

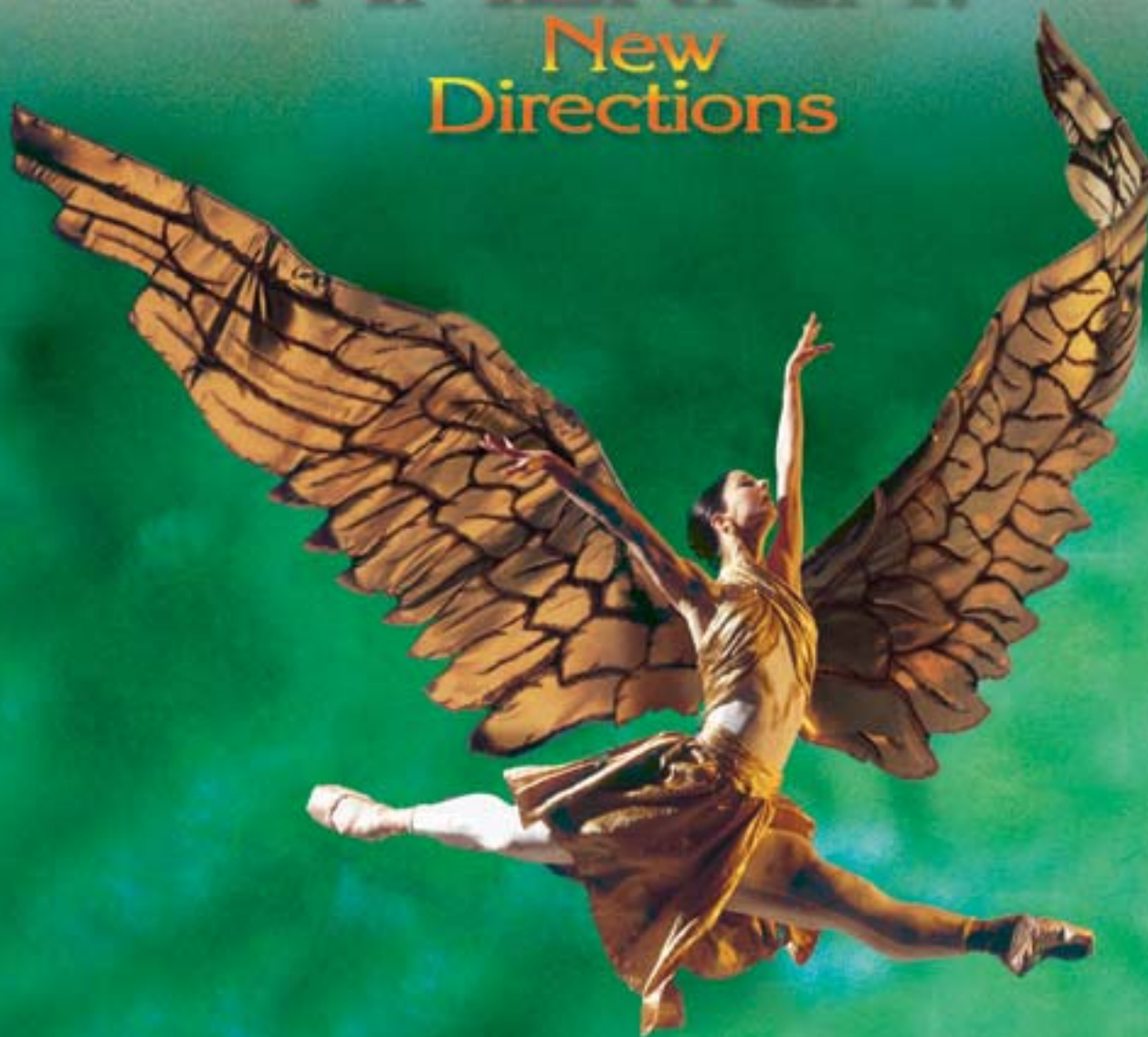
# U.S. SOCIETY & VALUES

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NUMBER 1

## The ARTS IN AMERICA: New Directions



APRIL 2003

# FROM THE EDITORS

In his recent book *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, the Australian-born art critic Robert Hughes identifies one of the core American experiences as “starting over, leaving behind what you once were.” For Hughes this does not mean wiping the slate clean but rather a complex interaction with previous tradition. “Somewhere inside the American museum,” Hughes writes, with a touch of humor, “there is always a small buried image of the immigrant getting off the boat with his luggage: boots, a Bible — or 27 Rembrandts.”

This kind of starting over is what artists do every day in making art. Starting from the ground up is also what we editors had in mind when we asked some of America’s leading experts in various art forms to tell us about the state of their field. What’s new, for example, in dance or the visual arts? Who are the most notable artists working in theater and music? How do current trends in movies and literature fit in with historical traditions?

Because any generalizations about the arts must be suspect in a country housing some 1,200 symphony orchestras, 117 professional opera companies, more than 400 dance companies, and 425 nonprofit professional theaters, each expert’s answer to these questions will necessarily be a partial answer. That’s why we have included a range of views — critics, working professionals in each field, portraits of the artists themselves. And, naturally, our experts sometimes disagree with one another. A diversity of opinions seems only fitting in a country where there is no ministry of culture, no official view of the best forms of art.

Yet this journal also reveals certain common themes. One is the increasing internationalization of art — the way contemporary American art forms are constantly enriched by the movement of artists and ideas across borders and vice versa. Another is what one critic calls “hybridity” — borders between art forms are breaking down as many artists work in cross-disciplinary ways. The dances of Mark Morris or Bill T. Jones sometimes incorporate spoken words; the visual artist Matthew Barney makes epic films that have the look of Hollywood movies. Another vital trend in the way new work gets created these days is the intricate cross-pollenization between the traditional centers of creativity on America’s coasts and the country’s less populated regions. In his overview essay, critic Terry Teachout makes the point that some of New York City Opera’s most exciting new work originates at Glimmerglass Opera, a small company in a small town in upstate New York.

What is at the root of all the ongoing creative ferment that this journal documents? In our opening interview, Dana Gioia, the poet who is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, identifies one likely source: “The reason that America has had this diversely distinguished history of art, this unprecedented breadth of achievement — ranging from movies to abstract expressionism to jazz to modern literature — is because America was and is a society that recognizes the individual freedom of its citizens.” ■

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APRIL 2003

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# BRINGING ART TO ALL AMERICANS

A CONVERSATION WITH  
DANA GIOIA

**T**here is no central ministry of culture that sets national policy for the arts in the United States government. The two national endowments — the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) — provide grant support for individual artists and scholars and for arts and humanities institutions. While the NEA budget — \$115 million for fiscal year 2003 — is quite modest when compared to other nations' public arts funding, private donations have always provided the major support for American culture. Private spending for the arts in the United States for the year 2002 has been calculated at roughly \$12.1 billion. During its nearly four decades of existence, the NEA, whose goals are to encourage excellence and to bring art to all Americans, has used its funds as a spark for private beneficence.

When Dana Gioia took over the NEA chairmanship early in 2003, he brought unusually broad cultural expertise to the position. Known mostly as a poet and essayist, Gioia spent 15 years as a corporate executive, writing verse in his spare time, before becoming a full-time artist. His pivotal 1991 reflection on his craft, "Does Poetry Matter?" (see Bibliography) — originally a magazine article — later was expanded into a book and continues to fuel spirited discussion. He has also written newspaper, magazine, and radio commentaries on music, film,



Dana Gioia

literature, and art, and has composed librettos for operas.

In the following conversation, Gioia discusses a range of subjects, from the public and private aspects of American culture to the evolution of various disciplines.

**Q:** Let's begin by viewing the arts in America through your unique prism — the NEA itself.

**A:** I come to the NEA with a very simple vision. A great nation deserves great art. America is the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the history of the world. But the measure of a nation's greatness isn't wealth or power. It is the civilization it creates, fosters, and promotes. What I hope to accomplish here, in the broad sense, is to help foster the public culture that America deserves.

Although we are the largest arts funder in the United States, the NEA's budget represents less than one percent of American philanthropic spending on the arts. So the federal government could never "buy" a certain kind of culture. Our role at the NEA is leadership. We are in the unique position of being the only institution that can see all of the arts from a national perspective. Enlightened leadership from us could accomplish goals in American culture more quickly and more pervasively than efforts by any other institution might. What excites me about my position is the possibility of using the arts to make America a better place in which to live.

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**Q:** Contrast, in general terms, American philanthropy with the European model with which the world is quite familiar.

**A:** The European model grew out of a tradition of royal and aristocratic patronage that in modern times has been assumed by the state. Over there, the majority of an arts institution's budget comes from federal or local subsidies. The American model rests on private philanthropy. And it works. We have an enormous range and depth of museums, symphonies, theaters, opera houses, and ballet companies.

Historically, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, the NEA used federal funds across the country to seed the development of regional dance, theater, and opera, as well as, to a lesser degree, museums and symphonies. The enormous number of these institutions that now exist in middle-sized American cities is evidence of the power of the NEA to lead.

**Q:** How do we explain the emergence of significant private funding for the arts, over the decades, even the centuries?

**A:** The arts in America grow out of American culture. The reason that America has had this diversely distinguished history of art, this unprecedented breadth of achievement — ranging from movies to abstract expressionism to jazz to modern literature — is because America was and is a society that recognizes the individual freedom of its citizens. American philanthropy follows the same model. America is perhaps the only nation in the world in which there have been hundreds of people who created enormous fortunes and gave them away within a single lifetime to philanthropic enterprises.

**Q:** Is there a corner of culture that might have escaped wide notice?

**A:** The original mission of the NEA was to foster excellence and bring the arts to the American people. We would now probably qualify that as bringing art to *all* Americans — recognizing the multitude of special communities in the United States, some cultural, some geographic, some related to language, and some related even to age and physical capabilities. All of those groups are our constituencies. We've also come to realize that to support our goals, we must have a role in education. And so providing leadership in arts education is now another goal of the NEA.

**Q:** What excites you the most about American culture these days?

**A:** There are several huge, overarching trends in the arts today. The first I would characterize as a kind of aesthetic crisis. As America enters the 21st century, there is a growing conviction that the enormous explosion of energy that came out of the modernism movement that began after World War I has reached its end. We still appreciate the rich legacy of modernism and the avant-garde, but it no longer seems to have the generative power it once possessed. There is a growing consensus on the need for synthesis between the intensity and power of modernism and experimental art, with the kind of democratic accessibility and availability that traditional and popular arts have. In every art form in which I have an active participation, I see this trend of artists trying to reconnect themselves to the public. What is emerging — whether one likes it or not — is a kind of new populism.

**Q:** How does this play out, for instance, in music?

**A:** Look at classical music — which actually leads me to the second major trend, the notion of fusion — disparate traditions coming together. For example, there is a very powerful movement in American music called world music, spanning everything from classical to pop — an attempt to combine and harmonize Eastern and Western traditions. You also see a kind of technological fusion — taking traditional performing arts and applying the potential of new technology. Twenty years ago, the emerging trend was postmodernism. But I think postmodernism in some ways was just an attempt to add to the life span of modernism. Today, the movements are not so much characterized by manifestos and methods as by intuition and outreach.

**Q:** And outreach is how you make the arts accessible?

**A:** Yes. The history of the arts in America, to a certain degree, reflects the excellence and depth that comes from elitist traditions tempered by the human possibilities of art in a democratic culture. That is a dialectic that will probably never be exhausted, but will take a slightly different form with each era. No art can cut itself off from its history. Even futurism and the avant-garde have deep and complicated traditional backgrounds. What often happens in the arts is that you reject your parents while embracing

your grandparents.

**Q:** You mentioned world music as an example of technological fusion. Talk about music in terms of the first trend you cited — the new populism.

**A:** The major tendencies in American classical music at the moment all have traditional roots. There is the new romanticism, which is the most overtly traditional. There is the world music movement, which uses non-Western traditions. And there is minimalism, which basically combines classical and pop traditions. All of these styles aim at accessibility.

**Q:** How do the megatrends play out in some of the other art forms?

**A:** In painting, interestingly, one of the major trends has simply been the reaffirmation of paint as a medium — as opposed to construction or collage and various other forms of expression. There has also been a revival of figurative and landscape painting as viable alternatives to conceptual art and abstraction.

In poetry, there has been an enormous revival of form and narrative. One of the major literary trends in America has been the re-creation, entirely outside of official intellectual culture, of popular poetry — rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams [oral competitions in which the audience selects the winner]. Almost always, it employs meter and rhyme, even if it's a syncopated jazz rhythm as in rap, or, in cowboy poetry, a revitalization of the kind of stress meter of the border ballads. So what you see, in a sense, is an attempt to reestablish a relationship between the past and present, to mix the modernist and traditional modes to create something contemporary.

In theater, the most highly regarded American playwright in mid-career is August Wilson. Wilson, essentially, has revived the naturalist tradition that you see in Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.

**Q:** Take a play of Wilson's like *The Piano Lesson* — tradition, family history...

**A:** Exactly. It focuses on social issues. Yet more interesting, perhaps, in American theater is what a European would call *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "together artwork" — the Wagnerian notion of a theatrical piece that involves multiple media. New operas and opera productions are more overtly literal because the subtitles make their dramatic and poetic elements accessible to the audience. Meanwhile, in theater, you have someone like Julie Taymor, who brings together elements of *commedia dell'arte*, music, and

spectacle that one usually considered the province of opera or ballet. You have the notion of trying to fuse media — dance, opera, musical theater, spoken theater, even puppetry — into a total theatrical experience.

**Q:** Your own work is a mirror on this kind of fusion, isn't it?

**A:** Yes. I'm a poet, and before I took office here, I was collaborating with dance and opera companies. There are dance companies in the United States that employ resident poets and use texts with music and dance.

**Q:** I'd like you to place your personal history — someone who worked in corporate America while nurturing a career as poet and critic and essayist — against the backdrop of the responsibilities in which you'll be engaged for the next phase of your working life. What does that renaissance duality — the worlds of business and culture — mean for the Endowment?

**A:** If I am a renaissance man, it is only because it was the only way I could survive as a working artist. I wanted to be a poet, and I didn't want to have a career at a university — which meant I had to find some other way of making a living. I'm a working-class kid from Los Angeles who spent 15 years in corporate America working 10 to 12 hours a day while writing nights and weekends. I did that to survive as a writer, but I also discovered that I was good at business. I learned things in the business world that I don't think writers necessarily learn in their art form, like teamwork — the fact that you can accomplish so much more if you can create a situation in which, by working together against common goals, everyone can succeed. Business also taught me the importance of understanding what you want to do in the long term, and working toward it. Ironically, when I left business, I promised myself that I would never work for a large corporation again.

**Q:** What spurs your cultural sensibility these days?

**A:** I've long felt that one of the missing pieces in American culture is a new generation of public intellectuals — serious intellectuals, that is, who are not affiliated with universities. America needs more artist-intellectuals who can speak without condescension in a public idiom.

We have had a distinguished tradition in this regard that goes back at least as far as Emerson and Poe, up through the extraordinary explosion of New

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York Jewish intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s — which may have been the high point in the American tradition.

**Q:** When did the system change?

**A:** In the decades after World War II, the university system in the United States grew so large in the midst of a prosperous society that academia employed most of the intellectuals. Increasingly, these men and women began to speak within a narrow discipline, rather than to a diverse audience of intelligent readers. At the same time, the various media that once employed these public intellectuals grew smaller. One of the issues that most interests me is how to reinvent the media for public intellectual life. How can we create opportunities for artists and thinkers to address a general audience?

**Q:** How is American intellectual life currently changing?

**A:** I believe America is currently undergoing a transformation that I like to think of as the creation of a new Bohemia. The old Bohemia, in American terms, was an urban neighborhood characterized by a concentration of artist-intellectuals who crossed disciplines and were organized without regard to social class. The poet e.e. cummings, for example, also painted, wrote fiction, and did theater. Ezra Pound wrote music, criticism, and poetry. Wyndham Lewis was a superb painter as well as a novelist. A lesser-known American writer I greatly admire, Weldon Kees, was a poet, a writer of fiction, an

abstract expressionist, an art critic, and also an experimental filmmaker. Bohemia is based on the notions that the different arts reinforce and nourish one another and that creativity happens best in a classless situation where talent and energy are the currencies.

Today, a new sort of Bohemia is emerging — not as neighborhoods in big cities, but as a virtual community through technology. It moves through the Internet, inexpensive phone calls, the fax, overnight delivery, electronic publishing — and also through the creation of such temporary Bohemias as writers conferences, artists colonies, and artists schools, where people come together for a week or more. These communities are not defined by local geography but by cultural affinity.

In the broadest sense then, the question is, how do you create artistic and intellectual life outside the institutional support of the university? Not that the university is bad, but rather that a culture is richer when art is created in many places in a society and when academic and bohemian cultural life creates a healthy dialectic. Even though my heritage is Italian and Mexican, my thinking is Germanic in that I believe in dialectics — how forces meet and transform each other constantly. Or perhaps such intellectual hybridization is characteristically American. ■

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*The interview with Dana Gioia was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*



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# THE RETURN OF BEAUTY

BY TERRY TEACHOUT

**W**hat a difference a century makes. In 1903, comparatively few Americans took anything like a passionate interest in the arts. Only two living American novelists, Mark Twain and Henry James, had done major work, and Twain's was long behind him. Our best painters, the American impressionists, hewed to a style frankly derivative of their European models; our art museums were narrowly provincial in scope and ambition. We had no great composers, no great poets or playwrights, no ballet companies, and only a handful of symphony orchestras and opera companies.

Merely to draw up such a list, though, is to see how radically the arts in America were transformed in the 20th century. Under the aspect of modernity, the United States came to play a central role in all the arts. (We even invented three new art forms — jazz, modern dance, and the motion picture.) In addition to producing world-class artists of our own,



Cellist Yo-Yo Ma plays during a Concert of Remembrance in New York's Carnegie Hall in honor of those affected by the September 11 terrorist attacks.

this country attracted emigrés from all over the world whose work was promptly absorbed into the mainstream of American culture. Moreover, the mass media made the fruits of this great transformation available not merely to a highly educated elite class but to any American who cared to partake of what the British poet Matthew Arnold so famously called “the best that has been thought and said in the world.”

