

dialog

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PHILOCTETES CENTER
FOR THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF IMAGINATION
AT THE NEW YORK PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE

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Our Life in Poetry: New Poets/New Poetics



Patrick Rosal

When Francis Levy introduced the roundtable *Our Life in Poetry: New Poets/New Poetics*, held on January 29, he said of the three participating poets, “This is the youngest group we’ve had here at the Philoctetes Center, and they’re also alive, which is different from some of the other poets we’ve had.” The event, hosted by **Michael Braziller**, publisher of Persea Books, featured the poets **Gabrielle Calvocoressi**, **A. Van Jordan**, and **Patrick Rosal**, who read from their recent work and discussed their biographical and literary influences.

Calvocoressi read from her first collection, *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart*, and her forthcoming book, *Apocalyptic Swing*. Her poems range in subject from adult drive-in movie theaters, to small-town athletic fields, to the Catholic Church. Particularly powerful was the last poem she read, which she prefaced by mentioning that as her mother’s mental illness progressed, her relationship to religion changed. She recalled that, at a certain point, “everything in our life was metaphor.” The poem, “Rosary Catholic Church,” beautifully depicts her mother’s suffering: “Mother glistening. Mother glowing with the spirit. All the windows of her mind blown out and the light pouring in so you can’t tell the fire from the moon.” Calvocoressi explained that she often writes using syllabics, a structure that assigns a fixed number of syllables to each line. With this form, she noted, she can “control the poem from behind.”

Jordan’s book, *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A*, about MacNolia Cox, a black national spelling bee champion, is a series of persona poems. He spoke of this particular form as a freeing experience: “The personas in this book are more revealing of my heart than the I.” Jordan treated the audience to poems about music, education, discrimination, and desire. “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” which Jordan introduced as an elegy for his father, concludes with the lines: “A need

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Note from Director Edward Nersessian: Finding the Love

Looking at the programs the Philoctetes team is organizing for the Fall, I notice three roundtables around the subjects of sex and love. Dr. Donald Pfaff of Rockefeller University is going to lead an event entitled *Love and Sex*, Dr. Sue Carter from the Brain-Body Center at the University of Illinois will be moderating *Love Code*, and we are planning another event inspired by Esther Perel’s book, *Mating in Captivity*. At least two of these roundtables will have a strong input from the world of biology, with *Love Code* focusing on the role of the hormone oxytocin.

Other than psychoanalysis, I have a long-standing interest in neuroscience, and at the present time there is not much new in this field when it comes to understanding love.

As usual, I ask myself, “What does psychoanalysis have to say about the subject?” As it turns out, on the topic of love, it doesn’t offer that much. Psychoanalytic explorations are most often directed towards expressions of love as a manifestation of unconscious conflict. Much has been written about narcissism, the inability to love, and the intensification of loving feelings when a girlfriend or boyfriend is lost to a real or fantasized rival. Psychoanalysts have also delved deeply into cases involving people who are observed to suddenly fall in love in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, such as a loss or serious physical illness. Psychiatry has delineated de Clerembault’s syndrome, which involves love with delusional properties. But love, in its everyday occurrence in life, goes mostly unno-

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Audience member, Weather and Imagination

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Note from Director Edward Nersessian (continued)

ticed in psychoanalytic work. Although a few analysts have tried to tackle the subject in published articles, much more can be learned about quotidian love from literary writers than from psychoanalysts. This fact was impressed upon me again recently when I had the opportunity to read Francis Levy's forthcoming novel, *Erotomania: A Romance*. I will not spoil anyone's reading pleasure by saying more than this: you will find in it the lifecycle of a certain form of love.

Other than psychoanalysis, I have a long-standing interest in neuroscience, and at the present time—despite all the brouhaha in the popular press—there is not much new in this field when it comes to understanding love. Yes, it is true that when a person in an fMRI is shown pictures of someone they love, a certain part of the brain (the ventral tegmental area) shows heightened activity, but that explains nothing about love. For now, it is best to stick to literature if you want to apprehend more about what Montaigne called “an insatiate thirst of enjoying a greedily desired object.”

