roadways and highways and stops does. What a craftsman!

The latest book in the distinguished Ash-Tree Press list is one of the best, Night Creatures, by Seabury Quinn, a collection of eleven of his finest non-Jules de Grandin stories (yes, there are some!) edited and introduced by two stalwarts of the genre, my dear friend Joseph Wrzos and Peter Ruber. It is a loving, gentle introduction too, modestly refraining from pointing out that Quinn was, in his time, the most popular *Weird Tales* author. Scarce wonder, the editors point out, as he was along with August Derleth its most prolific author. He actually had written 550 stories, for WT (and for other venues as well), and they all sold! He was a lawyer who, after trying only a single case, went into funeral practice for the rest of his life, published an enormous number of articles besides his fiction, and served his country in three wars in various capacities. His stories still are being reprinted, and the complete de Grandin stories have been collected in three huge volumes for the definitive Quinn devotees. I have had time for only one story so far, "Masked Ball", and it is a beauty. It is characteristic of Quinn, in style and content, being set in already romantic New Orleans, with a very beautiful and mysterious heroine of French origin. She is, *naturalment*, given to a sprinkling of French in her speech, but it is *charmant*. The hero is a quiet, stalwart ex-GI, who meets her and immediately falls in love. There is the requisite gambling scene, fancy ball and the inevitable duel. Yet it is touching and even poignant, belying Quinn's somewhat leaden prose, and avoids the usual clichés. It is a splendid achievement, well up to the standards I have grown to expect in any book edited by my erudite and scrupulous friend.

## BROADWAY BEAT

I cannot complain about obscurity in Samuel Beckett after seeing Savannah Bay (OB) by the late Marguerite Duras (film: "Hiroshima Mon Amour", and many more, films, novels, plays). It only lasted 65 minutes, was beautifully acted and staged, but I have little idea what it was about. Something involving an older woman and her granddaughter only, and her daughter, missing, or a child, perhaps dead. I do not know. Duras disliked naturalistic drama and wanted her work to be capable of many interpretations. I have difficulty having one, but it still was worthwhile, as I too tire of realistic and naturalistic drama all the time. Also, as my wife and I were dawdling about the lobby after the show, the lead, Kathleen Chalfont, a splendid actress, came in. We chatted and she told me she had been with the play five weeks and always found something new. I told her that perhaps in five weeks I might understand a little of it, but that I liked it anyway.

I had no such problems with Eight Days (Backwards) (OB) by Jeremy Dobrish, even though it was all written with scenes in reverse, starting today and working back. It was a comedy and the interesting thing was that had it been played sequentially, I do not think it would have been funny – the humor came only because we learned what had motivated the characters, all typical of the city scene, a man who belatedly in life seeks to do S/M with his unbelieving wife, a kid who goes to a fortune teller hoping to find a soul-mate in life – but we already know he had just missed out, big business people, etc. The plot and dialogue popped Janet's eyes a few times, but we both laughed and enjoyed it.

Douglas Carter Beane has written some good comedies, but his Mondo Drama (OOB) only flogs a dead horse, the Mondo Cane Italian films. These use snippets of outrageous human behavior and activities. (The original succeeded because its song "More" became a success.) Beane's version is merely a succession of pallid jokes, most of them the level of tired e-mail jokes that clutter our mailboxes daily. It all is especially silly inasmuch as most of the audience was not even born when these films appeared, and it required exposition from the three so-so actresses. I have seen so many poor shows that it would be unfair to characterize this as *the* worst, but I can say with assurance that none was worse. We went mostly because the director is working with my son on one of the shows with which Michael is involved, and although he did keep the show moving, nothing can save a trite and lousy book.