To be sure, ours is essentially a popular culture, and one cannot fully appreciate *any* kind of American art without acknowledging the extent to which so much of the best of it springs from that culture. The art critic

Clement Greenberg, among the first commentators to single out “middlebrow” popular culture as a threat to the integrity of high art in America, once referred to “the American mind” as typified by “its positivism, its unwillingness to speculate, its eagerness for quick results, and its optimism.” But he failed to realize that those traits might themselves

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serve as the basis for a characteristically American style in art, one that would amalgamate high, middle, and low, thereby ennobling popular culture even as it popularized serious culture. It was a tricky balancing act, and many artists found it hard to keep from slipping into the slough of pandering.

But it was possible, and today no one needs to be persuaded of the significance of those modernists who spoke in the crisply empirical, immediately accessible tone of voice now acknowledged by the whole world as all-American. Louis Armstrong, Fred Astaire, Willa Cather, Aaron Copland, Stuart Davis, Duke Ellington, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Frost, John Ford, George Gershwin, Howard Hawks, Edward Hopper, Flannery O'Connor, Jerome Robbins, Frank Lloyd Wright: Surely these and others like them rank high among our exemplary figures, the ones whose work is indelibly stamped "Made in U.S.A."

And what of the state of American art now that the modern era has come at last to an end? For the most part, it is quite astonishingly vital and promising, though some art forms, not surprisingly, are in better shape than others. But it is also true that art in America is coming out of a bad patch. Starting in the 1960s, American culture, for the first time in its brief history, fell victim to a bad idea, one that for close to a quarter-century held considerable sway over our artists and critics. All at once, it seemed, we had lost our collective willingness to make value judgments — to take Duke Ellington seriously while simultaneously acknowledging that Aaron Copland was the greater composer. In its place, we got postmodernism, which not only denied that either man was great, but rejected the very idea of greatness itself.

**T**aken literally, "postmodernism" means nothing more than that which came after modernism, and by the 1960s, the modern movement in art, for all its epochal significance, was nearing the end of its run. Not that all modernists had ceased to do important work. (A few, such as the modern-dance choreographer Paul Taylor and the abstract-expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler, are doing

it to this day.) Still, the modern movement as a whole had degenerated over time, as movements will do, into a rigid ideology whose spokesmen habitually drew false conclusions from false premises. Those were the days when abstract painting, atonal music, and plotless dance were being presented as historically inevitable, a quasi-Marxist argument whose makers not infrequently sought to quash dissent, also *à la* Marx. It was time for a change, but the one that came would prove reminiscent of political commentator H.L. Mencken's definition of democracy as "the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard."

For all the reams of fuzzy prose that have been penned on the subject of postmodernism, its underlying premise is straightforward. To coin a paradox, postmodernists are absolute relativists. They disbelieve in truth and beauty, claiming instead that nothing is good, true, or beautiful in and of itself. Rather, "goodness," "truth," "beauty," and "quality" are constructs imposed by the powerful on the powerless for political purposes. Hence there can be no great art and no great artists (except for Marcel Duchamp, the patron saint of postmodernism and its own exemplary figure). Shakespeare? Beethoven? Cézanne? Mere capitalist tools, used to anesthetize the masses and prop up the decadent ruling classes of the West. To the postmodernist, randomness was as good as order, noise as good as music, and all artistic statements were created equal, though those made by the nominally powerless were more equal than others.

As a theory, postmodernism is so patently absurd as to need no refuting — save by the immediate experience of great art — but its purely practical consequences have not been altogether negative. For one thing, it put a long-overdue end to the stifling late-modernist monopoly. Precisely because of its indifference to "quality," postmodernism also encouraged the blending of dissimilar styles, an approach well suited to American artists, who have always had a knack for melting down unlikely combinations of cultural ingredients into such shiny new alloys as jazz and modern dance. It gave tradition-loving artists room to maneuver, especially those classical composers who still believed in the natural law of tonality, which had long since been

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declared anathema by the avant-garde.

Most of the time, though, postmodern audiences were expected to make do with the resoundingly empty gestures of conceptual art and minimalist music, in which theory replaced content. (The critic Hugh Kenner once defined conceptual art as that which, once described, need not be experienced.) In the whole history of art, no major theoretical movement has produced more theory and less art than postmodernism. Ultimately, it amounted to little more than a set of attitudes, foremost among them the marginalization of the idea of beauty and its replacement with the sniggering, fearful Irony Lite that was the hallmark of American culture in the 1990s. It was an aesthetically sterile position, and for that reason it was doomed — though no one could possibly have envisioned the terrible occasion that proved that it, too, had run its course.

**T**he destruction of the World Trade Center, among countless other things, may well have brought an end to the unthinking acceptance of postmodern relativism. On that never-to-be-forgotten morning, Americans awakened to the crudest possible reminder that some things are not a matter of opinion. Even the most fashion-obsessed neighborhoods of Manhattan found themselves awash in fear and bedecked with flags, and the word “evil” quickly reentered the vocabulary of a generation of educated innocents who thought there was no such thing.

Something similar happened when, a few days later, musicians in New York and elsewhere began giving memorial concerts to which the public flocked. What did they come to hear? Yo-Yo Ma played Bach at Carnegie Hall; Plácido Domingo sang *Otello* at the Metropolitan Opera House; Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic broadcast Brahms’ *German Requiem* to the entire country over the Public Broadcasting System. And did anybody complain because the Met performed Verdi instead of Arnold Schoenberg? To ask the question is to know the answer. “One greatly needs beauty when death is so close,” old King Arkel sings in Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. What Americans wanted in their time of

need was beauty, and they never doubted for a moment that such a thing existed.

But this collective renewal of belief in the power of truth and beauty did not suddenly take place on the morning of September 11, 2001. It was already in the wind, just as postmodernism itself was not so much an era as an episode, a gradual transition from one cultural epoch to the next. What we are now seeing, by contrast, is the emergence of a genuinely new style for which no one as yet has coined a better name than “post-postmodernism.” It was evident, for instance, in the growing willingness of independent-minded American filmmakers to engage directly — and beautifully — with the problem of postmodern relativism. One encountered it, for instance, in Terry Zwigoff’s *Ghost World*, the poignant story of two disaffected teenagers trapped in a grubby pop-culture hell of strip malls, convenience stores, and round-the-clock Muzak, set adrift on the sea of relativity by their barely visible baby-boomer parents. Or *You Can Count on Me*, written and directed by the playwright Kenneth Lonergan, in which we meet Terry, an immature small-town drifter, and Sammy, his stay-at-home older sister, orphaned in childhood and desperately lonely as young adults, deeply flawed but not without virtue, seeking to make their way in a world that no longer has much to offer in the way of certainty. Revealingly, Lonergan himself played the role of a Methodist minister so afraid of being judgmental that he is reluctant to assure Sammy that the adulterous affair in which she is engaged is endangering her soul. (“Well, it’s a sin,” he says, “but we don’t tend to focus on that aspect of it, right off the bat.”)

Another key figure in the new post-postmodern style is the modern-dance choreographer Mark Morris, whose work appeared at first glance to be quintessentially postmodern in its ironic distancing from emotion, though the best of Morris’s dances, in particular the masterly *V* and *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, now seem to me to have that unabashed emotional and expressive directness without which no art can be truly great. I would not be at all surprised if cultural historians of the next century, looking back on the art of the present day, point to Morris as a key figure — perhaps even the key figure — in the transition to post-postmodernism.

Like so many artists who have been touched by postmodernism, Morris continues to defy ready categorization, and I expect that the fluidity of idiom typical of his work will turn out to be the one enduring legacy of the postmodern moment. “Boundaryless” polystylism, for example, is now very much the thing in contemporary popular music. To name only a few of its more notable practitioners, the classical-soprano-turned-Broadway-diva Audra McDonald, the theatrical songwriter Adam Guettel, the jazz musicians Pat Metheny, Luciana Souza, and Ethan Iverson, the bluegrass band Nickel Creek, and the big-band composer Maria Schneider are all making music that is, in Duke Ellington’s useful phrase, beyond category.

Nor is such rampant hybridizing limited to the field of pop music. What mixed-media pigeonhole, for instance, can accommodate the adult “comix” of Daniel Clowes (the creator of *Ghost World*) and “picture stories” of Ben Katchor? From Morris’s dance-driven operatic productions to Susan Stroman’s part-danced, part-acted *Contact*, a Broadway “musical” in which nobody sings, American theatergoers also find themselves delighted by works of art whose genre cannot be easily defined. Were Basil Twist’s fanciful, visually rich “stagings” of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* and Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* puppet shows or ballets? And what about Robert Weiss’s adaptation of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which the dancers of Carolina Ballet were joined by two actors for an intensely compelling version of the Tolstoy novella, accompanied by the music of Beethoven and Janáček? Was it a ballet or a play? Or do such distinctions simply not matter any more?

To mention Carolina Ballet is to be reminded of



Members of the Mark Morris Dance Company perform *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.

another important trend in post-postmodern art, the “deprovincialization” of America’s regional performing-arts groups. Not only are our medium-sized cities capable of supporting first-rate opera and ballet companies, but many of these groups are doing better work than their New York-based counterparts. Most of the fresh, engaging new

productions currently being presented by New York City Opera, for instance, originate at Glimmerglass Opera, a “regional” company based in upstate New York. Similarly, a fast-growing percentage of the leading dance companies in the United States, among them Carolina Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Miami City Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, and the Kennedy Center’s Suzanne Farrell Ballet, are “Balanchine companies” led by New York City Ballet alumni who danced for George Balanchine and whose superbly danced repertoires consist in large part of their mentor’s work. The city long known as “the dance capital of the world” may well be on the verge of becoming no more than *primus inter pares* in the increasingly decentralized world of post-Balanchine ballet.

All this suggests that when it comes to post-postmodern art in America, it doesn’t much matter where you do it or what you call it, so long as the results are beautiful. And it is no coincidence that post-postmodern artists are increasingly willing to use that word without encasing it in the protective quotation marks of irony. “Trying to compose beautiful things, I say what I mean and mean what I say,” explains Paul Moravec, a member of the group of American classical composers that I have dubbed the New Tonalists. “The irony in my work is not glibly postmodern, but rather the essence of making audible the experience of fundamental paradox and ambiguity.” Lowell Liebermann, another American composer who has repudiated the hard-edged nihilism of the avant-garde to embrace traditional tonality, agrees. “Of course there’s a backlash from

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the old guard,” he says, “but the tide is finally turning.”

Osama bin Laden and his cronies, the ones who banned secular music from Afghanistan, would scarcely have approved of such talk. For them, as for every other zealot who murders in the name of a false god, earthly beauty is a mere illusion, a distraction from the One True Cause. But if September 11 taught us anything, it was that beauty is real, as real as evil, and worth fighting for. That is

what Liebermann, Moravec, Mark Morris, Kenneth Lonergan, and the rest of America’s post-postmodernists are doing. They are fighting for the right to make beautiful art — and winning. ■

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*Terry Teachout, the music critic of Commentary and the drama critic of the Wall Street Journal, writes “Second City,” a column for the Washington Post about the arts in New York City. His writings about books, dance, film, music, and the visual arts also appear regularly in National Review, the New York Times, and many other American magazines and newspapers. His most recent book is The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken.*

To see our Photo Gallery on “The Return of Beauty,” go to <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0403/ijse/gallery.htm>

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# DANCE

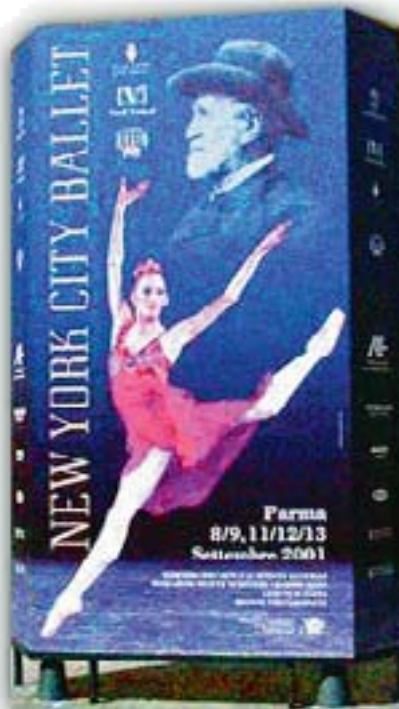
## A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING TRADITION

BY OCTAVIO ROCA

**T**here is no time like the present to look at the future of American dance. So much keeps coming, so much is left behind, and the uncertainty and immense promise of all that lies ahead tell us that the young century is witnessing a watershed in American dance history. Candid shots of American artists on the move reveal a wide-open landscape of dance, from classical to modern to postmodern and beyond.

Each of our dance traditions carries a distinctive flavor, and each demands attention: the living legacies of George Balanchine and Antony Tudor, the ever-surprising genius of Merce Cunningham, the all-American exuberance of Paul Taylor, the social commitment of Bill T. Jones and Joe Goode, together with a vibrant new generation of American dance-makers who are responding to the amazing growth of dance companies and their audiences from coast to coast.

Most of all, the optimism and sheer daring that have long marked American dance are alive and well from New York to San Francisco, from Miami to Seattle, and from Houston to our capital in Washington, D.C. They are alive in Mark Morris's cheery iconoclasm, in Lar Lubovitch's invention, in



A poster advertises the appearance of New York City Ballet as part of Festival Verdi 2001 in Parma, Italy.

Michael Smuin's jazzy abandon, in Broadway's newfound love of dance, in every daring bit of performance art that tries to redefine what dance is and what it is not. American dancers today represent the finest, most exciting, and most diverse aspects of our country's cultural riches.

The phenomenal aspect of dance is that it takes two to give meaning to the phenomenon. The meaning of a dance arises not in a vacuum but in public, in real life, in the magical moment when an audience witnesses a performance. What makes American dance unique is not just its distinctive, multicultural mix of influences, but also the distinctively American mix of its audiences. That

mix is even more of a melting pot as the new millennium unfolds. And it makes for a uniquely varied, gripping tale of dance and dancers facing a new era.

Ours is a constantly changing tradition whose very vitality is what we will bequeath future generations: the cowboys and sailors alongside the magical swans and sugar plums, the dances of political questioning and the dances of pure joy of movement, the selflessness and optimism, the generosity of spirit, the elemental theatrical excitement that is the promise of each rising curtain. American dance stays

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alive by ensuring that it never remains the same, that it is a living tradition, the American tradition. Enriching that tradition involves not just looking ahead to the next surprise but also looking back with both pride and affection at the giants of American dance who have made the future possible.

#### THE BALANCHINE LEGACY

"Ballet is like a rose," George Balanchine once said. "It is beautiful and you admire it, but you don't ask what it means." In the colorful garden of 20th century dance, Balanchine, who was born and studied dance in Russia, cultivated the American rose: exuberant, bright, optimistic, and triumphant. He revolutionized ballet for all time, changed the meaning of classicism, nurtured the speed and athleticism he found in the New World, and made these qualities integral to the very nature of beauty in motion.

More than a century ago, Petipa took the French style of ballet to Russia and transformed it into what we know as classical ballet. In the United States in the 20th century, it took an atmosphere of openness to change to nurture the genius of George Balanchine, and it took a lifetime of dance to change the classical ballet once again, to create an American ballet. Yet Balanchine shunned bravura, and he worked consciously against the stellar virtuosity that marked the Petipa style. He deliberately distorted the classical style even as he revitalized its tradition.

Like Petipa, Balanchine loved shifting geometric patterns and cultivated their intricacies with stubborn insistence. He absorbed the rhythmic freedom of American jazz and made the dancer's body reflect it. To this day, Balanchine dancers boast feet flexed almost as often as they are pointed, hips loose and jutting, extensions impossibly high, turned-in poses, and unexpected resolutions in motion that could suddenly make sense of an entire musical score. The living style Balanchine created is drenched in both musical and kinetic logic: the sense of connection from phrase to phrase, the miraculous absence of preparation and the virtual explosion of movement when it emerges, the utter integrity of music and dance. The man created works for every venue, from the Ringling Brothers Circus, from Broadway shows and the American Ballet Theatre, to his very own New York City Ballet.

The tradition of American neoclassicism that

Balanchine started is an exuberant work in progress, much of it being carried out today by muses turned ballet masters. Peter Martins, Balanchine's handpicked successor at New York City Ballet, is perhaps the chief guardian of neoclassicism and continues to delight with new ballets that reveal hidden possibilities within the syntax and speed of the American style. Helgi Tomasson, the most sublime male Balanchine dancer of his generation, is the artistic director of San Francisco Ballet and oversees one of the most exciting neoclassical repertoires anywhere.

In both New York City Ballet and San Francisco Ballet, young Christopher Wheeldon is at the forefront of a new generation of choreographers who create valid new works that are extending the definition of American ballet. Arthur Mitchell has been performing his own miracles in Manhattan as founder and director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Edward Villella is reproducing and elaborating on the sensual Balanchine style in his Miami City Ballet. The fiery Suzanne Farrell has created her own Suzanne Farrell Ballet at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. Not one of these troupes looks like the others, and not even New York City Ballet looks the way older fans remember it. The dance goes on.

That is Balanchine's legacy, and it is part of our past. But something so irretrievable as the past cannot hold back something as promising as the future. Balanchine's biggest gift of all may well turn out to be the revelation of the endless possibilities of American ballet.

#### DANCE AS THEATER

Those possibilities, of course, go beyond neoclassicism. It was another immigrant, Antony Tudor, who most radically changed the face of American dance by injecting a dose of emotional truth to the 19th century symphonic ballet formula, adding depth and theatrical impact to the European narrative dance tradition. The American Ballet Theater, the late Tudor's home and today's American

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national company, continues in the 21st century a tradition of dramatic ballets that are thrilling reminders of the immediacy, of the vitality, of this art form. Lar Lubovitch's *Othello*, choreographed for both the American Ballet Theater and San Francisco Ballet, is the most ambitious and successful among recent narrative ballets, but there have been many from coast to coast that prove there is more to American ballet than neoclassical steps: the revitalized repertory of Gerald Arpino's Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, Stanton Welch's Houston Ballet, and Mikko Nissinen's Boston Ballet; the continuing balletic explorations of the African-American experience by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater under Judith Jamison; works as diverse as Yuri Possokhov's *Magritomania*, Dennis Nahat's *Blue Suede Shoes*, Michael Smuin's picaresque *The Christmas Ballet*.