Sex, of course, is another matter altogether. To this day, some one hundred years since the publication of Freud's groundbreaking work, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” the media, and most laypeople, think that psychoanalysis is all about sex. In fact, this is far from correct and stems from partial and inaccurate takes on what psychoanalysis is all about. To begin with, sex as an act or even as a fantasy must be distinguished from what is called libido in the standard edition of Freud's work. Libido, viewed as life force—in contrast to *destrudo*, the death and destruction force—can be described as the psychic instantiation of the biological, i.e., the effect of hormones and other substances on the central and peripheral nervous system. In a certain sense, it can be said that libido opens the biology locked inside us to the influences of the outside world. With this understanding, psychoanalysts talk about the libidinal investment of a mother in her child, or the investment of sublimated libido in one's work. What we call libido is probably the compilation of related but not identical emotions that are capable of bringing about action in the organism. That is to say, they are motivational forces. These emotions—and here love comes into the picture—have the ability to soothe the mind and provide a pleasing effect. They lubricate the mind, contrary to the working of aggression, which agitates it. Sex in psychoanalytic terms carries with it implications a great deal more complex than our everyday understanding, but it also implies sex in the familiar sense, acknowledging that it plays an important role in determining behavior.

Sexual fantasies are often a clue to a person's behavior, choice of partners, and even their behavior in non-sexual situations. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* described how a 46 year-old woman married to her high school sweetheart took \$42,000 from her retirement account and smuggled a 27 year-old prisoner out of the prison where she was a volunteer. The two were eventually found and arrested in a honeymoon cabin. Around the time this happened, there were two significant issues in the woman's life, which are important to consider from a psychoanalytic perspective: her father was dying and she was recovering from cancer. A psychoanalytic effort at understanding the incident would, in addition, entail an in-depth exploration of the woman's fantasies, including her sexual fantasies. Only at that point could one eventually comprehend the motives behind the love and sex in this situation.

We hope the three upcoming roundtables will enrich our understanding of sex and love and their intertwined nature, and that some of the points I am making here in a superficial way will receive a more thorough explication during the events themselves. Hopefully, the prairie voles that are the subject of Dr. Sue Carter's research into sexuality will teach us a thing or two about ourselves.

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Weather and Imagination



Sheila Jasanoff, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Stephanie LeMenager

The range of discourse and variety of perspectives offered during the roundtable *Weather and Imagination*, held at the Center on January 12, mirrored the vast and unpredictable nature of the topic under discussion. Moderator **Deborah Coen**, Assistant Professor of History at Barnard College, kicked off the proceedings by attempting to clarify the difference between weather and climate. “A common definition of weather,” she explained, “is the condition of the atmosphere at a place and time. We can distinguish this from climate, which is defined as the average weather of a certain place.” Professor Coen went on to characterize climate as a “mathematical abstraction,” whereas weather is what people experience in their everyday lives.

The old adage, “We don’t have climate in Britain, we have weather,” not only makes light of the erratic nature of England’s weather systems, it introduces the relevance of national identity to the analysis of climate.

Sheila Jasanoff, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, responded by citing the old English adage, “We don’t have climate in Britain, we have weather.” The quip not only made light of the erratic nature of England’s weather systems, it introduced the relevance of national identity to the analysis of climate. **Anthony Leiserowitz**, a Research Scientist at the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, spring-boarded off of this remark by referencing the Inuit as an example of a culture predicated on a history of living through extreme conditions. The tribe, he elaborated, is actually suing the United States for their “right to be cold.” Dr. Leiserowitz went on to describe weather as a sort of “social glue,” citing its frequency as a generic topic of conversation and lauding cab drivers as “one of the best, unused resources to communicate about climate change.”

Professor Coen re-focused the discussion with a question that emerged as a central theme of the roundtable: “Do you treat weather as an individual or as a collective?” **Stephanie LeMenager**, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, addressed the “political valence” of climate and its effect on national ideas, recalling how Union soldiers fighting in the malarial South felt divorced from their identity as Americans, and how the phrase “This is not America” was used frequently by the media in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Professor Jasanoff interjected by asking, “What are the different ways we come to a collective knowledge about weather?” opening the conversation to the various means that scientists, the mass media, and entities like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change use to validate and communicate the idea of climate change.