Fortunately, the next day came as a welcome relief, an excellent production of a fascinating story, and a one-man show at that, as Janet succumbed yet again to her nemesis (marvelous lighting and superb props enlarged it). I Am My Own Wife (OB) by Doug Wright is closely based on a true story, of a man who love most of his/her life as a woman, in East Berlin and the Nazis and then under Soviet domination. The sole actor handles many roles convincingly. Part of the play's punch comes late, as we must ask whether the stories this brave person reveals are true. Wright, who interviewed her in the early 1990s before her death, and did much research, takes no sides. It was a wonderful production. My son is working as lyricist for a musical, Grey Gardens, with this fine writer (he also wrote "Quills", for stage and screen) and I am very hopeful for it. Scott Frankel, who wrote the score for Michael's Doll, scored My Own Wife and will do Gardens. (See next page for an account of the Ravinia Festival production of Doll.)

Janet fell in love with Pilobilus, a dance company, years ago, for their comic invention and weird ways of twisting bodies into inextricable messes. That was long ago. Unfortunately, most dance companies get tired of repeating themselves, and I cannot blame them, so they dropped that style, and in 4 sets, one was an old, very comical one, and the other three, mostly picking up rigid bodies, twisting them, dumping them etc ad infinitum, were pretty much the undanceworthy same. It was a great disappointment to both of us.

Once again we saw Eiko and Koma (wife and husb., resp.), my son's companion's famous clients, in one of their outdoor performances, Offering (reconceived). (Sic.) Readers will recall these Japanese-born Americans are adherents of the Japanese *butoh* school, very slow movement, albeit their own conception of the art. They do it in many regional sites so you may have the opportunity to see them free. They will be as nothing you have ever seen, but beautiful, and their performance, which appeared to have more story content this time, ambiguous, was open to many interpretations. Try to see them. This was downtown on the East Side of Manhattan, 10<sup>th</sup> St on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, in the yard of the landmarked St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, to give it its full name. It stands on the oldest site of Christian worship in New York City.

The lead of Humble Boy (OB) by Charlotte Jones is an introspective, quiet, bumbling young man. His father, a gentle soul who had grown the magnificent stage set full of 3-foot high grass and an array of flowers, with a huge beehive in the center, has just died. The young man sees and chats with his ghost. His mother, meanwhile, a self-centered woman, has been carrying on an affair with another man and plans to marry him. The young man is opposed to this, but had had an affair with that man's daughter. They split then, and he is unaware she had a child. She also had other affairs. When he is surprised, she asks whether he expected her "to hie myself off to a nunnery." This is the only quotation from a play with a familiar ring, but it isn't really *Hamlet*, only a sort of cousin. In fact, the mother eventually gives the man up, also chats with the ghost, and stays home. It was a huge hit in London, so-so here, except for that set. Janet liked it more than I.

Years ago, "The Boys in the Band" was a success, picturing the gay scene with a bunch of men in a room. I forget its details, but The Last Sunday in June (OB) by Jonathon Tolins is the unintended update, when gay life is an accepted part of our scene. Two young men are about to go shopping for the new home they are buying, but their apartment in New York City overlooks the Gay Pride Parade, taking place on the title date. One decides to invite friends over. The humor is all gay-oriented and very funny, although some of the audience picked up references that eluded us. It avoids sit-com when it sombers down, as we learn the two men, although partners for seven years have not always been faithful. One guest, an actor, hopes this is not a gay play that gets serious in the last half. Another guest is getting married, to a woman, who knows what he is and does not care. When she shows up, brashly outspoken, she admits she likes gay men. At 90 intermissionless minutes it seemed somewhat long and redundant, and offered no quick fix, but it was a good and compassionate picture of a group only very slowly emerging from the outside of society.

Kiki and Herb: Coup de Theatre (OB) had a man (Kiki) in sequined shimmy-drag talking and "singing" (in a man's voice of course) accompanied by Herb who played the piano, the two being on for nearly 90 excruciating, painful minutes. The audience like all audiences wanted to enjoy it, and laughed it up, some critical response was good, but I am there to hate, to be shown, before I grant my august approval. There were possibilities, if familiar, a worn-out second-rate duo, with plenty of shady stuff in their backgrounds, grinding out torch numbers, giving useless advice, etc. The problems here were lousy, undistinguished material and lousy actors. Kiki should have been female; the cutie-pieness of this guy vanished as soon as he waved his masculine arms and opened his mouth. Our real problem was that there was no escape, which we quickly and desperately wanted. I do not like to march down an aisle and across another and exit during a show, so we had to sit and groan. Which we did. Book was by Justin Bond (the execrable Kiki) and music by Kenny Mellman (Herb). Two songs were familiar, and I suppose the rest were from the literature, but really 2<sup>nd</sup> rate, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> is more appropriate, like the show.