If American ballet presents a varied and colorful panorama, American modern dance boasts a veritable kaleidoscope of possibilities in the new century. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company amazes at least as much today as it did when Cunningham first teamed up with John Cage in 1953 to declare the independence of both music and dance from any restrictions other than those of the human mind.

Paul Taylor is no longer the new kid on the block, but this greatest living American choreographer and his Paul Taylor Dance Company continue to challenge and entertain with the originality of new works as well as the depths time brings to continuing revivals of what are by now classics of modern dance: *Eventide*, *Company B*, *Esplanade*, *Black Tuesday*, and many more.

The Mark Morris Dance Group, which like Taylor's troupe has regular seasons around the United States and frequent tours abroad, marries affection for the classical tradition with the impish freedom to smile and make its own rules: Irreverence and disarming sweetness combine with exquisite musicality in Morris's choreography, which revisits classicism with gusto while investing steps with a riotously contemporary spirit. Morris is a classicist with a true populist's heart.

#### A RETURN TO MEANING

But perhaps it is on America's West Coast, with the particular flavor of the arts of the Pacific Rim, that American modern dance is witnessing its most original developments. Working in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Patrick Makuakane has been revolutionizing the world of Hawaiian dance and redefining the meaning of the folk art known as hula with his unique company, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu. His work proclaims the universality of Hawaiian culture even as he mixes hula and contemporary rhythms in a giddy multicultural frenzy.

Also in San Francisco, the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company creates a uniquely American blend of traditional Chinese stage pictures, international pop, and the cutting edge of post-modern dance. Cai's all-female, quite beautiful company also boasts a determined desire to entertain, even as the choreographer subtly nurtures a new dance language that stands a radically new Chinese-American fusion.

The African-American experience, gloriously expressed in dance by pioneers from Alvin Ailey to the more recent Bill T. Jones and David Rousseve, has its most youthful and original proponent today in Robert Moses. His West Coast company, Robert Moses' Kin, mixes jazz, blues and rap, poetry and street talk, casual movement and rigorous postmodern syntax in new works — including *Never Solo* and the masterful *Word of Mouth* — that add up to a slice of African-American life, a universal dance message, and, perhaps above all, a gripping theatrical experience.

Margaret Jenkins, a student of Merce Cunningham, makes dances that reflect the coincidence and disjunction, violent clashes and sudden rests that make up much of modern life: Her Margaret Jenkins Dance Company is a seismic force in the American dance avant-garde.

Difficult to classify but impossible to ignore, fellow Californian Joe Goode makes dances that explore and often explode the primal, mythic values of the American heartland. He is the real thing, never boring, always surprising and utterly original, and his highly theatrical work is deeply personal, the truth of it universal. With his Joe Goode Performance Group, the San Francisco choreographer blurs the boundaries of theater and dance while enriching both fields with irresistible insouciance. In his profoundly



moving millennial epic *The Maverick Strain*, irony yields to emotion, movement to ecstasy, nostalgia to hope.

Some of the most original modern dance anywhere is being created by The Foundry, a dance collective founded by Alex Ketley and Christian Burns whose electrifying performances and theatrical use of avant-garde video techniques contain much that is new, and even more that is daring. Perhaps the best news about Burns and Ketley's work is the conviction embodied in their project: Cunningham's revered abstraction for its own sake has been left behind as a glorious aesthetic of the 20th century and, in the dawn of the 21st, dance is returning to meaning, to important themes, to drama and musicality, and to renewed technical virtuosity. The Foundry is at the vanguard of American dance.

#### REDEFINING DANCE

Dance in the United States today is unique. From classical and neoclassical ballet to the frontiers of modern dance, it is safe to say that there is nothing quite like New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theater, or the Paul Taylor Dance Company, like the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company or the Joe Goode

Performance Group, like Robert Moses' Kin or The Foundry. These are only some of the best examples, but more could be cited: the brilliant dance satire of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo and the intimate dance jewels of the Lawrence Pech Dance Company, the earthy sensuality of New York's Ballet Hispanico, the rock-and-roll energy of Ballet San Jose, and the jazzy elegance of Smuin Ballet. Young Americans are challenging and redefining our definition of dance.

Dance in the United States is a kaleidoscopic art form that reflects a wildly varied, multifaceted culture. Dance after new dance appears like so many reflections in a living mirror, their lights adding up to a constellation of optimism. American dance reflects American life. ■

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*Octavio Roca is the chief dance critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, and he has been theater, music, and dance critic for the Washington Post, the Washington Times, and the CBC-Radio Canada network. The author of Scott: More Than a Diva, Roca has also translated several works for the stage, including The Coronation of Poppea, Orpheus and Eurydice, The Soldier's Tale, and Our Friend Fritz. He collaborated with the composer Lucia Hwang in the cantata The Uncertain Rhythm of Your Pulse, which was premiered by the San Francisco Women's Philharmonic in 1993.*

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## Profile: Choreographer Robert Moses

Over the past decade, Robert Moses — whose dance technique was once described as “an explosion in the eye” — has developed a national and global reputation for his artistry and creativity. Much of that work is rooted in his own multiracial company, Robert Moses' Kin, based in San Francisco. But it emerges as well through his frequent energetic presence on university campuses in residencies and master classes.

Moses began his career in dance as a featured performer with some of the most respected U.S. troupes — including American Ballet Theater and Twyla Tharp Dance. He founded Kin in 1995 with an eye toward giving expression to the African-



Robert Moses and Catherine Ybarra dancing in *Word of Mouth*, which was choreographed by Moses.

American experience. But he soon realized that that experience actually was a collection of diverse and divergent experiences. As he later put it: “We must define ourselves in relationship to what is distinctly ours, with the understanding that nobody has accomplished anything alone.”

At Stanford University, where he is a lecturer, and

elsewhere, Moses focuses as much on dance heritage and the African-American experience as he does on the technique of the art form. In his work, he strives for a multicultural focus. An example of this is *Union Fraternal*, a piece he created three years ago, blending his modern dance perspective with a John Santos score that melds Congolese drumming and

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Cuban danzon music mirroring the couple's dance popularized in Havana's social clubs.

One of his greatest choreographic successes is *Word of Mouth*, a celebration of African-American oral traditions incorporating a wide range of supporting material — from a poem by Nikki Giovanni to the music of Duke Ellington, the Staples Singers, and contemporary rap. It is, Moses has observed, about “all the things we carry with us...things we need to know...about our senses of ourselves...about the lineage of language and how that holds people together.”

Recently, Moses has moved in the direction of nonfiction in fashioning new work. Early in 2003, he unveiled *A Biography of Baldwin*, the first in a trilogy

of works set not to music but to a spoken dialogue — the archival tape of a 1961 seminar whose participants included novelist James Baldwin, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and poet Langston Hughes, among other prominent African Americans in the arts.

Ultimately, Moses sees choreography as more expansive than linear. “Dance is about imagery,” he has said. “We must stop treating dance as if it were music or literature, because while it sometimes tells a linear story, it reaches people in a different kind of way.” To the extent that dance is a system, he maintains, “it has to be serving the image, or the motion, and not the other way around.” ■

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## A Conversation With Judith Jamison

*No one who ever saw Judith Jamison in performance can forget the tall, lithe figure, with arms seemingly extending into outer space, who brought significant recognition to dance as performed by African Americans. As a dancer for the globally acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 1965 to 1980, Jamison performed landmark pieces — such as the anguished *Cry* and the exultant *Revelations* — that invariably brought audiences to their feet. Her years on stage with the Ailey company laid the foundation for her second career; since 1989, she has been a choreographer and artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City.*



Judith Jamison dancing in *Cry*, 1976.

dance companies now. As the dance world retracts, it expands. It just keeps breathing. The caliber has gotten much higher, and there are more opportunities.

There may never be pioneers like Alvin Ailey, and there may not be times like that again. But because the ground has been made so fertile, young people are feeling that wonderful creative urge to make a statement — that “I have something to say, too.”

In my generation, 30 years ago, dancers were filling their time between

performances as waiters or postal workers. Now, dancers dance between performances. At the Ailey school, for example, we have choreographic workshops for dancers. They realize today that a dancer's life is short. Earlier generations never thought that way. In the past 10 or 20 years, a sense of urgency has arisen. “I've got to get it done now. I've got to get my statement out to the world as soon as possible.” My generation was never about longevity. Dancers are so smart now, planning their lives and stretching themselves in ways that we didn't years ago.

**Q:** Is choreography taking new forms?

**A:** I think so. But I always wait for the next brilliant person coming up. There are many new stars on the

**Q:** What has been happening over the past decade or so in dance that excites you?

**A:** Quite simply, the most significant development is that there are more opportunities for dancers to dance. Even though we have companies closing and funding is difficult, every time I turn a corner, there's some young choreographer who wants to take the plunge. That has never been more consistent than it is now. I have three friends — one who's a veteran, Donald Byrd, in Seattle — who are starting new

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horizon, young choreographers who have the brilliance but need the exposure. Take Troy Powell of Ailey II, our junior company. He was 10 years old when Alvin discovered him as part of our outreach program to schools. Later he joined Ailey II, and then I brought him into the main company, where he stayed for 10 years. He had an agenda. He wanted to choreograph. Since he was full of all the knowledge he had gained as an “Ailey baby,” he did. Now he is Ailey II’s resident choreographer.

**Q:** We know that, historically, Alvin Ailey picked up techniques and ideas during his many travels overseas — more than a generation ago — to exotic locales. Are there influences from abroad affecting the scene today?

**A:** I think the situation has reversed itself. I remember going to discos in Europe while we were on tour, and we’d bring dozens of records with us, to bring the music to Europe. Now it’s the reverse. There’s been a real evolution, a return of our own stuff back to us. Influences keep streaming back and forth across the oceans. We’re very influenced by each other.

**Q:** Is dance today still dominated by the creative giants of the past — George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey — or are there new forces taking hold?

**A:** I see new forces constantly, new dancers, new interpretations. I was in *Revelations* in the 1970s. I saw it with Mr. Ailey in 1963 — same work, different interpretation. Each generation validates itself. Each generation’s dancers bring something fresh. They rejuvenate the piece, which is brilliant in the first place. The dance lives because they’re doing it.

At two o’clock this afternoon, I had one cast doing *Revelations*, and tonight I have another one dancing it. As long as they believe in and are committed to their craft, they transcend the age of the piece. But the piece must be brilliant. As long as a person is influenced by the world and knows the craft, there will always be something new. If you want to get down with some West African movement and add some club dancing to it, then all of a sudden it becomes something new. There are always people stepping out on that edge — and they’re getting younger and younger.

**Q:** In this somewhat uncertain economic period, how does dance cope?

**A:** You have to nip and tuck all the way. It’s all relative — whether you just began or whether you’re 45 years old. But I can still do, artistically, what I want to do, with a lot of help from my friends.

**Q:** How do you see the field of dance evolving over the next decade?

**A:** We might have people getting away from dance as something that comes from very deep within. We might start becoming more technologically oriented, depending on what the world becomes. What’s beautiful to me, to this day, is dance that’s not overproduced, so that I can actually see the dance. I don’t want dance to be overanalyzed, so outside of the inside that it’s no longer about our humanity. I don’t have a deep fear of that, but we should always be careful and understand what we’re doing as human beings, what the gift is. As long as we stay attached to this theme, to the entire spiritual physicality of what dance is, then we’ll be all right. ■

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*The interview with Judith Jamison was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

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# MUSIC

## THE QUINTESSENTIAL AMERICAN SOUNDS

BY TIM SMITH

**T**he early years of the 21st century have yet to provide a clear-cut sense of where music in America is heading, but through the mixed signals, it's possible to draw some promising conclusions.

Despite premature reports of its demise, the classical genre is still very much alive and kicking. American composers continue to create rewarding experiences for performers and listeners alike; most orchestras sound better than ever; most opera companies are enjoying increasingly sizable audiences, with particularly strong growth in the desirable 18- to-24-year-old category. The pop music field — from the cutting-edge to the mainstream to the retro — is still spreading its stylistic influences around a world that has never lost its appetite for the latest American sounds and stars.

### THE ADVENT OF CYBER TECHNOLOGY

Technological advances continue to influence the whole spectrum of America's music in mostly positive ways. Composer Tod Machover has pioneered computer-generated "hyperinstruments" that electronically augment the properties of



Singer Norah Jones and her album "Come Away With Me" captured eight Grammy Awards in 2003.

conventional instruments and expand a performer's options of controlling pitch, tempo, and all the other elements of music-making. Listeners are downloading not just the latest hit recordings, but also live classical concerts and opera performances via the Internet. Music organizations have been quick to add Web sites, giving regular and prospective patrons new opportunities to learn about works being performed and even to take music courses, not just buy tickets.

That component of music education keeps getting broader in scope. The San Francisco Symphony's interactive Web site for children, for example, offers highly imaginative, user-friendly access to the basics of music education. And a new Boston Symphony Orchestra Web site allows for previously unheard of

opportunities to dig inside the creative process; Internet users can manipulate the orchestration and even the notes of familiar classical pieces.

The New World Symphony, the Florida-based training orchestra for music school graduates, is at the forefront of developing still more applications of the cyber technology. Thanks to Internet2, the latest generation of the Internet, a conducting class at Baltimore's Peabody Institute can now observe a live

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rehearsal of the New World Symphony in Miami Beach and can interact with its music director, Michael Tilson Thomas. More uses for this technology are being planned. The Cleveland Institute of Music will soon be connected to the orchestra by Internet2, providing on-line private music lessons and coaching between the two locales, and several more music schools may soon join in this instant, virtual-reality learning across any number of miles. To stay on top of every fresh wave of technological advances, the New World Symphony is building its own state-of-the-art facility, designed by Frank Gehry. A brave New World indeed.

It is easy, however, to find bad news attributed to technology. Thanks to all the downloading of music from the Internet, record sales are declining sharply. The recording industry, so pivotal in the dissemination of music, is hurting as never before, certainly a worrying trend for the new century. It's even worse on the classical side, with fewer and fewer record labels willing or able to devote resources to classical artists and repertoire. Many organizations are struggling with, and sometimes sinking under, debts, especially since the September 11 terrorist attacks and the jittery U.S. economy; crucial endowment funds, which produce interest income for orchestras and opera companies, have been hit particularly hard by a decline in the market value of investments. Many public school systems continue to ignore music education, a failure that spells trouble for future audience development. The decline in the number and quality of classical music radio stations across the country causes further damage.

Still, there certainly are encouraging aspects of American musical life, which shows considerable resiliency in the face of so many obstacles. The San Francisco Symphony, for example, has responded to the loss of its former recording opportunities with a major label by producing its own recordings with the highest technical and artistic values; one of them won a 2003 Grammy Award for best orchestral

performance. To counter the dearth of music education in the schools, a grassroots advocacy initiative called "Support Music" was launched in March 2003 by a coalition involving the nearly century-old, 90,000-member National Association for Music Education and the International Music Products Association (representing 8,000 companies). With significant congressional supporters, Internet resources, and loads of impressive statistics proving how students with music training or appreciation demonstrate higher scores in verbal and, especially, math tests, the initiative provides parents and teachers with the tools and resources to make a case for strengthening music education in every community. And stepping into the picture just as music groups and philanthropic foundations are finding it harder to afford the commissioning of new works, the distinguished Meet the Composer organization has announced the Magnum Opus project, a catalyst for individual patrons; a San Francisco venture capitalist and amateur violinist had stepped up to the plate to start this initiative with \$375,000 worth of commissions that will soon have three orchestras playing fresh scores by three composers.

#### SHOWCASING CLASSICAL ARTISTS

For even more tangible proof of how Americans are bolstering the musical arts, consider the coming unveiling of new performance venues in steady succession. The \$274 million Walt Disney Concert Hall, with its unmistakable curves and swirls designed by Frank Gehry, will give the Los Angeles Philharmonic a long-desired new home in the fall of 2003. The \$89 million Strathmore Hall Music Center, with a graceful design by William Rawn Associates, is set to give a substantial boost to cultural activity in the northern suburbs of Washington, D.C., and become a home-away-from-home for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2004. The \$370 million Performing Arts Center of Greater Miami, a multiple-theater complex with a vibrant design by Cesar Pelli, will provide a concert hall for the resident Florida Philharmonic and New World Symphony, as well as many visiting artists, and a badly need new opera house for Florida Grand Opera, in 2005. The following year, the Nashville Symphony will take up residence in the \$120 million Schermerhorn

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Symphony Hall, designed by David M. Schwartz in neoclassical style and boasting the unusual feature of natural light.

Each time the money and enthusiasm can be raised to build a new performing arts center, the foundation of music in America is greatly strengthened. And there certainly is much for these centers — and all the existing theaters, of course — to showcase. American classical artists have long been known for remarkable virtuosity and expressive potency; the level is only getting higher. Just look around at podiums. Never before have so many unusually gifted American conductors held so many of the country's most prominent orchestral posts: Michael Tilson Thomas, who has made the San Francisco Symphony a beacon for adventuresome programming; Leonard Slatkin, who has done the same in his tenure with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C.; Robert Spano, who is energizing the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Lorin Maazel, who is putting his distinctive stamp on the New York Philharmonic; and James Levine, whose inquisitive mind will guide the Boston Symphony Orchestra, starting in 2004. Other exceptionally gifted American conductors — like Marin Alsop, David Robertson, James Conlon, and Kent Nagano — reinforce the country's musical assets.