Dr. Leiserowitz highlighted an interesting perceptual divide between the analytic and the experiential, cautioning, “By the time we’ve experienced climate change it is too late.” He pointed to films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* as effective means of relating abstract, analytical ideas to experience-hungry minds. **Ben Orlove**, who teaches in the Department of Environmental Science and Policy at the University of California at Davis, stressed that our individual experience is marked by collective events, establishing the link between weather, which is perceived on an individual level, and the collective experience of climate.

The panel went on to explore metaphors and cultural narratives as a means of better understanding the changes happening on our planet. Leiserowitz posited that climate change has been a tough pill to swallow in America due to the lack of an analogous narrative in Western culture. Professor Jasanoff, however, pointed out a singularly apt cultural reference—the “Loss of Eden” mythologies. Audience members responded by voicing their own intense concerns about climate, sharing personal reflections, and momentarily piercing the ominous clouds with a few rays of insight. *Z.L.*

Philoctetes Journal

Volume II, Issue 1, of *Philoctetes*, the biannual journal of the Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of Imagination, will appear this Spring. The first two issues of the journal were mailed to all of our members free of charge. Beginning with this next issue, those interested in receiving the journal must subscribe.

To subscribe, simply indicate your name and mailing address and enclose payment. Checks should be made payable to The Philoctetes Center. All subscribers will receive the next two issues of the journal.

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Our Life in Poetry: Emily Dickinson

“I think I was enchanted,” begins Emily Dickinson’s poem about her experience of reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a girl. Dickinson captures the mysterious transformation that reading poetry can effect. “I could not have defined the change—/ Conversion of the Mind/ Like Sanctifying in the Soul—/ Is witnessed—not explained—.” The January 8 poetry course at the Philoctetes Center offered an opportunity to witness Dickinson’s brilliant mind, with **Alice Quinn**, former poetry editor at *The New Yorker* as guide, along with **Michael Braziller**, who hosts the *Our Life in Poetry* series. Quinn fluidly quoted from letters and biographies in discussing the poet’s legendary reclusiveness, her religious doubts, her family background, and her publishing history. At age 20 Dickinson wrote to a friend, “I don’t leave the house unless emergency takes me by the hand.” Of the visitors that frequented her parents’ home in Amherst, Massachusetts, she commented, “Most people talked of hallowed things and embarrassed my dog.”

Early publications altered much of the unusual punctuation, capitalization, and wording of the original texts. Quinn justified these edits, however, arguing that otherwise early readers would have found the poems too off-putting.

Dickinson published only seven poems of the nearly 1800 she wrote in her lifetime. When Braziller suggested that Dickinson thought of publishing as a vulgar enterprise, Quinn confirmed that she referred to it as “the auction of the mind of man.” After her death in 1886, her sister Vinnie found about 400 poems in her bedroom, sewn together in packets. Vinnie and Mabel Loomis Todd, her brother’s mistress, endeavored to submit the work to the “auction” the poet had disdained, enlisting the help of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had corresponded with Dickinson. Early publications altered much of the unusual punctuation, capitalization, and wording of the original texts. Quinn justified these edits, however, arguing that otherwise early readers would have found the poems too off-putting. In the definitive 1955 edition of Dickinson’s work, the style of the original manuscripts was largely restored.

The 12 poems Quinn and Braziller read during the evening were mostly written during Dickinson’s extremely prolific period of 1862-3, when she produced 360 poems. Quinn nearly popped out of her chair with enthusiasm as she recited the poems, often from memory, referencing other poems periodically to help illuminate Dickinson’s language and themes. As Quinn noted, Dickinson didn’t always settle on her diction, sometimes noting six possible words she might use in a particular spot. One way to move through her work, Quinn suggested, is to link up various poems by tracing some of her distinctive words.