It has been a slack season, but rescue finally came, with an entrancing, physically beautiful interpretation by Mary Zimmerman (who did last year's superb *Metamorphoses*, based on Ovid and Grecian legend) of The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci (OB). In 90 minutes of reading his thoughts on all subjects, the proportions of the body, shadow, light, color, texture, the inadequacy of sculpture compared to painting (!), flight, etc., that miraculous mind roaming and noting everything and anything. There was no story, no plot, just that marvelous mind, adapted into many short moments and scenes, gracefully acted by eight men and women, all being aspects of

the questing mind of Leonardo. Knowing and loving him and Art as well, Janet and I (and the audience which roared its applause (unfortunately, the critics were far more reserved) thought it was (rivaled only by I Am My Own Wife) easily the best show of a drab summer season. It was as well a very apposite companion to the breathtaking show of 100 of his drawings shown earlier at the Metropolitan Museum. Everything in it, the amazing fluidity of the actors, the settings, the costumes, lighting, background music, all enchanting. Zimmerman is surely the current magician of the theatre, its Nikolai, its Fellini, a precious and questing intelligence.

Seen in Stockbridge, Mass in the Berkshires, a well-performed and directed revival of Assassins, music by Stephen Sondheim, book by John Weidman, based on an idea by Charles Gilbert, Jr. It is the stories of nine presidential murderers or would-be murderers, from John Wilkes Booth to Lee Harvey Oswald. I suspect the initial idea was a very black comedy on a minstrel show style, with really cutting stuff, but it emerged as a repetitious series of screwballs deciding to cure their unhappiness by "killing the president ". In consequence it lacked focus, at least until the most somber presentation, of Oswald, in which all the loonies past and present were urging him on to his duty as he saw it, not merely to commit suicide with a handgun but to use that big old rifle he had just happened to have brought along. It was sort of like the shy hero of so many movies who is urged by his friends to do a heroic act. This was a travesty at heart then, but hardly presented as such, thus repulsive. I liked best Sara Jane Moore, a mousy little housewife who never even got a shot off at poor abject Gerald Ford (subject also of a try by Squeaky Fromme!) Music was only a piano, which presented the songs as rather accessible tunes; since we are accustomed to sweepingly complex orchestration by Sondheim, I wonder whether such was his intent, although it does fit the minstrel show format.

Shows have been coming only slowly this summer, and the Joyce provided a welcome program, with the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Afro-American, out of Denver, where it has been an establishment for 33 years. It was a fine program, most effective for a dance devoted to Birmingham the day after the bombing of a black church in which four little girls were killed, and in Divinities, an imaginative, wonderfully choreographed, beautifully costumed piece with a thrilling score, a colorful setting of African legends. Ms Robinson, a tall, graceful and modest lady was on hand for a well-earned curtain call.

We returned from *Doll* exhausted from awful air transportation delays, and Janet awoke the next day feeling ill. She did recover but when I received an invitation to see Bill Irwin's new show that very night she underwent total recovery at once. The show as The Harlequin Studies (OB), consisting of an explanatory introduction, interesting, well staged but not too funny. It was, fortunately, followed by a hysterically funny commedia del arte comedy by the great clown, a loving tribute to the grand old Italian art school style, albeit with numerous modern touches. A well-chosen company, acrobatic and comic, filled the show out. Music was by his regular sidekick, Doug Skinner, making it a terrific 75 minutes.