The young generation of performers does that, too. Consider such talents as violinist Hilary Hahn and pianist Lang Lang, who light up stages not just with exceptional techniques but deeply considered interpretations. From the Emerson Quartet to the Ying Quartet to the ever-provocative Kronos Quartet, American chamber music ensembles remain on a high plane as well. And American vocalists are contributing to what will almost certainly be viewed many years hence as another golden age of singing — just for a start, sample the radiant sopranos of Renée Fleming, Deborah Voigt, and Dawn Upshaw; the velvety mezzo of Denyce Graves; the sumptuous baritone of Mark Delavan; and the gleaming, downright revolutionary countertenor of David Daniels.

## Rock

The best-known American singers, of course, are the ones singing to a different beat — the rock beat that revolutionized music in the early 1950s and shows no sign of slowing down, let alone fading out. There isn't a corner of the globe that hasn't felt the drive of this quintessentially American contribution to the musical art form. Ethnic sounds from various cultures — generalized by the term "world music" — have become increasingly assertive in the international marketplace over the years, but the most influential kinds of popular music still emanate, as they have since the age of ragtime more than a century ago, from the United States.

Two genres, in particular, have exerted an extraordinary hold for the past two decades or so — rap and its close cousin, hip-hop. Born of inner-city poverty and mixed with braggadocio and a host of anti-establishment sentiments, rap replaces sung melodies with rhythmically punchy, mostly rhymed recitation set to an insistent beat. Hip-hop uses many of the same features, but it is a more dance-driven, rather than message-driven, phenomenon. Both styles have African-American roots, but have been quickly embraced by white performers and can be encountered today just about everywhere and in just about any circumstance. Rappers pop up in TV commercials and movies; rappers even articulate the feelings of contemporary Christian bands.

Lately, hip-hop seems to be taking new twists and turns; one result is lyrics with less posing and more down-to-earth attitudes. Even Eminem, the bad boy of this field who insulted just about everyone in his early days, has softened his anger somewhat and introduced a wicked sense of humor. The unmistakable sound of his music, with its funky rhythm tracks molded by Dr. Dre, exemplifies the fresh drive behind the hip-hop movement now. Such acts as The Roots and Outkast are among those also contributing to the new vibrancy of this crowd-pleasing sound.

The hard-charging, super-amplified style known as heavy metal is also very much a lasting force, several decades after first exploding on the scene. Some subtle changes can be found here, too, today. A telling case in point is Audioslave, a groundbreaking band formed from the members of two of the last century's biggest acts — Rage Against

the Machine, the most overtly political rant-rock band of the late 1990s and Soundgarden, a leading Seattle-based proponent of “grunge” (the name given to an aggressive musical style that expresses the anger of disaffected youth). With Audioslave, the raging has largely given way to pure rock, full of inventive instrumental flourishes that will likely energize a new generation of fans. Political statements can still be found in rock, of course, as they have almost from the beginning, and some of the messages now within earshot are being made with fresh creativity, as evidenced by a “prog” (progressive rock) band called System of a Down. The musicians combine left-leaning lyrics, strong melodic hooks, screams, rapid-fire guitar work, and even a touch of rhythms from Eastern music.

#### POP

A look around the pop scene will turn up the lingering presence of “techno” music in nightclubs (punchy, dance-to sounds generated by disc jockeys spinning turntables) and new manifestations of “garage bands” (The Vines and The Strokes are among today's examples of this traditionally raw, unfocused music-making). Mainstream pop is providing its typical lion's share of entertainment, with particular help these days from airwaves-dominating female vocalists, such as Sheryl Crow (shades of the



Saxophonist Wayne Shorter performs during the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland in July 2002.

“California rock” style of the old band The Eagles) and Lucinda Williams (a potent fusion of blues, country, and rock). One thing pop fans are encountering less of is the phenomenon of “boy bands,” ensembles of young males crooning innocuous tunes with carefully synchronized harmonies and fancy footwork. These acts seemed unstoppable in the 1990s, but appear to be fading fast.

As evidenced by an abundance of radio stations playing “the greatest hits of the '80s, '90s, and today,” older styles of pop continue to be a strong part of the American musical fabric. Sounds from even earlier in rock history are never far away; the group Sugar Ray incorporates so many elements from vintage rock

styles that the result is at once nostalgic and refreshing. Newcomer Norah Jones, who swept the 2003 Grammy Awards, is an intimate songstress who provides a direct link to the likes of Phoebe Snow and others from decades ago, proving the longevity of the softer rock beat and evocative, communicative lyrics. And John Mayer has demonstrated the durability of one of American pop's greatest assets of the 1960s and 1970s — the sensitive singer-songwriter. Still another demonstration of the endurance and versatility of American pop music can be found in the seemingly unlikely, but thoroughly winning, collaboration of veteran song stylist Tony Bennett and pop/country star k.d. lang.

#### BROADWAY AND HOLLYWOOD

Also demonstrating the holding power of the old days is the enormous popularity of the Broadway musical *Hairspray*, with its ear-catching songs recreating the sound and flavor of the 1960s American scene. Musical theater remains one of America's most distinctive cultural assets. Such hits as *Rent*, *The*

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*Producers*, and *Chicago* (which also scored big in a movie version that won an Academy Award as the best motion picture of 2002) continue the venerable tradition of audience-pleasing Broadway shows. And Stephen Sondheim, the groundbreaking composer of masterworks like *Company* and *A Little Night Music*, remains a benchmark of creativity; his latest musical, *Bounce*, about two colorful sibling entrepreneurs from early 20th century America, is scheduled to debut this year (after many revisions).

In addition to Broadway, American composers continue to dominate Hollywood. The artfully crafted, atmospheric, brilliantly orchestrated scores of such veterans as John Williams and Elmer Bernstein, along with the work of gifted young composers, help to enliven and enrich one blockbuster after another. America's oldest contribution to music — jazz — enjoys a smaller niche of public interest today than it once did but has hardly lost its compelling energy. You need only hear the sophisticated phrasing of singer Diana Krall, or the hot vocals, piano playing, and arranging of Peter Dinklage, or the cool sax riffs of Wayne Shorter to know that the great legacy of jazz has fresh life.

#### TONAL VS. ATONAL

The American pop scene routinely experiences a sensation every few years, something strikingly novel and inventive. As of this writing, listeners are still waiting for the next one. It's much the same in the classical sphere, which has not been vigorously shaken up since minimalism began to make serious inroads in the early 1970s. Back then, many a pundit announced that the minimalist fad wouldn't last. Philip Glass, the composer who most unsettled conservative ears with his few, basic chords and motor rhythms, was supposed to disappear the fastest, yet he's still going strong, producing music today (as in the acclaimed film *The Hours*) that sounds very much like what he has been doing all along.

There are detectable differences, however, in what Glass and the other major minimalists, John Adams and Steve Reich, are doing. They have all gradually refined their techniques, expanded their horizons. Minimalism has evolved into a style with such a wide melodic and harmonic range and capable of such expressive intensity (Adams's affecting, Pulitzer Prize-

winning memorial to the victims of September 11, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, is a recent case in point) that it can be heard now as an adjunct to the most prevalent style in contemporary classical music — neo-romanticism.

The severe atonality and complex abstraction once deemed sacred in academic circles still has its adherents, but it will not likely enjoy again the firm hold it had on American composers 40 or 50 years ago. The predominant force now is mostly tonal, often very lyrical, directly communicative. The vividly orchestrated, sometimes emotional scores of Aaron Jay Kernis exemplify this flourishing movement, which is unafraid to reveal roots in the past. It isn't so much a case of a stylistic re-tread, however. The best of today's neo-romantics take full advantage of the liberating influences of the atonal revolution and explore a limitless melodic and harmonic range.

The older generation of accessible American composers — the likes of Ned Rorem, John Corigliano, William Bolcom, John Harbison, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich — is still producing important work as 20th century music gives way to 21st. These artists seem more like pioneers or prophets now that tonality has reclaimed the forefront. Helping to reiterate how much mileage is left in tonal devices are many younger composers, among them Michael Hersch, whose darkly beautiful music is striking deep chords with audiences, and Kevin Puts, whose atmospheric, sometimes minimalist-inflected scores are doing the same. As always with American music, it's dangerous to generalize. Tonality may be king again, but it does not have absolute rule. There is still a remarkable amount of diversity in expression, still a remarkable number of individualistic voices. These include Jennifer Higdon, whose brilliantly orchestrated works speak eloquently in an often complex language, and Tan Dun, who brings the exotic flavors of music from his native China into a Western environment and fashions an arresting sound world all his own.

#### THE STATE OF AMERICAN MUSIC

As the new century unfolds, challenges of many types will keep rising, but chances are, the musical community will meet them head-on, backed up by a compelling reservoir of talent, dedication, and imagination. When you tally up all the dynamic



orchestras, opera companies, conductors, soloists and chamber groups, all the fresh-voiced composers, and all the myriad pop performers who are making their mark day by day, it's clear that the state — and most certainly the heart — of American music is sound. ■

Tim Smith is classical music critic of the Baltimore Sun. He is the author of *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music* and a regular contributor to *Opera News*.

## Profile: Composer Elliot Goldenthal

Most American composers of serious music have for decades adhered to a tradition of not crossing borders — not creating both classical compositions and the accompanying music for film, ballet, and theater performances. George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Bernard Herrmann, John Corigliano, and Philip Glass are among the few

exceptions — composers whose work has spanned the performing arts.

Add to that list Elliot Goldenthal, who at 48 has been a major force not only in composing symphonic pieces for the concert hall, but also as a creator of movie scores. Working on music for both independent films and star-fueled, big-budget studio productions, Goldenthal brings the same individualistic style to these compositions as he did to his 1997 ballet based on Shakespeare's *Othello* and his formidable *Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio*, a 1996 work for chorus, orchestra, and solo cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Goldenthal, who studied under Copland and Corigliano, is as eclectic a composer as can be found on the scene today. His music has saluted the 70th birthday of Leonard Bernstein (*Shadow Play Scherzo*) and the 75th anniversary of a legendary New York City baseball field (*Pastime Variations*).

Goldenthal's work in films covers an equally wide range. For his score for *Michael Collins*, a study of the Irish revolutionary, Goldenthal used Irish pipes and penny whistles, as well as lush orchestral sounds, to create a romantic aura. In *A Time To Kill*, based on a novel by John Grisham, the composer brought a traditional African-American spiritual into confrontation with ominous string harmonies to



Elliot Goldenthal

depict, musically, a decades-old racist incident in the U.S. South.

The score for *Titus*, one of Goldenthal's many collaborations with stage and film director Julie Taymor, opens melodramatically, then shifts to saxophone solos, jazz themes, and other nontraditional combinations before culminating in an elegiac finale. As one critic

noted, the score exploited "the differences between symphonic, swing, Tibetan, electronic, and surf music" in the manner that the movie itself offered diverse images of Rome.

Goldenthal's latest composition is the warm, intimate score he created for *Frida*, Taymor's 2002 project on the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. In keeping with the passion and romanticism of the movie's subject, the music, created for a small ensemble (guitar, accordion, marimba, and piano), incorporates traditional Mexican folk music and is capped by a stirring waltz, played once on guitar and again on piano.

Goldenthal has been honored with numerous cultural tributes for his contributions to the concert hall, the ballet stage, the theater, and film. Most recently, his work on *Frida* was recognized with an Academy Award for the best movie score of 2002. ■

## A Conversation With David Gockley

For more than a generation, David Gockley has garnered considerable attention and respect as general director of the Houston (Texas) Grand Opera. In that capacity, he has spearheaded the commissioning of new works and brought to the fore new performing and creative talent.

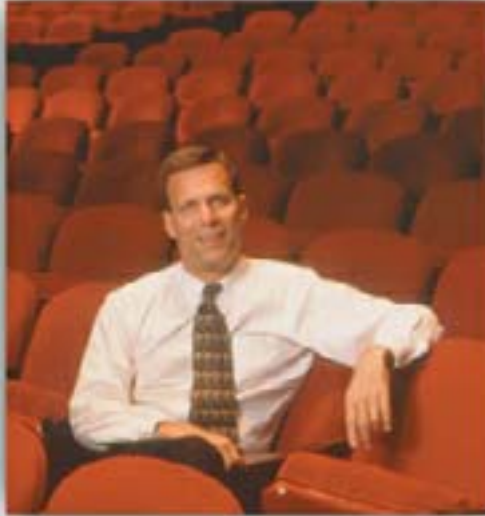
**Q:** Looking back over the past decade or two, what do you believe to be the most significant developments in serious music in the United States?

**A:** New music is more listener-friendly, audience-friendly, today, as opposed to being academic-friendly. There's more of a chance that the operatic music of our time will be accepted by audiences, and just not thought of as a dose of castor oil. There's more of a connection with the 18th, 19th century idea of opera being middle-class entertainment that is not confined, intellectually, solely to academics and aficionados, as it was for much of the 20th century.

From the 1920s on, classical, or art, music took a turn away from the great traditions, down what I would call a blind alley, in evolutionary terms. I'm talking about music that turned out to be more an intellectual process than an attempt to seize audiences with an immediate experience.

Today, composers are not afraid of being popular, and opera companies — more than orchestras — are welcoming them into their houses.

The relationship between the Lyric Opera of Chicago and composer William Bolcom is indicative of this trend. Lyric has commissioned Bolcom three times and put the full extent of their abundant resources into realizing his works. We also see these works being picked up by other opera companies — Bolcom's *A View From the Bridge* at the Metropolitan Opera and Mark Adamo's *Little Women* at New York City Opera. So it's more wide open now, everywhere.



David Gockley

When I first got into the business 30 years ago, we all knew that the purpose of producing world premieres was to get attention and a review in the *New York Times*. So an opera would have a world premiere and then sit on the shelf. That is not the way it is today.

**Q:** What's the greatest challenge in your field, from your perspective?

**A:** I would say it's the reality that there are so many, varied, less expensive entertainment options — including staying at home to

listen to recordings or to watch a DVD or 120 channels on television. These new media threaten to move opera and symphony off the radar screen of public consciousness. There are a lot of really, really good new singers. But somehow, they don't get the chance to become household-name celebrities like Luciano Pavarotti or Beverly Sills did in the past. The attention of the media is on things that have a greater common denominator among the public.

There's another challenge — the demographic change in American cities that tends to marginalize great Western civilizations. Opera and serious music are not reaching the new immigrant groups in urban America. That will take generations to accomplish. Music has to survive somehow in the meantime.

**Q:** Is there a new musical tradition coming here from abroad? And if so, who are the creative influences?

**A:** In opera, the significant creative influences are the stage directors who are reinterpreting the existing repertoire of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries in new and sometimes radical ways — often much to the chagrin of the traditional audience. In some ways, the directors have attracted a new public, a younger public, a public interested more in visual art. The big test case of "directors' opera" will be the new administration at the San Francisco Opera — notably its general director Pamela Rosenberg. Though originally from California, Pamela has spent most of

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her career to this point in such cities as Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart, where she absorbed a modernist sensibility. Her repertory and productions will challenge the basically traditional San Francisco audiences.

As far as composers go, people seem to be staying where they are — with some exceptions, such as Tan Dun. But conductors do keep coming from abroad, just as some American conductors continue to be popular overseas.

**Q:** When you think of the creative giants of the past — Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, and others — is there a new generation of luminaries in music?

**A:** I think one would have to call composer John Adams a “creative giant.” His music has spanned both orchestral and opera genres. None other springs to mind in the tradition of Copland or Bernstein.

**Q:** How, at this time of economic downturn, do you continue to function?

**A:** We’re more conservative in our programming. We are unbelievably scrupulous about our costs. We take every opportunity to do things more efficiently, hang on and ride it out.

**Q:** Speculate, for a moment, as to how your field will be different in 10 years.

**A:** I’d love to prophesy a new golden age. The challenges mentioned earlier — competition from other media and demographic change — are exacerbated by the high cost of opera and symphony. Opera at least has the visual component, which we must exploit to the extent possible. I don’t see going beyond an evolutionary state. I do believe there will continue to be high-quality opera available in major U.S. urban centers and at festivals like the Santa Fe Opera. There will be continued attempts to reach out and cultivate new audiences. The level of training of American artists, the theatricality of opera, and new works with American themes or influences will keep opera viable. ■

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*The interview with David Gockley was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

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# THEATER

## PLAYWRIGHTS NEW AND OLD

BY CHRIS JONES

Spring comes early in Montgomery, Alabama. But while the resplendent grounds of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival — which is perhaps America's most beautiful theater — are especially verdant in the first months of the year, it's one of the Festival programs, the Southern Writers' Project, that attracts the arts world to the cradle of the civil rights movement. Each year, over the course of several days, the Southern Writers' Project puts on half a dozen or more new plays by aspiring and established playwrights.

The Southern Writers' Project is not the only place to see the latest up-and-comers in the flowering field of American playwriting, however. The spring Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville offers an even better-known slate of works — including, in 2003, a dazzling and wildly popular new play called *Omnium-Gatherum*.

Penned by Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros and Theresa Rebeck, this intensely stimulating dissection of American geopolitical views imagines a dinner party thrown by Martha Stewart immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With characters based partly on known American intellectuals, the "guests" represent a broad variety of political points of view. And judging by the response in Kentucky, American audiences clearly are hungry to debate America's place in the world.



Buyers queue up at the James Theater in New York to purchase tickets for *The Producers*.

**ON AND OFF BROADWAY**  
The daring and laudably frank *Omnium-Gatherum* appears headed for Broadway. There was a time once in American theater when new plays typically opened on Broadway. For some years, however, the nonprofit American theaters — often called resident theaters or

regional theaters — and their for-profit counterparts have enjoyed a lively give-and-take when it comes to the propagation of new American works for the stage. Some new plays begin in the commercial arena and flow to the regional nonprofits. Others move in the opposite direction — spawning in Louisville or Montgomery and ending up, like Donald Margulies's *Dinner With Friends*, in major commercial productions. Nowadays, these two branches of an American theater industry forever hungry for new products feed each other — in roughly equal measure.

Indeed, the old stereotype of commercial producers as avaricious entrepreneurs looking only for lowest-common-denominator entertainment long has been outmoded. These days, commercial producers are, first and foremost, theater lovers looking for vibrant and progressive new American works. And they're willing to get behind even risky plays that catch their eye.