“I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—” begins one of Dickinson’s most famous poems, which describes a narrator’s dying moments. “The Stillness in the Room/ Was like the Stillness in the Air—.” By contrast, the evocative readings throughout the evening created a buzz in the audience. An appreciative murmur accompanied the final couplet of “‘Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,” a poem about a desperate struggle with death, which ends, “And when the Film had stitched your eyes/ A Creature gasped ‘Reprieve’!/ Which Anguish was the utterest—then—/ To perish, or to live?” The poem’s conclusion prompted Quinn to pronounce with delight, “Ha! One of her greatest poems.” Quinn and Braziller discussed the recurrence of death in Dickinson’s work and the many deaths she would have witnessed in her community, particularly during the civil war. Quinn noted that she once heard someone say of Dickinson, “Funerals were her TV.”

Following the last stanza of “The Brain is Wider Than the Sky,” someone commented with a sigh, “It’s so simple.” Yet, as Quinn pointed out, the poems are quite psychologically complex. “Because we’re going to be here with the psychoanalysts, I wanted to dive right into the wreck,” she joked. Braziller referred to another poem, “The Brain Within its Groove,” as “the great psychoanalytic poem.” A psychiatrist in the audience pronounced that no one was equal to Dickinson in describing internal phenomena, adding that he often shows her poems to patients because “those are the words that describe exactly what I’m doing. Nothing I say can get it as precisely.”

Quinn, who edited *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments by Elizabeth Bishop*, recounted that Bishop hadn’t thought much of Dickinson until she read the 1955 edition of her work. After that, Bishop simply confessed, “I guess she’s the best that we have.” *P.R.*



The Development of Temperament During the First Three Years of Human Life

The study of how personality develops among infants has reached a level of sophistication that makes the oft-repeated parental grievance about the “terrible twos” seem hopelessly quaint. While the topic stretches back to Freud’s description of the psychosexual stages in the first three years of life, any serious conversation about the formation of temperament thrusts forward into the realm of neuroscience, touching on phenomena such as oxytocin and the chemical processes that illuminate how bonding occurs between humans. This brand of groundbreaking scientific detail was at the forefront of the roundtable *The Development of Temperament During the First Three Years of Human Life*, held on January 19.

Moderator **Donald Pfaff**, Professor and Head of the Laboratory of Neurobiology and Behavior at Rockefeller University, began the discussion by describing recent laboratory work with rats that has contributed to a deeper understanding of the neurological factors involved in the formation of temperament. Male rats castrated at birth and female rats given high levels of testosterone were found to exhibit reversed gender behavior later in life. **Frances Champagne**, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Columbia University, conducted a separate experiment with rodents, which focused on mother-infant interactions. Dr. Champagne noted among the study’s conclusions that when a mother engaged in a higher frequency of licking and grooming behavior with her offspring, they went on to exhibit greater resiliency in dealing with stress situations, which in turn affected their reproductive behavior as adults. In addition, these rats were prone to higher-frequency licking and grooming with their own offspring.

In order for attachment to go well, a mother has to be sensitive to a child’s needs, in particular when the child exhibits negative affect. When treatment of the child is inconsistent, the child becomes insecurely attached.

Sue Carter, Professor of Psychiatry and Co-Director of the Brain Body Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago, explained that her original interest in the effects of oxytocin came through her own experience as a mother. She was given doses of the hormone to induce the birth of her first child and avoid a cesarean section. Many years later, in an effort to better understand the effects of oxytocin on humans, she began her research on prairie voles, noting however, “You can’t do to animals what you do to humans. It would be unethical.” She described oxytocin as the hormone that “allows us to be human” by facilitating the passage of our large heads through the birth canal. It is released by the brain and other tissues during birth, lactation, and sex, and has been linked to the formation of love relationships. Most importantly, as Dr. Pfaff emphasized, too much or too little of it affects normal bonding behavior. A child’s early bonding experience is crucial in determining behavior in later life, notably the degree to which he or she is able to bond with other adults. Dr. Carter stressed that the ability to bond does not have to involve sex or marriage, simply the capacity to form feelings about another individual. “It might even be someone you don’t know,” she elaborated. “People bond in the strangest ways. They can bond to Brad Pitt!”