9/11 was so horrific, truly a part of our history, that it resists our will even to see it dramatized. Nevertheless we saw two attempts. One was a concert, The Witness, sung by Suzanne Carey accompanied by the Russian pianist, Sergei Dreznin, book and lyrics by the American, Dennis Kozeluh, based on actual testimonies. I think a solid score without words would have been better. The lyrics tended finally toward banal hopes based on love and peace. Words were effective, often crushingly so, in Portraits, by Jonathon Bell, different actors in a series of monologues based on actual words or situations of that terrible day. He began with a nice if trivial piece and concluded with a woman who bitterly reviles her husband, who died that day, for being a hero and helping others to survive. She needed her husband, she shouts, and her children needed a father. Why did he have to be a hero, she cries. A woman whose son was one of those he saved, visits her, to express her appreciation and understanding, and helps the bereaved wife accept the situation. The monologues are strung together by an artist who wishes to accomplish what Picasso did after another act of terrorism, Guernica, in the 1930s in Spain. Unfortunately, it is not effective. A Picasso is beyond the purview of nearly any artist. The audience was small, for people cannot bear to see the subject, yet the play, which was most

respectfully written, merited attention. I think it would have done better as a one-shot TV performance. Nevertheless, it was worthy.

The theatre is sort of a minor league now, with a second play about baseball. Rounding Third (OB) by Richard Dresser is an amusing story of two little league coaches, one is a win-only man while the other, a new recruit, believes the kids should play for pleasure. It has sentimental turns in the men's own lives, but works well, with a stronger second act than the first, in which it forces itself into obvious paths. It was the first preview and hopefully the author will tighten it up. In one scene his own (unseen) and hapless outfielder son is trying to catch a game-ending flyball, and he prays that this one small but memorable act will work. It is a lengthy peroration and must surely have been the longest flyball in history. (The other baseball play is "Take Me Out" by Richard Greenberg, a very good, prize-winning play.)

A year or so ago we saw the British Jez Butterworth's "Mojo". I seem to recall it did not grab us, although it received good critical acclaim and has allegedly been translated into 30 languages. We just saw his latest, The Night Heron (OB), which could well be translated into English first. Some lowbrows are living in a shack on a marshy fen, and a night heron is flying about – that is about all the significance the title had. They sublet a room in this shack to a burly woman just out of jail, and eventually it is revealed that one of the men just killed someone to steal stuff for selling, and the other, who nearly shot himself at the beginning, goes into a room and does the job, while the wacky woman is reported to be driving off. All in a lousy English, in the land where this marvelous language was invented. It all proves that if you write something idiotic in London someone will stage it eventually at the Royal Court Theatre there. It is a place I would avoid if I went back, and should avoid transmogrification here.

Sometimes an honorable intention goes awry. Christopher Trumbo, an experienced TV screenwriter, wanted to do a play about his father, Dalton, and his experiences with the House Un-American Committee (HUAC) back in the witch-hunting years. He compiled it from his father's letters, and it emerged as Trumbo (OB) basically a one-actor play with another character in several roles, his son, a member of HUAC, etc. Actors rotating in the role would act Trumbo himself. Nathan Lane was first and we saw F. Murray Abraham. Unfortunately, there was no directing demonstrated. Abraham simply sat stolidly for 90 minutes, reading from a notebook, too fast and inaudibly. One cannot shout, after all, for 90 minutes. My hearing device (loaned free by all theatres now) unfortunately was getting interference from a radio station. I had to use it but it was like being at a party or in a busy restaurant, with other voices constantly impinging. Withal, there was nothing new, no serious emotion, just serious reading. The actors in my son's show, all held scripts and sometimes used them, but they were directed, they moved, etc. They were not mummies sitting immobile at a desk.

There is a sure-fire cure for the disgruntlement that follows unsuccessful plays, and that is a play by A. R. Gurney. This urbane, witty, intelligent quintessentially WASP writer and observer never lets us down. Sylvia (OOB) was just a small-theatre revival of his enchanting play that had eluded us a few years ago, when it helped skyrocket the reputation of actress Sarah Jessica Parker. I hope it does that for Pamela Graham, for she was a delight as the mutt whom Greg, a middle aging husband tired of his job and even disenchanting with his wife. Graham plays the dog, who talks to both Greg and Kate, jumps up and down and makes herself at home on the sofa, and is entirely believable as a dog. We loved Graham and the play and it inspired me to remember our own beloved dog, Edna, in the installment of "Journeys" in this issue.