Musicals may still rule on Broadway, but it also launches some great new American plays, such as Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*. A drama about a gay baseball player, Greenberg's play was a finalist

for the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Still, visits to this year's new plays in Alabama and Kentucky were an apt indicator of the breadth and diversity of the new work being developed by a new generation of playwrights. American theater has long been distinguished by playwrights' efforts to explore current social issues on stage, and the new generation of playwrights continues that tradition.

#### FRESH VOICES

Carlyle Brown, a remarkable scribe currently best known for his *The African Company Presents Richard III*, penned and self-performed *The Fula From America*, wherein he explores the mythic and practical place of a modern-day African American on a bus journeying through the bush of the African motherland. In Brown's capable hands, this strange trip through the African continent becomes a real tour-de-force that is full of rich global characters and wry social commentary, and recalls the very best work of such great American monologists as Lili Tomlin. As it ponders the perennial questions of whether one can ever truly return home again and the changing role of the American abroad, *The Fula* feels fresh, wise, and realistic.

Meanwhile, the politically charged playwright Kia Corthron — an important new American writer and the author of the recent New York hit about girl gangs called *Breath, Boom* — offered a provocative new work called *The Venus de Milo Is Armed*, which deals with the global horrors of landmines from a uniquely American perspective. Herein, Corthron imagines landmines exploding in the United States, as a means of getting her domestic audiences to relate to this global problem.

And as light relief, a hitherto unknown Alabama writer named Linda Byrd Killian penned *Aaronville Dawning*, a funny and gossipy Southern gothic tale of an elderly woman from Mississippi who chats with the audience, from her kitchen, about her life and local characters as she prepares food for a funeral. Droll and wise, it is like a southern version of *Having*

*Our Say*, the splendid work from the last decade about the Harlem-born Delaney sisters.

Taken together, this remarkably disparate trio of works offered ample evidence that modern American theaters strive more and more for works that reflect a broad collection of voices, especially those we do not hear all that often.

Other playwrights — including the likes of Regina Taylor — were in the audience for the event.

Increasingly, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has become the venue of choice to see important southern writers — including the Alabama-born Rebecca Gilman, who has emerged in the last five years to become one of the most important new voices in the American theater.

A modest and unassuming woman in her mid-thirties, Gilman came to Chicago from Trussville, Alabama.

After initially collecting fistfuls of rejection letters, Gilman's big break came when a tiny Chicago-area theater company called the Circle Theatre in Forest Park produced one of her early plays, *The Glory of Living*, an unflinching exploration of child abuse, sexual deviance, and serial murder. Favorable reviews reached the ears of Susan Booth, then literary manager of Chicago's prestigious Goodman Theatre (now the artistic director of the growing Alliance Theatre in Atlanta), and Gilman quickly became the Goodman's favorite daughter.

The Goodman premiered Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*, a play about white liberal racism. Set on a fictional college campus, that play follows the reaction of the white administrators to the news that an African-American freshman student has been receiving threatening and anonymous letters. In the second act, a stressed-out dean of students, Sarah Daniels, loses control in front of a colleague and unleashes a monologue in which she confesses her own racism. Since the character is hitherto empathetic — and the racism is expressed with the language and logic usually favored by liberals — the monologue garnered both the play and production



Three lovestruck bridegrooms in Charles L. Mee's *Big Love* — part of the 2002 Humana Festival in Louisville, Kentucky.

enormous attention, as well as a subsequent production at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Since then Gilman has penned *Boy Gets Girl* (a relationship-oriented, Yuppie-populated drama) and *Blue Surge* (a piece that probes the connections between the police and the criminals whom they chase). Gilman is a provocative, important playwright and a name to watch.

#### PROBING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The current American theater certainly does not rely entirely on new names. Writers like Tony Kushner, whose controversial *Homebody/Kabul* probed issues surrounding the creation of the balance of power in the Middle East, continue to serve as the political provocateurs of the contemporary American theater.

August Wilson has almost completed his grand opus following the African-American experience in each decade of the 20th century — his dazzling *King Hedley II* provided ample evidence in 2000 that this remarkably prolific and poetic writer is becoming more and more interested in invading the territory once reserved for the Greek tragedians. In 2003, Wilson is adding *Gem of the Ocean* to his stunning progression, leaving himself with nine decades covered and just one more to go.

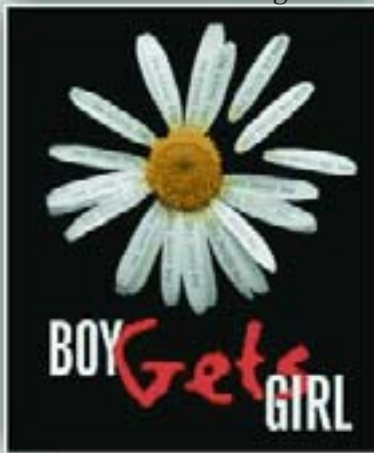
And in the last couple of years, Edward Albee, a grand old man of the American theater, proved that a playwright in his seventies can still shock an audience. Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* a domestic tragedy wherein one of the leading characters falls in love with a four-legged animal, won the Tony Award last year for the best original play on Broadway and became one of the most talked about dramas in years. The topic may sound prurient, but that's avowedly not the case. The work actually is a serious and weighty play wherein the taboo love object functions as a metaphor for any "other" in a personal (or, for that matter, political) relationship. The very word "tragedy," after all, has its origins in the term "Goat Song." In the case of the

Albee play, the deep themes — which carry great metaphoric weight — make many younger writers look positively timid in comparison.

Still, several other new American playwrights have come to the fore in the last couple of years. Adam Rapp, an articulate voice of youthful anger who likes to break theatrical rules, has penned works like *Nocturne* (which probes a young man's journey through the confines of guilt) and *Finer Noble Gases*,

an uber-naturalistic slice-of-life about a bunch of lonely musicians preoccupied with getting and then destroying technology.

The rather older Charles L. Mee, an astonishingly complex and gifted playwright, also ploughs a very singular path (including making all of his works available on the Internet and encouraging theater groups to mix and match material as they see fit). Much of Mee's work has been influenced by the classics — as he proved with his wildly popular *Big Love*, he's especially fond of modern versions of ancient Greek plays. And



A poster advertises the Manhattan Theatre Club's production of Rebecca Gilman's play *Boy Gets Girl*.

Mee's recent and poetic *Limonade Tous Les Jours* follows a man to Paris, where a gorgeous young French cabaret singer finds him irresistible. As in all of Mee's works, there's a sense of romance, fantasy, and wisdom.

Mee has frequently collaborated with the director Anne Bogart — together the duo recently created *bobrauschenbergamerica*, a dazzling theatrical treatment of the vista of Bob Rauschenberg, the eminent visual artist of the 1950s. Bogart also has penned *Score*, a recent solo look at the career of the great composer Leonard Bernstein. And she has lent the superb actors who make up her SITI Company to other American playwrights — including the astounding Jefferson Mays, who will have spent most of 2002 and 2003 working on Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, a play about a German transvestite who survives the collapse of the Berlin wall.

#### CROSSING BOUNDARIES

In many ways, Bogart's work (wherein director and author often become inextricably merged) is indicative of the collapse of many of the old

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boundaries that used to divide the American theater. These days, those newly irrelevant divisions are eroding fast.

The writer-director Mary Zimmerman, whose gorgeous adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was such a great success on Broadway, is what one might think of as a full-service artist. From her version of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* to her remarkable collaboration with Philip Glass on the opera *Galileo Galilei* at the Goodman Theatre, Zimmerman typically has eschewed anachronism or direct political commentary, but she still has forged an unforgettable link between archetype and the nightly news.

Several times over the last couple of years, Zimmerman had gently coaxed her open-mouthed audience to a shocking place where ancient traditions crashed like powerful waves against the mean, destructive shores of modern life.

Zimmerman is a consummate storyteller. But in the main, the new generation of American theater artists tends to be less interested in traditional narratives — its video-generation playwrights grew up with an affinity for surrealist images and fast-changing visuals. Writers like the intense, San Francisco-based Denis Johnson (*Hellhound on My Trail*), the heir apparent to Sam Shepard and a chronicler of the motifs of a semi-mythic American West, often focus on the impact of images rather than cold dramatic logic.

In general, the emerging generation of writers is more intrigued these days by boundary crossings. Take, for example, the mature work of Suzan-Lori Parks, within whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *Topdog/Underdog* two African-American brothers named Lincoln and Booth share a grungy boardinghouse room. Lincoln even works as an Abe Lincoln impersonator at a penny arcade.

Is this history or a work of fiction? Is it a straightforward tale of sibling rivalry or a grand look at the echoes of the past? As she did with her

equally challenging *The America Play*, Parks blends fact and fancy in the most provocative of fashions.

This self-conscious sense of theatricality — employed for both Brechtian and humorous purposes — even has infected the Broadway musical. Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann's *Urinetown, the Musical* imagines a world where corporate ownership has run so amuck that residents have to go to privately owned toilets for relief.

The show aims to make a point about the importance of conservation and compassion. But its characters also know that they are, well, characters in a musical. And that lends the whole affair a smart, postmodern sensibility that appeals to younger audience members, even as the show pays homage to the traditions of the Broadway musical — one of the great American artistic inventions, as Mel Brooks's side-splitting live version of *The Producers* so aptly reminded us.

One can see this blending tendency in all areas of the arts — both American museum exhibits and rock concerts are becoming more overtly theatrical than was previously the case, even to the point of employing live actors and dramatic narratives. And Broadway often looks to Hollywood for inspiration and vice-versa — the Hollywood version of the Broadway musical *Chicago* was named the best film of 2002 by America's Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

#### SPECIAL EFFECTS

Many theaters point out now that their primary competition for audience members comes not from other arts groups but from retail environments that are increasingly theatrical in nature. One store, American Girl Place in Chicago, which caters to the preteen set, even hired Broadway composers and created its own pint-sized musical in the basement of the store. New works of theater, it seems, crop up even in shopping areas.

The theater technology of America is changing, too. Within the last two years, there have been astonishing advances in two-dimensional imagery, with digital images often creating what would in the past have been painted on canvas. Now that moving-light instruments are commonplace, the state-of-the-art theaters (such as the stunning new

4,000-seat Coliseum at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas) are using massive LED (light emitting diode) screens to create a sense of depth and offer a level of entertainment spectacle available nowhere else in the world.

These days, Las Vegas shows are no longer empty glamour, but complex visual experiences, wherein global artists take advantage of massive budgets and blank aesthetic slates to experiment in the middle of the great American desert. Although

lower tech, a similar screen provides the backdrop to the Broadway musical *Hairspray*, a work that combines the sizzle of "camp" with the kinds of serious civil-rights themes that they well understand in Alabama.

The play is still the thing in contemporary America, but the breadth of the modern theatrical canvases knows no boundaries. ■

*Chris Jones is a theater critic with the Chicago Tribune.*

## Profile: Playwright Regina Taylor

Regina Taylor was approached several years ago by the director of a theater company in Princeton, New Jersey, and asked to create a stage drama out of a volume of vintage black-and-white photographs of African-American women in "going-to-church" hats. Taylor was galvanized by the challenge.



Cast members of Regina Taylor's new play *Crowns, Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*.

The result was *Crowns*, a blending of gospel music and old-fashioned storytelling centering on these women. The playwright/actress shaped the drama in part during a residency at actor Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in Utah, and unveiled her play in the New Jersey college community late in 2002.

"We're doing the truths of their lives," Taylor noted shortly before the premiere of *Crowns*. Citing the revelatory nature of the hats, she called them "wonderful windows into these women's souls."

*Crowns*, which has drawn considerable attention since its debut, is only the latest example of its author's creative and intellectual prowess. Taylor is a renaissance woman for her time. Actress, director, and playwright, she has journeyed throughout the world of the performing arts over the past two decades.

The daughter of two schoolteachers, Taylor grew up in Dallas, Texas, and was still an undergraduate, majoring in journalism and English, when she made her professional acting debut in a television movie — a docudrama about the history of school integration

in the U.S. South. After graduation, Taylor moved to New York City in 1981 to continue acting — a craft to which she had been directed by one of her writing instructors in college.

"I became fascinated with the process of acting," she told an interviewer recently. "With writing you put pen to paper. It's the flesh and

blood, as it were. In acting, you're giving your voice and body to the spirits."

As a stage performer, Taylor was the first African-American woman to star as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* on Broadway. In television, she won a Golden Globe Award for her depiction of an African-American woman in the U.S. South in the 1950s in the acclaimed television series "I'll Fly Away." In films, she has been a steady presence opposite such actors as Denzel Washington and Samuel L. Jackson.

Taylor's first play, *Oo-Bla-Dee*, which focused on black female jazz musicians in the 1940s, debuted at a theater in Chicago and had subsequent stagings elsewhere. She then adapted Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* into *Drowning Crow*, using a rural setting in contemporary South Carolina to present the story of a generational split in an artistic family.

Now, with *Crowns* having had a New York staging after its Princeton engagement, Taylor is setting her sights on one of her next projects, a stage adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* — at the specific request of the author. ■



## A Conversation With Carey Perloff

For almost 20 years, Carey Perloff, artistic director of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, has witnessed the evolution of the theater scene across the United States. During her decade at the helm of the prominent A.C.T. troupe — which has encompassed, among other challenges, the rebuilding of her company's theater space from the ruins of a 1989 earthquake in California — she has seen



Carey Perloff

the expansion in the pool of creative talent and audiences alike. Her perspective extends beyond the United States as she seeks ideas from her peers around the globe and pursues collaborative ventures.

**Q:** What impresses you as some of the more significant developments in theater during the past decade or so?

**A:** There are several. One is the renaissance of the American actor. It's a great moment. I think about the future of the field a lot, because we have an actor-training program here at American Conservatory Theater that grants a master of fine arts in acting. What we've found is that American actors have a unique fusion of skills — a wonderful kinetic sense, a big emotional range, and the kind of language and text skills that we have traditionally associated with British theater. The standard of acting, in many different genres around the country, is incredibly high. When my international colleagues come to work with us, they're always amazed that American actors can sing, can dance, can handle a wide variety of styles.

I also think that we're crossing disciplines more in general. The boundaries of the well-made play are breaking down. We did a multidisciplinary music theater piece last year with San Francisco's remarkable Kronos Quartet — a new kind of opera that developed an enthusiastic following. This kind of interdisciplinary work is happening around the

country, a healthy reminder of the fact that American theater is truly national, not just based in New York.

There's a lot of cross-pollination among disciplines, which is great, and a strong international influence. We have international artists coming through A.C.T. all the time.

**Q:** What's the greatest challenge facing the American theater community today?

**A:** One is the ongoing fight for idiosyncrasy. There is a real

danger that with the ever-tightening economy, theater will become very homogeneous — that every theater will produce the same kinds of plays, that producers will be scared of taking risks. Really exciting theater is developed for a very particular community at a very particular time, and it needs to become the idiosyncratic voice of that particular venue. That's how theater stays interesting. If you look around the country, there's less surprise in theater seasons than there used to be; they're more predictable. So individual voice is an important issue.

Another challenge is keeping major artists in the field. We lose them to the [movie] industry very quickly. The temptations of other resources are so great.

**Q:** What are the creative and artistic influences from abroad that have been significant, from your point of view?

**A:** Ironically, we have the Europeans to thank for keeping great American artists like director Robert Wilson in the field. It's unbelievable that one of the most significant American artists has been employed almost solely by Europeans. Here in San Francisco, there are populations from all over the world, so no matter what kind of material you're working on, you have that population as a resource tool.

**Q:** Are the creative giants of the past — the O'Neills and the Williamses and their contemporaries — still dominating the field, or are new voices able to be heard?

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A: I think it is possible for other people's voices to be heard. I don't know that we have the generation that was Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill and Clifford Odets and Lorraine Hansberry and others. It's always hard to tell that until time has passed. But I think it's a vigorous time for American writing, and it takes a while for voices to emerge. It goes back to risk, though: A theater has to be interested enough in a given writer's voice to support the work through both failure and success. That's how a writer grows.

I do think that American audiences have become infinitely more sophisticated than they were a decade ago. We do very challenging plays here at A.C.T. Because we've spent so much time really energizing our audience about unusual material, they relish it.

Q: Ten or 12 years ago, the average artistic director outside New York City could not get away with that type of experimentation.

A: No. That has evolved. And it's very exciting. And for the artist, it's so much more fun.

Q: Here we are at a time of economic downturn. What do you do to compensate?

A: This economy has been particularly terrifying on the West Coast. We went through an extraordinary boom in northern California, which allowed A.C.T. to erase our entire post-earthquake deficit and build a huge subscription base. But the combination of the collapse of Silicon Valley and the September 11 terrorist attacks and the recession has been so punishing to California. And yet A.C.T. has had one of the best years we've ever had at the box office. Audiences are incredibly hungry for live theater — for the whole participatory experience of seeing a play. Like other regional theaters around the country, we do pre-play discussions, post-play discussions, symposia — everything and anything that helps an audience feel engaged. And we've found that people respond very strongly when they are given a chance to interact.

One major cause of the money problems A.C.T. and other nonprofit theaters across the country are experiencing is that the field is chronically under-endowed — unlike symphony orchestras and art museums. Because we're always thinking about solving the next production, we don't always focus as much as we should on the long-term future, and how we're all going to survive. It becomes very hard to push forward and grow and be ambitious and do the kind of work you want to do, while not taking so many risks that your institution's health is imperiled. It's a very hard call.

Q: Speculate, if you will, as to what might happen in theater over the next 10 years.

A: What I'm hoping is that more mid-sized theaters will emerge again. It's one of the keys to the whole theater ecology. It's why I wanted A.C.T. to develop a smaller space. As much as it's wonderful to see major productions in a large, glorious space, there's something about the intimacy of a 200-seat theater that is very special.