While not all of the panelists agreed that a fantasy relationship could be an example of healthy bonding, **Daniel Schechter**, Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry in Pediatrics at the Columbia Univer-



Donald Pfaff

sity Medical Center, noted that there is a broad spectrum of human relationships. “If you have a good enough early attachment,” he went on, “it affects all relationships. It affects relationships to God, to community, to teachers, and at least permits those relationships to occur. If you have an early relationship that doesn’t allow flexibility and adaptability, that’s when you get stuck and can’t form these bonds and end up with various social problems.” Center Director Edward Nersessian then asked how successful attachment could be defined. **Susan Coates**, Clinical Professor of Psychology at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, responded that in order for attachment to go well, a mother has to be sensitive to a child’s needs, in particular when the child exhibits negative affect. When treatment of the child is inconsistent, she went on, the child becomes insecurely attached.

Steering the conversation toward factors outside of child-parent bonding, pediatrician and child psychiatrist **Nadia Bruschweiler-Stern**, who directs the Brazelton Centre in Switzerland, commented that it’s difficult to isolate the causes for variations in temperament. She pointed out that studies have shown that heightened irritability among infants depends in many cases on acid reflux. Dr. Coates, however, noted that parental behavior was the most reliable predictor of whether a child will develop social anxieties, noting that maternal depression skews child behavior in the direction of inhibition. Coates went on to raise the possibility that shy children have an empathic advantage over bold children, citing an experiment in which inhibited infant monkeys unexpectedly rose to assume dominant hierarchical roles in relation to more aggressive monkeys. Dr. Bruschweiler-Stern asserted that certain behaviors, such as habits of movement and self-soothing mannerisms, appear to be passed through genetics, rather than through parental bonding. Coates conceded that in some cases mothers are not well matched temperamentally with their own babies.

After the panelists delved into the various character traits that begin to form in children under the age of three, such as extreme novelty seeking, obstinacy, and hyperactivity, questions from the audience prompted a discussion of the impact on babies of the natal event itself, as well as the pre-natal environment. The acknowledgement of such factors highlighted the stark contrast to early Freudian thought on the subject of temperament, which placed an emphasis on constitutional factors, but did not address the infant’s early relationship with the mother. An earlier comment by Dr. Coates shed some humor on this contradiction. “Psychoanalysts,” she quipped, “do not believe in temperament until they have their second kid.” *A.L.*

Music and Imagination: The Rhythmic Brain

Colicky babies have been known to stop crying when a parent turns on a dustbuster or, alternatively, places them on a washing machine during spin cycle. Some dairies make a point of playing Mozart sonatas when cows are being milked because it is thought to make the animals feel contented, and thus more productive. Sprinters can increase their rate of movement to 5-7 steps per second, but these results can only be achieved by systematically applying music to their training regimen. For this reason, the use of ipods has been banned in most marathons because music can act as a kind of performance-enhancing drug. Most significantly, children with developmental problems and patients suffering from Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Tourette's achieve improvement in affect and self-expression when they are exposed to exercises that incorporate rhythmic movement in response to music.

Eric Barnhill, a Juilliard-trained pianist whose interest in music therapy stems from his own life experiences with Tourette's syndrome, spoke about the therapeutic power of combining music and movement at the most recent session of the Center's ongoing music series. **Stephanie Chase**, violinist and Artistic Director of the Music of the Spheres Society, hosted the January 14 event, entitled *Music and Imagination: The Rhythmic Brain*. Mr. Barnhill began by introducing his Cognitive Eurhythmics therapy method, which he developed specifically to enhance attention, coordination, and self-expression in children with developmental disorders. His approach stems from alternative movement practices like the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkreis Method, and Tai Chi, all of which are frequently taught at graduate programs in music and performance. But the roots of his system rest primarily in an approach known as Eurhythmics, which was developed by the Swiss music teacher Emil Jacques Dalcroze. The distinguishing feature of the Dalcroze approach, and of Mr. Barnhill's work with children, is the combination of movement exercises with elements of music and rhythm.

Mr. Barnhill went on to explain that his technique allows him to perceive that an infant who appears to lack motor control is simply unable to organize itself rhythmically. He added that music and rhythm, experienced through the gateway of movement, impact psychological processes, which in turn impact the structure of the brain.