A second OOB play proved to be another winner. Unstaged previously in the USA, P. G. Wodehouse's 1923 comedy Good Morning, Bill was completely delightful, and, working on a shoestring, the theatre came up with delightful costumes, staging, directing and acting. Typical PGW story, goofy British nobleman, beautiful girls, great character acting by old duffer as a doctor, nobleman, and golfer, a wonderful production which had you thinking you were at a Broadway show.

## DOLL, Live at Ravinia

Doll had a great reading at Lincoln Center last year, but years have passed for it, despite awards for production. Mostly that is because a producer dawdled over it so ineffectually long. In addition, the actress signed as lead failed Michael a number of times, taking inopportune walks. It finally came closer to a real production in Sept. 2003, a showcase production, a staged reading, scripts in hand, but used more as security blankets by the professional cast, at the Ravinia Festival just outside Chicago. His star had walked at the last moment *again* (having also sung in a prior show at Ravinia) but he was fortunate enough in Judith Blazer to find a real talent. It is not a rock show, and depends on an audience who has some knowledge of history and intelligence, and is a well-written fantasia on real people, with a grand sweeping score. It is based on actual people, Alma Mahler, widow of the composer, a flamboyant woman given to sexual escapades, marriages to Jews despite her anti-Semitic leanings, and a brief, tempestuous affair with the young painter Oskar Kokoschka. When she aborts her pregnancy he is infuriated and breaks the relationship. He has a full-size doll of her made that he escorts to restaurants and the opera, lavishing affection on it. The rest is Michael's art. Oskar's agent (based on a composite of actual people), furious that he has ceased creating art breaks up the doll. Oskar, now cognizant of his obsession bitterly returns to art. Alma, with greater understanding, recognizes that he never ceased loving her, but also sees the emotional impact of the doll as an alter ego, a doppelganger of herself. As the play ends she has reconstituted the pieces and begins whirling with it to one of the beautiful waltzes that Frankel composed.

A reprise of a song by the agent comparing the sawdust of which the doll is made to the government of Austria-Hungary, both crumbling, accompanies Alma, but the waltz sweeps her as the lights fade. Michael holds the first appearance of the doll until close to the ending of Act One, although he realizes the audience is surely curious about the title. He considered having a mention within the opening waltz, but I think it is better to delay her. She occupies close to center stage for much of Act II. There would be no suspense otherwise, and she would lose the mixture of revenge, curiosity and horror when we discover Oskar has, in a weird manner, transferred his love to the doll, and even placed a small doll within her as a pregnancy!

The climax is a marvelous scene, which, unfortunately, I must wait to see on Broadway when all the elements are in place, the perfect props, an orchestra, not a piano, however grandly Scott played, the dances and ensemble, and above all, the great opera house scene, a pastiche of the Olympia doll scene from *Tales of Hoffman*, with Frankel's music, but still for a coloratura soprano, whose springs need to be rewound several times, sung in French, and she on a grand swing in the manner of Fragonard's painting. It was not attempted anywhere close to that but should be breath-taking when properly staged. Will it ever happen? The theatre is lofty and great, but, like Alma, it is an impossible mistress.

Incidentally, in real life, Alma married Walter Gropius, the great Bauhaus architect, became pregnant with Franz Werfel's child while married, divorced Gropius and married Werfel. With the advent of Nazism they left Austria and moved to America. She had had composing dreams while married to Gustav Mahler, but he forbade her from writing. She toyed for years upon a slight piece, her ability being to inspire and to make love. Kokoschka was a great success in his early years, his paintings now in many museums, deeply introspective portraits, every vein outlined almost painfully. He stated his objective was to paint the interior of the body. He was wounded in WWI and returned home, married someone, and lived a sadly uneventful life, painting no more of his signal portraits but painting insignificant landscapes which are all forgotten now. His doll is lost but lives in photographs. She and Alma live again in Michael's play, the symbol and the actuality. People ask me. After seeing the standing ovations his play received, am I proud of my son? I wish him literal success, but for me, and for Janet as well, he represents what once I had dreamed of being, and my pride in him, his life, and his accomplishments only begins to state it.

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