The other thing I'm really fighting for — because it's the best thing that ever happened to me at A.C.T. — is the maintenance of a core company of actors. It's an idea that, unfortunately in the last 10 years, has disappeared from almost every American theater. It can be the greatest thing to watch really terrific actors transform in role after role. It's so thrilling. We have a great actor here who has just played the sleaziest, funniest character in [David Mamet's] *American Buffalo*. And now he's going to play a romantic in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. That lets an audience in on the whole transformative process of theater. ■

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*The interview with Carey Perloff was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

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# FILM

## MOVIES AND MODERN AMERICA

BY RICHARD PELLIS

**W**hat is a “typical” American movie? People throughout the world are sure they know. A characteristic American film, they insist, has flamboyant special effects and a sumptuous décor, each a reflection of America’s nearly mythic affluence. Furthermore, American movies revel in fast-paced action and a celebration of individual ingenuity embodied in the heroics of an impeccably dressed, permanently youthful Hollywood star. And they feature love stories that lead, inevitably if often implausibly, to happy endings.

Yet over the past 15 years, for every high-tech, stunt-filled *Mission Impossible*, there are serious and even disturbing films such as *American Beauty* and *The Hours*. For every conventional Hollywood blockbuster apparently designed to appeal to the predilections of 12-year-old boys, there have been complex and sophisticated movies such as *Traffic*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Magnolia*, and *About Schmidt* that are consciously made for grown-ups. What is therefore remarkable about contemporary American movies is their diversity, their effort to explore the social and psychological dimensions of life in modern America, and their ability to combine entertainment with artistry.



*Gangs of New York* director Martin Scorsese (right) with actor Daniel Day-Lewis.

*TITANIC* AND THE MYTHS ABOUT AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE  
Nevertheless, the stereotypes about Hollywood films are deeply ingrained. In 1998, while I was a visiting professor in Germany, I often gave lectures at various places in Europe on American movies. The reactions of my audiences were often the same. If, for example, I spoke to secondary school teachers in Brussels, Berlin, or Barcelona, I would ask how many had seen *Titanic*. Half

the teachers in the room would raise their hands, reluctantly. They would then look around to see if others were joining them in this confessional. Their embarrassment at having surrendered to yet another Hollywood seduction was palpable.

When I asked them why they saw the movie, they usually said that they wanted to understand better the tastes, however vulgar, of their students or their own children. Or that they were curious to see what all the pandemonium was about, all the marketing and publicity and hype on behalf of a \$200 million adolescent fantasy. Not one of the teachers would admit that they went to see *Titanic* because they had heard it was good, maybe even a work of art.

The teachers did not know it, but they had internalized the criticisms of American mass culture, and especially of American movies, that have persisted for nearly a century. Since the 1920s, people both in the United States and abroad have been told that Hollywood’s products are “bad” for

them. According to the defenders of high culture, American movies are brash, superficial, inane, and infantile. Worst of all, they are commercial. Like everything else in American life, movies are regarded as just another item available for consumption, perpetually for sale, a commodity to be advertised and merchandised, no different from detergents and washing machines.



Actor Jack Nicholson in Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt*.

No wonder, then, that the teachers felt guilty at having gone to see *Titanic*. No wonder, too, that they acted as if they'd been temporarily slumming. They had not been bewitched by Leonardo DiCaprio, not them. They knew the film was preposterous. The very mention of the movie got a laugh from the audience; it was a guaranteed punch line with audiences everywhere. Indeed, it is this laughter that enables people to enjoy America's movies without suffering any pangs of conscience about wasting their time on such trivia.

#### AMERICAN MOVIES IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

Despite these century-long preconceptions about Hollywood movies, we should recall that — not so long ago — the films people the world over cared and argued about, that seemed to speak directly to their personal or social dilemmas, came from the United States. From the late 1960s until the end of the 1970s, American filmmaking underwent an extraordinary renaissance. In few other periods were American directors so influential or their movies so central in shaping the experience and values of audiences everywhere.

One reason for this renaissance was that, with the advent of the counterculture, the major Hollywood studios were no longer certain about what sorts of movies would make money or about what the new, young audiences who came of age in the 1960s wanted. So the studios were willing, for a brief time, to let anyone with an idea make a movie. They turned over Hollywood to a group of gifted and often eccentric directors (Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George

Lucas, Woody Allen) who wanted to make European-style movies: films that were mostly character studies, without conventional plots or linear narratives, and with lots of stylistic experimentation.

Beginning in 1967, with Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, the Americans released a flood of improvisational and autobiographical movies,

many of them appealing especially to college students and young adults who were disaffected by the war in Vietnam and disillusioned with what had once been called, in a more innocent age, the American Dream. The movies included Mike Nichols's *The Graduate*; Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*; Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*; Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*; Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*; Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (parts I and II), *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*; George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars*; Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*; Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*; Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men*; Paul Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman*; Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*; Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz*; and the most wrenching film of the 1970s, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*.

These movies offered a vision of an America drenched in loneliness, conspiracy and corruption, psychic injury, and death. Yet despite their melancholy view of American life, the films themselves were made with wit and exceptional exuberance, reinforced by the vitality of a new and distinctly un-Hollywood-like generation of stars — Warren Beatty, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman, Faye Dunaway, Jill Clayburgh, Meryl Streep.

#### HOLLYWOOD AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

During the 1980s, much of this cinematic inventiveness seemed to vanish. Yet even in a decade

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when people in Washington and on Wall Street allegedly yearned to be masters of the universe, the most memorable films were not the Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger special-effects extravaganzas. They were instead the inexpensive, quieter films like *The Verdict* and *Driving Miss Daisy* — movies that savored the unexpected insights and triumphs of otherwise ordinary people, and that offered an antidote to the clichés about America’s adoration of wealth and global power

Despite Vietnam and the generational and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, American life was still shadowed during these years by the grimness of the Cold War. But at least the United States and the Soviet Union understood the rules of the diplomatic and ideological game; neither country was willing to embark on international adventures that might threaten the other’s sense of national security. All this changed with the end of the Cold War in 1989. The United States was now the planet’s sole superpower. Yet paradoxically, Americans found themselves living in a world of even greater moral uncertainties and political dangers — a world where terrorists respected no national boundaries or ethical restraints.

#### CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MOVIES

So having left the familiar parameters of the Cold War behind, Americans after 1989 could be equally moved by films with very different preoccupations. Two trends in American filmmaking were conspicuous, both inspired by the cinematic past. One was a passion (on the part of youthful directors like Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Cameron Crowe) to replicate the unconventional, character-driven, movies of the 1960s and 1970s. This aspiration was exemplified in such films as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Fargo*, *L.A. Confidential*, *High Fidelity*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Thus, in its multiple narratives and sardonic dissection of American show business, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* was reminiscent of Robert Altman’s *Nashville*, while Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* was structured exactly like Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret*, with the events on stage mirroring the events in “real” life. In addition, American directors sought to resurrect the tradition, inherited from the 1960s, of the stylistically impressive, elliptical, and nightmarish excursions into

the world of tortured souls — an effort reflected in *Seven*, *Fight Club*, *Mulholland Drive*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Insomnia*.

The other trend seemed more atavistic: the longing to return to the epic themes and old-fashioned storytelling of an earlier America, to rekindle the moral certitudes of a *Gone With the Wind* or a *Casablanca*. No two films were more devoted to this project than James Cameron’s *Titanic* and Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* — each brilliantly made, both filled with trust in a better future after all the hard lessons of life were absorbed.

But for all their indebtedness to the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, American movies of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century portrayed a society that the filmmakers and audiences of the counterculture and the antiwar movement would not have recognized. Near the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Bonnie asks Clyde how he would live his life differently. Clyde responds by saying he’d rob banks in a different state from the one he lives in. The audience shares in, and possibly smiles at, the ironic disjunction between the question and the reply. There is no hope here, only an anticipation of doom. In contrast, *Pulp Fiction* and *Titanic* — otherwise antithetical in their subjects and emotions — both strain for faith and re-emphasize the typically American notion that individuals can transform their lives.

Films of the past 15 years also introduced to their audiences a fresh generation of actors who were less emblematic of an unorthodox America than were the actors who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, Kevin Spacey, Russell Crowe, Brad Pitt, John Cusack, Matt Damon, Edward Norton, Frances McDormand, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Julianne Moore — none of whom conforms to the classic notion of a Hollywood star — have given performances as vivid and as idiosyncratic as their illustrious predecessors. Unlike the iconic stars of Hollywood’s classic era, who always seemed to be playing themselves — stars like Cary Grant, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor — the current generation of American actors disappear into their roles, playing parts that differ from one movie to the next.

Most of their movies, although financed by Hollywood, are exceedingly offbeat, a testament to the variety of American filmmaking. One important

reason for this eclecticism is the impact of smaller, semi-independent studios — like Sony Pictures Classics and DreamWorks — that specialize in producing or distributing avant-garde movies. No studio head has been more influential or more successful in promoting innovative American as well as foreign-language films than Harvey Weinstein of Miramax.

In many ways, Weinstein is the crucial link between the movies of the 1960s and those of the past 15 years. Weinstein grew up in the 1960s, idolizing the films of François Truffaut, Federico Fellini, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and Francis Ford Coppola. When Weinstein launched Miramax in 1979, he wanted to produce the sort of challenging films he had adored in his youth. Which is precisely what he has done. Miramax has been responsible for bringing to the United States foreign films like *The Crying Game*, *Cinema Paradiso*, *Il Postino*, *Life Is Beautiful*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*, all of which made money despite the presumption abroad that Americans will only pay to see blockbuster movies made in Hollywood. But Weinstein has also supplied both the funds and sometimes the inspiration for many of the finest American films of recent years: *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The English Patient*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *In the Bedroom*, *The Hours*, *Chicago*, and Martin Scorsese's long-time project, *Gangs of New York*.

Still, no matter how important the convictions and contributions of particular producers, directors, or actors have been, what contemporary American movies have most in common with the films of the 1960s and 1970s is a seriousness of artistic purpose combined with an urge to enthrall the audience. These twin ambitions are by no means uniquely American. Wherever they have come from, the greatest directors — Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Federico Fellini, François Truffaut, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg — have always recognized the intimate relationship between entertainment and art.

So while American movies are undeniably commercial enterprises, there is no inherent contradiction between the desire to make a profit on a film and the yearning to create a work that is

original and provocative. Indeed, it may well be that the market-driven impulse to establish an emotional connection with moviegoers has served as a stimulant for art. Hence, some of the most unforgettable American films of the past 40 years, from *The Godfather* to *The Hours*, have been both commercially successful and artistically compelling.

#### THE UNIVERSALITY OF AMERICAN MOVIES

Yet in the end, what makes modern American films most “American” is their refusal to browbeat an audience with a social message. American movies have customarily focused on human relationships and private feelings, not on the problems of a particular time and place. They tell tales about romance (*Shakespeare in Love*, *High Fidelity*), intrigue (*The Usual Suspects*, *L.A. Confidential*), success and failure (*Chicago*, *American Beauty*), moral conflicts (*Pulp Fiction*, *The Insider*), and survival (*Titanic*, *Saving Private Ryan*). This approach to filmmaking reflects, in part, the traditional American faith in the centrality of the individual.

But American or not, such intensely personal dilemmas are what people everywhere wrestle with. So Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans have flocked to modern American movies not because these films glorify America's political institutions or its economic values, but because audiences — no matter where they live — can see some part of their own lives reflected in Hollywood's dramatic stories of love and loss. As a result, like so many people all over the world in the 20th century, foreign moviegoers might at present disapprove of some of America's policies while embracing its culture as in some sense their own. ■

*A professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin, Richard Pells is the author of several books, including Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II. He is currently at work on From Modernism to the Movies: The Globalization of American Culture in the 20th Century, to be published by Yale University Press. Pells has held Fulbright chairs and visiting professorships at universities in São Paulo, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Sydney, Bonn, Berlin, Cologne, and Vienna.*

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## Profile: Filmmaker Alexander Payne

The sweeping vistas of the Nebraska countryside outside the city of Omaha in the movie *About Schmidt*, and the hushed, stoic visages within the city itself, represent a homecoming of sorts for filmmaker Alexander Payne.

The son of Greek parents who owned a prominent restaurant in Omaha, Payne left Nebraska after high school to study Spanish and history at Stanford University, with an eye toward becoming a foreign correspondent. His young adulthood took him to Spain, where he enrolled in a course in philology at the University of Salamanca, and later to Columbia, before pursuing a master of fine arts degree at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Payne's three feature films have focused on the terrain he knows so well — the American Midwest, and specifically Omaha. His early audiences — insiders and followers of low-budget, independent films — have expanded to embrace the traditional American moviegoer.

*Citizen Ruth*, a 1996 movie, starred Laura Dern as a young, pregnant indigent who, unwittingly, becomes a pawn of both sides in the pro-life/pro-choice debate about abortion in the United States.

Three years later, Payne wrote and directed



Alexander Payne

*Election*, an acerbic satire about American politics seen through the lens of a student council election in a midwestern high school. Payne received an Academy Award nomination for his screenplay, and the movie ignited the career of its young leading lady, Reese Witherspoon.

Most recently, Payne adapted *About Schmidt*, a novel by Louis Begley, for the screen. From the first moment,

when Schmidt, played by actor Jack Nicholson, is revealed as a man on the verge of his retirement, the movie is compelling. By the creator's own description, this is a movie about "loneliness, contempt, anger, regret." And yet Payne has embedded elements of humor within Schmidt's journey, as well as a suggestion of a certain redemption. In the end, Schmidt finds a purpose in his life through his sponsorship, via an international organization, of an impoverished African child.

For the self-described "restless" Payne, 41, who is preparing his next movie — about two friends who take a wine-tasting tour just before one is to be married — these are the best of times.

"I'm getting to make the films I want to make," he says.

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## A Conversation With Geoffrey Gilmore

For 10 days each January, the small winter sports community of Park City, Utah, is transformed into one of the most vital spots on the landscape of American movies. The Sundance Film Festival unfolding there serves as a bellwether of what is transpiring, creatively, in independent filmmaking in the United States — that is, films made by independent producers outside the Hollywood studio system. Since 1990, as co-director and director of film programming,



Geoffrey Gilmore

Geoffrey Gilmore has been responsible for film selection and the structure of the annual Sundance event.

**Q:** From your vantage point, what are the most exciting developments in American movies today?

**A:** Although independent filmmaking had its roots earlier than the last decade, the past few years have seen its tremendous development. There is a whole new generation of directors who are doing

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movies on both sides of the line — independent, low-budget productions and major studio films. The idea that these two sectors would never meet was talked about at the beginning of the 1990s, but you can't say that anymore, not with directors like Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*) or Alexander Payne (*About Schmidt*) on the scene. Of course, there still are differences, not the least of which is that the average cost of a studio film is approaching \$60 million, plus another \$30 million for marketing and distribution, while the independent world has considerably lower budgets.

**Q:** But creatively speaking, you do have a blurring of lines, don't you?

**A:** There is, but I would argue that the kind of year we just had was somewhat unusual. Major studios, by their very nature, are commercially driven. If a project has a commercial aesthetic to it that also allows for creativity in direction, performance, and writing, that's fine. But the studios would rather be on a much more predictable course as to what works and what does not.

You asked about the biggest change recently. There are a whole range of films being distributed theatrically that in the 1980s or even the early 1990s would not have been distributed at all. There's been a change in the marketplace and in the kinds of films that are coming out. Some 250 studio films are produced each year, and another 350 or so independent/European art films are distributed. Also, you have more films independently directed by women — like Allison Anders, Nicole Holofcener, Rebecca Miller, and Lisa Cholodenko. And there are more works by people of color. There's always been a black-genre cinema that existed under the radar, and it is now completely visible, with people like Gina Prince-Bythewood, John Singleton, and the Hudlin brothers. There are Latino writer-directors like Robert Rodriguez and Gregory Nava. And two nights ago, there was a world premiere of *Better Luck*

*Tomorrow*, a film that came out of Sundance by an Asian-American filmmaker named Justin Lin.

The fact is that you have this range of work available says something about the transformation that has taken place. This isn't a marginal achievement; it's very significant, and, in some ways, it's only in its initial stages. The independent sector represents less than 10 percent of the total box office. But it has infused Hollywood with remarkable talent — leading actors like Renée Zellweger, Julianne Moore, Adrien Brody, and Nicole Kidman, and directors like Haynes, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, and Gus Van Zant. Now these directors can make films whenever and wherever they want — inside and outside the major studio system. And Sundance is very much part and parcel of helping those independent films find audiences.

**Q:** What is a significant challenge facing young filmmakers and the industry as a whole?

**A:** You could say that the good news is the number of films being made, and the bad news is the number of films being made. Distribution is a bottleneck, and I think it will be even more of an issue as the number of films produced increases and the democratization of film production continues. You don't need a lot of resources now to be able to make a movie with pretty good production quality. There were always people in the past who made films for \$5,000, but not that many. Today, using a good consumer-level camera and a final-cut pro program on a computer, you can make a movie with the level of production quality of a lot of things that are being bought.

A second major transition has been the "corporatization" of media. Today, almost all of Hollywood's major studios are part of media multinationals. So you're dealing with companies whose existence doesn't necessarily depend on whether they do well producing films out of Hollywood, but on their other revenue streams, like cable channels or book and music publishing companies. In some ways, this development has been more transforming than what has happened in the independent arena.

**Q:** And the challenge in all this?

**A:** The issue is finding ways in which formulaic and generic work, basically produced for a mass audience, doesn't overwhelm the originality or diversity that the independent arena brings to it.



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**Q:** Do the creative giants of the past still dominate, or has a new generation truly taken hold?

**A:** The creative giants of the recent past, the generation that came along in the 1970s, still have an enormous power — the Coppolas, the Scorseses, the Spielbergs. But their dominance isn't singular. We're talking today about a different kind of filmmaking than when those guys grew up. You have a very different economic situation in Hollywood now as far as how films are financed and budgeted. Four directors have come out of Sundance in the last two years who are now stepping up to direct \$100 million movies.

**Q:** Do you see the economic downturn having ominous overtones for independent filmmaking?

**A:** The sources of funding that 20 years of stock market increases helped fund — the enormous amount of foreign sales and video-support work — are not going to be there anymore. There are fears, some of them well founded, that a lot of the production that particularly supported major independent films may not be around.