Barnhill cited a hypothesis put forth by the neuroscientist Francis Krick, who believed that the structures in the brain responsible for perception oscillate at 40Hz per second, and this rhythm unifies the various planes of perception, such as vision, hearing, and even touch. While Barnhill conceded that some of the theorists whose ideas constitute his method might be considered "outliers" in their respective fields, he believed that taken collectively they validated the premise that rhythmic patterns are a fundamental component of perception. He introduced the concept of prosody, which is the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech, highlighting its importance in understanding our ability to process speech. "When we are listening for meaning, we need prosody," he asserted. "Without it we can barely get through a standard English sentence."

The distinguishing feature of the Dalcroze approach, and of Mr. Barnhill's work with children, is the combination of movement exercises with elements of music and rhythm.

Ms. Chase shifted the emphasis of the discussion by asking how Barnhill's techniques might be used with adults who want to enhance their coordination, especially in relation to musical performance. She referenced her own struggle to learn a highly complex Stravinsky suite. Barnhill insisted that there was no distinction, in terms of the methods used to achieve growth, between the organizational challenge of a child trying to catch a ball and someone trying to play a sophisticated piece of music. A member of the audience took exception with this premise, pointing out that performers approach their work from a background of confidence and competence, whereas a child with learning difficulties has no sense of being able to connect to his or her own body, or act as an agent for change. "There's something deceptive about fluency of any kind," Barnhill responded, explaining that when we see skilled activity, we assume that it comes easily to the performer, when in fact the process of gaining mastery is very similar—though admittedly more sophisticated—to the process of a child learning a relatively simple task. Bouncing a rubber ball in rhythmic patterns, Barnhill illustrated how rudimentary counting exercises that challenge children with cognitive disabilities can quickly accelerate into complex rhythmic puzzles that force adults to rearrange their normal patterns of perception. *A.L.*

New Poets/New Poetics (continued)

builds in me/
only after struggle builds around me/
a mythical ether challenging this horn/ with its song stuck in its
throat: memory/
the present moment and all the notes falling/ between them, strug-
gling to get out."

For all three of the poets, music is a prominent influence, particularly for Rosal, whose style of performance exudes the energy and emotion of song. Rosal comes from a family filled with musicians, and before he began writing poems in his mid-20s, he was a street dancer. "My dad didn't want us to become musicians because we wouldn't earn any money, so I became a poet," he joked. Rosal observed that "there's a shared joy, but also a private relationship" in music. This quality came across especially when Rosal sang in Spanish as an introduction to one of his poems. He went on to chant verse from another poem that was written in a Philippino dialect. Rosal presented poems from his two books, *My American Kundiman* and *Up-*

rock Headspin Scramble and Dive, capturing a spirit of outrage in "About the White Boys who Drove By a Second Time to Throw a Bucket of Water on Me," and unabashed joy in "The Woman You Love Cuts Apples for You."

Each poet discussed how other poets influenced their work and inspired them to pursue writing. When Jordan heard the black poet Cornelius Eady read, the familiar experiences Eady describes in his poems brought Jordan to tears. "It was the first time I'd ever been moved by art," he said. For Calvocoressi, seeing Seamus Heaney read in high school was pivotal, as was discovering the darker side of Robert Frost. When she was assigned Frost in school, she didn't like him, but perversely, she decided to "read him book by book to show how terrible he was." By the time she got to *North of Boston*, she couldn't believe how good he was. The way people in Frost's poems encounter the terrors of nature and their darkest selves became a source of inspiration. For Rosal, a story about Pablo Neruda served as a testament to the music of poetry. Neruda once recited a poem for an audience full of people in Chile and forgot the words in the middle. "Everyone in

Absolute Wilson



Courtesy of New Yorker Films

With seminal works like *Deafman Glance*, *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, and *Einstein on the Beach*, Robert Wilson emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as one of the foremost avant-garde theater artists of his generation. His inscrutable yet highly iconic work defies categorization in any previously existing theatrical style, forming a genre unto itself, and venturing into realms of abstraction and dream-like imagery rarely seen on such an ambitious scale. *Absolute Wilson*, screened at the Philoctetes Center on February 9, endeavors to uncover the sources of Wilson's aesthetic vision and provide insight into the personality behind his enigmatic theatrical spectacles.