**Q:** Is that going to stop a young adult with a camera and a dream from making movies?

**A:** No. It means that instead of an independent film being made for \$5 million, it may have to be made for \$1 million. And then it's a question of whether or

not that kid can get his or her film seen.

**Q:** There's a sense that there's been a change in the demographics of the film audience. Is that how you see it?

**A:** People say that the audience is getting older — meaning that more diverse and more aesthetically challenging works are going to be permitted. And perhaps the more formulaic franchise work that's been put out there is not as dominant as it was. I'm hesitant to say that the franchise-driven work, the generically produced work, is disappearing. There's a run of "girl power" movies out now — directed straight toward young teenagers. And franchise "action movies" are still as powerful as ever in terms of certain seasonal audiences. But rather than getting worse, I think the demographics are getting better.

**Q:** To sum up, then, looking forward?

**A:** We've barely begun to see the impact of digital cinematography and digital filmmaking, and we can expect a lot of visual experimentation and stylization. From a broader perspective, though, the world has been introduced to a kind of independent production that cannot be labeled either as "art movie" or "studio film." That opens up a whole range of possibilities for storytelling and writer-driven films that promise a diversity of content. ■

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*The interview with Geoffrey Gilmore was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

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# LITERATURE

## SNAPSHOTS FROM THE BRIDGE

BY SVEN BIRKERTS

One of the more interesting things about writing criticism for many years is that from time to time I am called upon to revisit a particular author or development, at which point I usually discover not only how much my tastes and inclinations have changed, but also that my subjects have refused to stay embalmed in the mummy-wrap of what I used to think. This has been borne out most vividly recently, as I have been asked to venture a concise overview

assessment of the state of American literature — fiction and poetry — in the new millennium.

Ever the overworked opportunist, I returned first to a reflective survey essay I had written just over a decade ago entitled “The Talent in the Room.” The intent of that piece had been very similar — to spotlight the major trends and talents in the world of literary fiction. My hope was to salvage at least the foundation and frame of the former structure. Alas, as soon as I began reading I saw that it was not to be. Somehow, while I’d had my eye on the foreground action, reviewing this and that writer, the background had quite steadily — and surprisingly — shifted.

In that earlier essay, bouncing off polemics by Norman Mailer (his own 1959 essay, “Evaluations — Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room”), as well as Tom Wolfe’s rabble-rousing



Some of the new faces on America's literary scene.

“Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” published in *Harper's* in 1989, I had concluded that contemporary American fiction was in a state of retreat. As more and more writers found themselves unable to deal convincingly with a radically transformed postmodern electronic society, there was a large-scale movement to a simpler world-picture. Instead of taking on the urban information culture, novelists and short story

writers went toward rural and small-town subject matters, taking either minimalist or maximalist approaches.

I considered in this context, among others, Russell Banks, Richard Ford, Ann Tyler, Ann Beattie, William Kennedy, John Updike, Sue Miller, and Joyce Carol Oates, all of them presenting powerful versions of American experience, but none of them addressing — so I thought — the subject I then deemed central. There were exceptions, of course, notably Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Stone, Richard Powers, Paul Auster, Toni Morrison, and Paul West, writers I saw as more attuned in their work to the vibrations of these transformations. But even taking these exceptions into account, my overall assessment was guardedly pessimistic.

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#### ASCENT OF THE NEW GENERATION

I am fascinated and heartened by how much has changed in the 10-plus years since I wrote “The Talent in the Room,” though the change has come not by way of revolutionary insurgency but more by incremental shifts and displacements. It has been a matter of younger talents coming of age — sensibilities more schooled in the new, postmodern way of things — and older writers in many cases ceding their long-held places in the spotlight.

The biggest transformation, I would say, has been the ascendancy of a new generation of highly ambitious writers who are at once panoramic in their impulses and attuned to our collective arrival in a hypercomplex and polyglot info-culture. The best known of these is probably novelist Jonathan Franzen, whose *The Corrections*, a highly articulate and many-stranded story of two generations of the Midwestern Lambert family, rode the 2001 best-seller lists for many months. The author reminded serious readers everywhere that it was possible to tell a page-turning good story while honoring the fractured complexity of life in our post-everything era.

Other highly visible and critically respected members of Franzen’s 40-something generation include the prolific polymath Richard Powers. Powers followed *Plowing the Dark*, his seventh novel, an exploration of the implications of virtuality (the digital stimulation of “reality”) with *The Time of Our Singing* in 2003, a mammoth saga of a mixed-race family that fused music, racial politics, and theoretical physics. There is also Jeffrey Eugenides, author of the generational angst-classic *The Virgin Suicides*, whose newest novel, *Middlesex* (2002), combines elaborate historical sequences with the coming-of-age travails of a transsexual. David Foster Wallace remains for many younger readers the standard-bearer of the new ethos of fragmentation and cultural displacement; his leviathan novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) is the benchmark work, what Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* was for readers a few decades back, while the more recent stories of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* immerse the reader in disturbingly obsessive personalities.

Slightly younger talents include Rick Moody, who writes with serious reach in various genres, including the short story (*Demonology*), the novel (*Purple America*), and the memoir (*The Black Veil*), as well

as Colson Whitehead, the young African-American novelist who, after marking his edgily whimsical debut with *The Intuitionist*, a novel about an elevator inspector, joined the maximalist cadre with *John Henry Days*, a broadly conceived satire of present-day race relations in collision with the culture of media boosterism. David Eggers scored a tremendous popular success a few years back with his energetic hybrid novel/memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which fused a personal confessional impulse with the narrative licentiousness of fiction.

A.M. Homes, Joanna Scott, and Helen DeWitt, three women writing determinedly outside the domestic pigeonhole (old stereotypes live on), match their male colleagues in inventiveness and a willingness to take on the zeitgeist, though none has achieved the popular success of Alice Sebold (*The Lovely Bones*), Janet Fitch (*White Oleander*), or Ann Packer (*The Dive From Clausen’s Pier*) — each one, interestingly, a novel that turns on the premise of a traumatic loss.

#### AN INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Another conspicuous trend-shift worth remarking on has been the infusion of an internationalist perspective and subject matter into the literary mainstream. Chinese-born novelist and story-writer Ha Jin, in *Waiting* and, recently, *The Crazy*, has opened the door to narratives from the period of China’s Cultural Revolution. Ukrainian-American Askold Melnyczuk, in *Ambassador of the Dead*, makes vivid the surfacing of suppressed World War II horrors in the lives of two families of Ukrainian-Americans, while Sarajevo-born immigrant Aleksandar Hemon, author of the story collection *The Question of Bruno*, in his novel *Nowhere Man* plies between past and present in the life of a young Sarajevo man living in present-day Chicago. Chang-rae Lee, in *A Gesture Life*, subtly dramatizes the life of a Korean-born Japanese man living in America and trying to evade the ghosts of his compromised past. Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Junot Diaz, in *Drown*, are among several younger writers who use the short story form to study the complex frictions that come with living in the ethnic divide, Indian-American and Dominican-American, respectively.

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A similar impulse — only expressed through reversed perspectives — is found in novels like Arthur Phillips's *Prague* and Jonathan Safran Foer's best-selling *Everything Is Illuminated*, both of which probe lives in other cultures from the vantage of Americans living and traveling abroad. Where Phillips refracts our recent cultural period through the experiences of a group of American expatriates living abroad — not in Prague, in fact, but in Budapest (the novel's little joke) — Foer depicts the encounter of a young American traveler (named Jonathan Safran Foer) with the ancestral past in contemporary Ukraine.

These several developments stand out against what remains a powerful mainstream continuity. The various modes of American realism continue to find strong representation in the works of writers like Richard Ford, William Kennedy, Sue Miller, Ward Just, Andre Dubus III, Peter Matthiessen, and Philip Roth (whose recent trilogy comprising *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* stands as one of the signal accomplishments of the past decade). No less "real" but stylistically more elaborate variations are presented in works by Annie Proulx and Cormac McCarthy, as well as John Updike, William Vollmann, and others.

Of the making of lists there is no end. At certain points the broader typologies break down and one starts ticking off the *sui generis* talents: the more assertively experimental stylists like Robert Coover, David Markson, Mary Robison, and George Saunders; the divergently uncanny storytellers like Paul Auster, Paul West, Mark Slouka, Howard Norman, Charles Baxter, Douglas Bauer, Jonathan Dee, Allen Kurzweil, Alan Lightman, Michael Chabon, Margot Livesey, Maureen Howard, T.C. Boyle, and Ann Patchett; the voice-driven southerners like Padgett Powell, Lewis Nordan, Jill McCorkle, Elizabeth Cox, Lee Smith, Nancy Lemann, Barry Hannah, Donna Tartt, and Ellen Gilchrist. There should be a separate slot for the astonishing magnifications of the ordinary by Nicholson Baker, from his debut novel, *The Mezzanine*, to the recent *A Box of Matches*, which built a whole narrative out of a middle-aged man's early morning musings by his fireplace. Have I forgotten anyone? Dozens, hundreds — I'm certain. Anyone who ventures to survey must prepare to live with a haunting sense of omission.

#### THE LANGUAGES OF POETRY

The poetry scene is configured by a similar plurality of modes, but what feels like abundance and variety in the world of fiction feels to many poets I've spoken with like a frustrating balkanization. A few years ago, the major division of camps was between the "formalists" and exponents of various kinds of "free" verse. The situation feels somewhat different now, with the split coming more between poets who use language in referential ways — pointing out at our common world — and those for whom language is its own self-created realm. The latter include the very visible John Ashbery and his many followers, and poets influenced by Jorie Graham, who puts the dynamic process of perception at the core of her expression. In their near vicinity, we find the poets of the experimental L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school, including Michael Palmer, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian, who in her long poem *Oxota* writes lines such as: "It's the principle of connection not that of causality which saves us from a bad infinity/ The word hunt is not the shadow of an accident."

The more directly referential poets branch out in a number of directions. There are the older inheritors of modernism, like former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, Frank Bidart, Louise Glück, Charles Simic, and C.K. Williams.

Alongside them we find a cluster, mainly younger, of poets espousing a somewhat less historically conditioned idiom, including Tom Sleigh, Alan Shapiro, Rosanna Warren, Gail Mazur, and Yusef Komunyakaa on the one hand, and more formally inflected poets like William Logan, Dana Gioia (recently named as head of the National Endowment for the Arts), Brad Leithauser, Glyn Maxwell, Debora Greger, and Mary Jo Salter, on the other.

On other branches we point to more personally declarative poets like Marie Howe, Mark Doty, and Sharon Olds; the benign and lightly surreal Billy Collins, our current Poet Laureate; and the less benign, more somberly funny Stephen Dobyns. A longer survey would find ways to place the work of Thomas Lux and David Lehman, as well as the powerful singular expressions of older, more established poets such as Adrienne Rich, Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Thom Gunn, and David Ferry.

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## THE SERIOUS READER REMAINS

Turning from poetry to the big picture of the literary world, it is safe to assert that transformations in the social and economic world have had their impact. In publishing, as in most things, money calls the dance, and the recent fiscal downturn, combined with the ongoing tendency toward corporate conglomeration (with its attendant squeeze on the “bottom line” of profits), has put pressure on small-returns literary projects. Authors have a more difficult time breaking in; editors have to work much harder to persuade their superiors to take on books that don’t promise substantial sales. The old expectations, fostered when publishing was the domain of independent houses, are no longer — the independents have all but vanished.

At the same time, the burgeoning electronic culture has made its inroads. While the much-touted electronic book (the handheld device that was to revolutionize reading) never caught on — indeed, was a major fizzle, confounding pundits everywhere

— there is little question that ever more sophisticated entertainments (video, DVD, and the like) have made inroads into our reading lives, and, of course, we hear regular laments about the shrinking away of seriousness.

On the other hand — always there’s that “other hand” — worthy books continue to be written, published, promoted, and read, and breakout best-sellers like *The Corrections* and *The Lovely Bones* remind everyone in the business that the avid serious reader has not disappeared. If the broader trend is toward more glitzy entertainments, we must nevertheless remark the steady proliferation of book clubs and reading groups. Dire predictions are risky, and except those that pertained to the coming of the horseless carriage, they usually have been exaggerated. ■

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*Sven Birkerts is the author of six books, including The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age and My Sky Blue Trades, a recently published memoir.*

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## Profile: Novelist Jill McCorkle

One of the hallmarks of American literature is a sense of place. Writers from the southern United States in particular — William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams, to name just three — are well known for conveying their depictions of this unique region.

Jill McCorkle is one of the heirs to that tradition, albeit her work reflects a New South through which interstate highways flow and in which suburbia and transiency have become irreversible realities. But in her five novels and two collections of short stories, McCorkle has maintained and enhanced the oral tradition that is so much a part of southern — and rural — culture. She once referred to her style as “the historical meandering method of storytelling.”

McCorkle, a North Carolina native, burst on the American literary scene in 1984 at age 26 — having graduated from college and from a master’s degree program in writing — with two novels, *The Cheer*



Jill McCorkle

*Leader* and *July 7th*, published simultaneously. McCorkle was one of the fiction writers taken under the wing of her publisher, Algonquin Books, a small, independent publisher of quality fiction and nonfiction books based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. With seven works now in print, she and Algonquin have enjoyed a fruitful relationship over the years.

McCorkle’s stories are laced with down-home humor, yet they are rooted in human struggle. “I write about people who are figuring out where they fit in society and how to reach a certain level of acceptance,” she once said. “Oftentimes I start out with an idea just because it is funny, but then I like to find the darker part of the story.” Paying tribute to her deft comic touch and her keen eye for southern manners, one critic noted that “her vision is also similarly humane, revealing the foibles of her characters but withholding harsh judgments or violent epiphanies.”

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The southern women she has created in novels such as *Carolina Moon* and *Tending to Virginia* — which she considers her most satisfying books — range from teenagers to the elderly. The way she interweaves their lives suggests her desire to embrace human relationships and extol the continuity of life. While rooted in the South, her writing touches universal themes — perhaps the

reason why her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

The most recent collection of stories by McCorkle, who now teaches writing at Harvard University and Bennington College, is *Creatures of Habit*, published in 2001. As one observer put it, the tales represent “what coming home should be but so seldom is — comforting, clarifying, and irresistible.” ■

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## A Conversation With Jason Epstein

Over a half-century as an editor and publisher, Jason Epstein has set a standard for publishing in the United States. As founder of Anchor Books, he established quality paperback books as an alternative to the mass marketing of soft-cover volumes. Epstein was editorial director of Random House; co-founded the prestigious literary journal *The New York Review of Books*; created the *Library of America* to bring to the market exquisite editions of classic American fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; and pioneered research and experimentation to bring book publishing in line with the computer age. Epstein was the first recipient of the National Book Award for Distinguished Service to American Letters in recognition of his work in “inventing new kinds of publishing and editing.”



Jason Epstein

**Q:** Is this a good time for books in the United States?

**A:** The nonfiction being published today is as interesting as what we were publishing 20 or 30 years ago, perhaps more so. Good historians, both amateur and professional, have learned how to address general readers, and the interest in first-rate historical writing has expanded accordingly. The same is true for science, where writers have also learned how to speak to nonspecialized readers. As far as I can tell, the editors who select and edit these books are highly qualified professionals who know not only how to prepare a manuscript for the printer but how to call books to the attention of readers.

Fiction is another matter, and this I believe

reflects a cultural problem endemic to First World cultures. The current generation of fiction writers has not produced as many world-class talents as one might have hoped. There is no shortage of interesting work, but there are no new Mailers or Roths or Hellers or Doctorows or DeLillos in sight — writers whose work is obligatory for serious readers. I wonder if the devastating wars of the 20th century help explain this phenomenon. The most interesting new writers are from India, China, Latin America, and even

Iceland, and it is reasonable to expect that, from the large Latino and Asian populations in the United States, interesting talent will continue to emerge. The cultural dissonance that these people encounter should give them plenty to write about.

Meanwhile, the proportion of readers in the United States seems to have grown, and I find it always a pleasure to see on the New York City subways ethnically diverse young people reading good books. There is no reason to worry about the future of books in the United States.

**Q:** What are the challenges today in book publishing and literature, as you see them?

**A:** On the other hand, there is much to worry about in the current state of the publishing industry, which is suffering from a severe structural crisis — the result of a highly overcentralized retail marketplace. Unlike the literary marketplace a generation ago, consisting of 4,000 to 5,000 independent booksellers, today's market is dominated by a few chains that require rapid turnover to support their

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expensive operations and that select their inventory centrally. This severely limits the shelf life of a book, and therefore the range of books available to readers.

Today there are probably no more than 50 or 60 independent bookstores in the United States with inventories of 100,000 or more titles, which helps explain the success of amazon.com and other on-line retailers that are able to maintain extensive selections. However, these operations have not proven profitable and may eventually be impossible to sustain.

The existing supply chain is clearly obsolete and will be replaced eventually by the electronic distribution of digital files printed and bound in the form of library-quality paperbacks at point of delivery. These highly disruptive technologies now exist but cannot be deployed at this time because they will render redundant such traditional publishing functions as centralized printing, physical storage and delivery of inventory, and traditional marketing, along with the functionaries themselves. When these technologies are eventually deployed, the effect will be to make millions of titles widely, cheaply, and permanently available in many languages to readers

throughout the world, and will constitute a second Gutenberg revolution, but on a world scale

The economic downturn does not seem to be affecting publishers' lists so far. But profits are down at some conglomerates and likely to fall further with predictable results. [The publishing firm] Bertelsmann, for example, has begun to liquidate certain fixed costs by combining divisions, intending to reduce not only its overheads but perhaps the number of its publications.

Morale in the industry is not high. An encouraging sign, however, is the proliferation of small houses, most of which have set high literary standards for themselves. The day of the conglomerates seems to me to be fading along with that of the chain booksellers whose same-store sales have been lagging for several quarters.

But people will continue to tell stories as they have been doing since the beginning of the human era, and other people will go on reading them. This suggests that the structural crisis that afflicts the publishing industry will sooner or later — and by one means or another — be overcome. ■

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*The interview with Jason Epstein was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

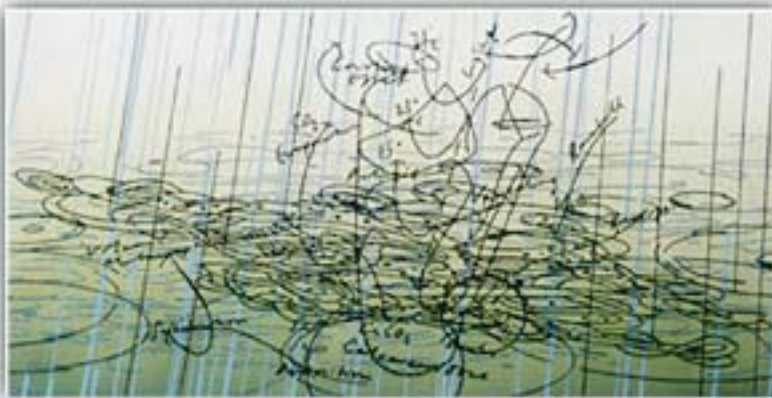
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# The VISUAL ARTS

## BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Once it was possible to sum up current trends in American art with a few deftly put phrases — “abstract, gestural painting” could have served at one point, or “return to figuration” at another. Today it is much more difficult to



Matthew Richie's relief print *Sea State One*.

pinpoint the dominant approach with anywhere near this kind of precision. In part, this is because art has changed, in part because the world has changed. Nevertheless, I believe that there are sets of tendencies that art today is following. These are often best understood by looking at individual artists who exemplify them, and thinking about how these artists are stretching our understanding and definitions of art.

But before we can do that, it might be helpful to look more closely at the idea of “American art.” This apparently simple category is actually much more complex than it appears. The conviction that there is such a thing as “American style” painting or sculpture that partakes of some quintessentially “American” quality was once an immutable tenet of modernist art criticism. Today, however, “American art” is no longer a simple matter of geography, national origin, or point of view. Instead, the globalization of markets, the ease of international communication, and the nomadic movement of artists from one country to another have all contributed to an art world without firm concepts of national identity. It is common for artists to list

multiple countries as their home and to refer to themselves in hyphenated ways. I recently attended an exhibition comprising artists from all over the world. I kept meeting interesting international artists — this one hailed from Cuba, this one

from Nigeria, that one from China — only to discover that they now live within a few miles of me in New York City.

This fluidity is an important element in any discussion of American art today. The evaporation of the borders between nations, at least in the field of art, mirrors the disappearance of all kinds of other boundaries as well. Hardly anyone worries about the unique characteristics of painting and sculpture any more. Just as artists hopscotch around the globe, they vault effortlessly across media, producing work that simultaneously incorporates not only traditional materials but also digital technology, theatrical installation, photography, performance, music, film, and video.

Similarly, “public art” once meant a massive sculpture set on a public plaza. Now public art is just as likely to appear on the Internet or to involve small groups of community members working together on a project of local interest. Equally changed is the old idea that art should confine itself to its own sphere. Artists today incorporate science, politics, religion, architecture, and ecology into their work and hope to have impact that stretches far beyond the gallery walls.



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#### THE EXPANDING DEFINITION OF ART

Navigating this brave new world of art takes an agile mind and a willingness to put aside preconceived ideas. This becomes clear from any survey of some of the artists provoking discussion today.

One of the most celebrated artists of the moment is Matthew Barney, an artist/filmmaker who has been the subject of a major retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Barney is both a filmmaker and an installation artist — although his installations largely consist of props from the sets of his films. His magnum opus is a seven-hour-long, five-section film entitled *Cremaster*.

Although each segment resembles a feature film both in length and visual polish, there are some significant differences between what you see at the local cinema and the films Barney offers for view. His whole opus contains only 12 lines of dialogue, and it is filled with outlandish characters and creatures that cross both gender and species lines. There is a cheetah woman, a tap dancing satyr, a bagpipe-playing Scot, a re-imagined Harry Houdini played by writer Norman Mailer, and a tragic queen played by actress Ursula Andress. The five sections make reference to

everything from the 1930s Hollywood dance sequences of Busby Berkeley to murderer Gary Gilmore to Masonic ritual. The narrative is highly ambiguous, and critics are divided over its meaning.

What makes Barney one of the most hotly debated artists today is the way he blends popular culture, private fantasy, references to high art and architecture, and striking imagery into a complex and demanding cinematic world that is as convincing on its own terms as it is difficult to fathom. Barney's works bear and even demand repeat viewings during which his carefully crafted set of private symbols weave together in increasingly coherent ways.

Barney's *Cremaster* series suggests how art can merge with film to create something that is quite far

from our conventional expectations of either.

Something similar goes on in the marriage of art and architecture that takes place in the work of Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio.

Trained architects who are equally at home in the world of art, Diller and Scofidio create work that questions what architecture is and how it functions in the world. Their most famous work is a beach house, commissioned but never built, whose *raison d'être* is the view from a single window. The model of the otherwise windowless house curves in such a way that this view is inaccessible until one has passed through its interior, which, almost incidentally, contains all the features — kitchen, living room, bedroom — of a normal house. But the real point of the structure is the large glass window at the farthest end that, paradoxically, turns out to be a kind of holy grail, never to be actually possessed. For once visitors have passed through the house to reach the much-anticipated view, they discover it is largely obscured by a video that presents a recorded version of the actual view just beyond it. Thus, the house operates both as a functioning building and a work of



*Park City Grill*,  
oil on canvas by John Currin.

conceptual art that asks us to question how we perceive reality.

Diller and Scofidio have also explored the way that our experience of space is altered by surveillance. This is an outgrowth of their early interest in how windows have created a new sense of transparency in modernist architecture. One such project involves a design for a restaurant interior in which surveillance cameras are aimed at people in the bar. Their images are then played on monitors visible to passers-by on the street outside. Hence this work reverses the usual relationship of watchers and watched, again changing our perceptions of our relation to the world.

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## ART AS LIFE

Such works expand the definition of art by aligning it with architecture. In a similar way, other artists graft their art activity onto corporate models of organization. This is the strategy chosen by Julia Scher, who is a bonded security professional with her own company called Security by Julia. Creating works in galleries and other institutions, she borrows the paraphernalia of security companies — surveillance cameras, monitors, soothing recorded voices, and office desks manned by people wearing her signature pink security uniforms. For the opening of a show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, Scher hired surveillance helicopters to film visitors entering and leaving the gallery and played their images on monitors inside. Such installations both parody and undermine contemporary reliance on technology to ensure our sense of personal and public safety. Because they touch on the emergence of an industry that is becoming an increasingly intrusive feature of modern life, Scher's installations have found wide audiences throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Such artists offer a new twist on the old avant-garde dream of erasing the boundary between art and life. In a sense, in their work, art becomes life. This impulse also underlies some of the most innovative approaches to contemporary public art. Moving far beyond the notion of "plop art," in which a piece of welded steel is dropped in the middle of a public square, many artists who work in the public realm today work to actively engage members of the community in which their art work will appear. Once again, this can lead to art projects that bear very little resemblance to conventional works of art.

The artist J. Morgan Puett created a particularly engaging example of this approach for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2002. Her work was titled *Cottage Industry*, and on one level that is exactly what it was. Puett took over an abandoned clapboard house in a formerly African-American neighborhood that has been emptied of residents pending urban renewal. She turned this weathered structure into a small clothing factory. Working with local weavers, seamstresses, and dyers, Puett created a line of textiles and garments that mixed references to the clothing worn by both plantation owners and plantation slaves of South

Carolina's pre-Civil War past. A single dress might combine corsets of the sort favored by a real-life Scarlett O'Hara with the rough muslin undergarments worn by her maid, thus aesthetically breaking the class barriers that once separated masters and servants.

For the duration of the exhibition, her artisans took over the house, setting up conference rooms, a design studio, a sewing parlor, a weaving area, and a shop where visitors could place orders for garments. From a political perspective, Puett had several points to make. The work served as a reminder of Charleston's difficult history. It also provided a model for the type of small business enterprises that the area's residents might undertake. And it helped get art and non-art people talking about the impact of urban renewal on the city's most vulnerable residents. The "art" part of the project involved both the creation of whimsical costumes and the mobilization of Charleston artisans.

## THE VIRTUAL REALM

American art is also colonizing the virtual realm, as artists create works that must be experienced on-line. One of the most ambitious of these is Matthew Ritchie, who has invented a whole cosmology that is presented and somewhat cryptically explained on his Web site. Based on the creation myths of the Western world and employing the sort of interactive technology used in Internet games, Ritchie's project centers around a group of seven damaged celestial agents who represent different parts of the human brain. Thrown from heaven, they fall to earth and shatter into segments across seven continents. These fragmentary creatures combine and recombine, making for an almost infinite set of possible narratives that the Web audience may pursue.

Meanwhile, for those who prefer their art to keep at least one foot in the "real" world, Ritchie also translates his narratives into abstract paintings that wrap across walls, ceilings, and gallery floors. One of these was installed as a permanent mural at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. In the end, although the story he tells may not be clear in all its details, it is evident that Ritchie has produced an allegory of creation that celebrates the artist's role as inventor of new worlds.

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Artists also meld digital technology with more traditional media. One striking example is Shahzia Sikander, a New York-based, Pakistani-born artist who studied traditional miniature painting. She is best known for her delicate watercolor paintings that blend aspects of Hindu and Islamic images of women in fantastical ways. However, during a residency in Texas, she created a digital “painting” in which fragmentary images, texts, and symbols drawn from Asian and Western art traditions slowly fade in and out of the surface of a small light box. This process allows her to make a graphic image of the kaleidoscopic nature of identity as experienced by emigré artists in today’s globalized art world.

#### THE CONVENTIONAL...WITH A TWIST

All this exploration of new media is not to suggest that artists have abandoned conventional art media. Another contemporary trend is the reworking of venerable art traditions. Here the boundary that blurs is that which separates past and present. Turning their backs on the evolutionary theory of art history, such artists mine traditions that have long been declared moribund.

For instance, Walton Ford creates nature paintings that capture both the obsessive realism and the elegant compositions of 19th century artist John James Audubon’s naturalist illustrations of flora and fauna. However, Ford provides a twist — introducing humorous details that transform his paintings into satiric allegories of empire. In a set of paintings in a show at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, a monkey grasps pages of an explorer’s diary while holding a hookah. In another, a giant starling appears poised to swallow a smaller bird.

John Currin performs a similar operation on the

hoary genres of the nude and the portrait. His meticulous oil paintings mimic the Northern Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries and early well-known traditions — mannerist traditions — but again something is not quite right. He introduces distortions of body or facial features, and endows his characters with a vapid stare that seems to have more to do with contemporary fashion models than old master painting. The result is simultaneously old and new, obscuring the distinctions between historical and contemporary consciousness.

#### BREAKING BOUNDARIES

This brief survey should make it clear that contemporary art is given to shape shifting and boundary blasting. If anything unites the very disparate tendencies visible today, it is an unwillingness to be bound by a simple definition of “art.” This development marks a sea change from older notions of art, which stressed its separation from life and its tendency to progress and change according to internally dictated rules. Now, change is as much a function of occurrences outside art as within it.

In an era of breaking boundaries, the task of the critic consequently becomes more difficult and more interesting. It is no longer possible to write about contemporary art in the United States as a series of formal developments or as an orderly succession of movements. Instead, art becomes a way of filtering the multifarious and contradictory information that bombards us from every direction. Free to draw from every discipline, every art tradition, and every mode of presentation, contemporary art turns out to be just as complex, provocative, and intellectually demanding as the world that has produced it. ■

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*Eleanor Heartney is an internationally published art critic, a contributing editor to Art in America, and the author of Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads and Postmodernism.*

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## Profile: Artist Tom Friedman

A cereal box. A handful of toothpicks. Soap powder. Sugar cubes. These are among the media that are close to the heart of artist-sculptor Tom Friedman, whose wit and inventiveness have helped redefine contemporary art.

Utilizing already-chewed bubble gum, masking tape, colored Styrofoam cups, paper straws, and other commonplace items as his materials, Friedman, 37, has become a popular new talent in the United States and abroad. His creations have their origins in the pop art of the Andy Warhol school and in minimalism, but, invariably, they take their own clever course.

"I try to transform these materials into objects for contemplation, to make them self-reflexive, continually coming back to themselves," the artist has said of his work. "By using a process or finding a logic that redefines them, it kind of takes them from the familiar to the unfamiliar."

Glue score upon score of toothpicks together in a particular pattern, the artist is saying, and the result — call it a starburst or a snowflake (Friedman has



*Untitled*, a 1995 creation of artist Tom Friedman, is constructed of toothpicks.

chosen to label the 1995 piece *Untitled*) — can be ethereal. Styrofoam balls, stacked one upon another, resemble one's impression of an alien form. An aspirin tablet can be shaped into a self-portrait cameo. "The materials may be mundane," one observer noted, "but the artistry is exceptional."

Friedman, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, studied graphic illustration in college and sculpture during his graduate work. He held his first solo exhibitions in 1991 in Chicago and New York City, and he has been presented in museums in Geneva, London, Stockholm, Rome, Tokyo, and Milan, as well as across the United States.

As one critic describes what Friedman has accomplished: "The ordinary morphs into the extraordinary, the literal mutates into the abstract...simplicity belies complexity, and the familiar becomes strange. Best of all, it's accomplished without pretense, with only the mildest degree of assertiveness. It invites; it doesn't demand." ■

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## A Conversation With Kathy Halbreich

*Kathy Halbreich remembers how — when visiting museums in her native New York City — she first came upon a painting by the great abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. The transformative power of that moment as a teenager has fueled her lifetime passion for art. Today, Halbreich is director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, one of America's foremost cultural institutions. The Walker Art Center, which focuses on today's visual, performing, and media arts, has*



Kathy Halbreich

*worked determinedly to reach out to new artists and untapped audiences.*

**Q:** During your tenure at the Walker Art Center, what do you see as the most significant development or trend?

**A:** When I became a museum director in 1991, one of the first things I did was to try to find my way and better understand other institutions' missions. While those missions included serious research resulting in the development of original exhibitions and important additions to their permanent

collections, very few, if any, mentioned those we are

...serving. In other words, very few included the word “people” in their mission statements. Over the years, many organizations have become more bifocal. We remain seriously committed to the art, but there has been a shift to the practitioner — the artist — and, even more critically, a heightened awareness of the diversity of the audience we serve. So for me, the major development over the last decade has been placing people at the center of our mission.

The Walker — and we’re not alone in this — has opened its thinking and doors to previously underserved audiences, particularly teenagers. This came out of my own sense of the power of art to transform my thinking and to broaden my mind as a young person. When I first saw a canvas by Pollock, it reflected my own internal sense of the chaos and order I was struggling to understand as an adolescent. Having had that experience, I thought — as a director — that it was important to make teenagers part of the pleasures and rewards of cultural institutions. Teenagers do precisely what artists do: They rock the boat, they ask questions outside the box, and their needs challenge the status quo.

One of the other huge changes in the field is the acknowledgement that no one person or institution owns expertise, that no one can possibly be expert in all the cultures of the world. So museums’ commitment to becoming genuinely public or civic institutions has been accompanied by a commitment to broaden our own understanding of our field and our expertise, as well as of the values that shape them.

**Q:** Have you seen creative or artistic influences from overseas expanding over the last 10 years?

**A:** Absolutely. Our mission at the Walker, which is unique, is animated by three adjectives: multidisciplinary, diverse, and global.

“Multidisciplinary” means that we shelter not only the visual arts but also the performing arts, film/video and new media. “Diverse,” as a concept, is reflected in everything from who serves on the Walker’s board of directors and staff to what is shown in the screening room, on the stage, and in the galleries.

And “global” acknowledges that not only do we include cultures from around the world, but also that we reflect new ways of thinking about older cultures and their artifacts. A contemporary institution, because it is dealing with living artists, cannot escape the differences of approach from — as well as those things that connect us with — Johannesburg and Istanbul and Shanghai.

For example, the Walker currently has a year-long educational-artistic program in progress under the theme “How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age.” This program involves exhibitions, the performing arts, and programs on-line. It is the product of four years of intensive research, travel, and conversation with experts from around the globe.

**Q:** Are there other refinements of thinking among your peers?

**A:** Many of us, for years, didn’t really know what to do with “traditional” work. Now there’s an understanding that even the most contemporary work is rooted in autobiography, geography, and culture. No longer is there the sense that tradition belongs on one side of the table and contemporary practice on the other. There is an increased alertness to subtlety, complexity, and difference, and an acceptance of this.

**Q:** Do the creative giants of the past still dominate the field, or has a new generation taken hold?

**A:** There will always be creative giants — which is a blessing. But at the moment, we are realizing that there are more creative giants operating across the globe than we were ever aware of before. It is why, at this particular moment, people are looking beyond their own prescribed borders.

**Q:** What is the greatest challenge you see today?

**A:** Economic instability. It has an enormous impact on our liberty to make choices. I have told my board that whatever choices we make in this economic climate, we must make them with an eye toward preserving freedom — the freedom to innovate, the freedom to be accessible, and the freedom to create new models of understanding. I don’t think we can let money be an excuse for not doing these things, even though the lack of money makes the risks we need to take more daunting.

Beyond economics, I think one of the greatest challenges for cultural institutions is to become more

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sensitive civic partners in the lives of all their constituencies.

**Q:** How do you think the field of art will change over the next 10 years, creatively speaking?

**A:** Ten years from now, I believe there will be new art forms for which we don't yet have names. They will bring together moving pictures, moving

performers, and the digital universe. Institutions, out of a sense of tradition and maybe even convenience, tend to break the disciplines into departments. You have a photography department, a painting and sculpture department, a drawing department, and maybe a film department. Today, artists are erasing those boundaries. ■

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*The interview with Kathy Halbreich was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.*

*To see our Photo Gallery on VISUAL ARTS go to  
<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0403/ijse/gallery.htm>*

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