Appropriately, the film opens with a quote by Baudelaire: "Genius is childhood recovered at will." Wilson's development as an artist seems inextricably linked to his childhood, his output appearing as a continual effort to simultaneously recapture and transcend it. Wilson grew up in Waco, Texas, where his father was a former mayor and a pillar of the strict Southern Baptist community. His early youth was defined by his difficulties with stuttering and his acute awareness of not fitting in with his environment. A dance teacher named Byrd Hoffman (for whom Wilson's theater company was later named) advised Wilson to slow down in everything he did, which he professes in the film not only alleviated his stuttering, but changed his entire perception of the world. The extreme slow rhythms of Wilson's plays would later serve as resonant testimony to the impact of this simple advice.

After a brief stint studying law at the University of Texas—to please his father—Wilson made his way to New York to study architecture at the Pratt Institute. While he was not an accomplished or disciplined student, he took a passionate interest in the school's extracurricular dance program. Clips of Wilson performing a solo dance work capture the awkward boldness of a young man struggling to overcome his inhibitions, while at the same time registering the precocity of a unique theatrical intuitiveness.

After graduating from Pratt, Wilson created a movement program designed to help brain-damaged and hyperactive children, a group he says he was able to relate to easily because they reminded him of his own alienation as a child. He was later hired at a hospital to encourage catatonic people to speak. In the course of this work, he discovered his purpose: "The reason I work as an artist is to ask questions—to say, 'What is it?'" After a brief, ill-fated stint in Texas, Wilson returned to New York City, renting a loft in Soho and creating the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, an informal movement collective designed to provide an expressive outlet for people of all ages and levels of ability. This collective, which the critic John Rockwell bluntly describes as cult-

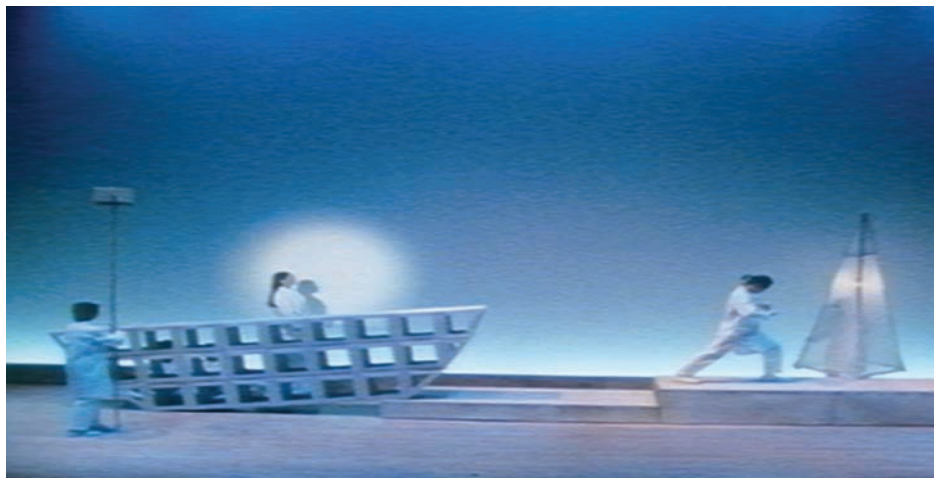
like, grew into an internationally renowned theater company and served as the anchor for Wilson's early successes.

Wilson's most famous works are noted for having incorporated the contributions of two disabled children. Raymond Andrews, a deaf African American boy adopted by Wilson, became the inspiration for, and starred in, *Deafman Glance*. Christopher Knowles, the autistic child of a couple close to Wilson, went on to appear in many of his plays, and provided much of the repetitive, largely nonsensical libretto for *Einstein on the Beach*. (Wilson comments about Knowles, "Chris and I think alike.") The film addresses the ethical questions raised by these "collaborations," offering perspectives that both endorse and reprove this unusual aspect of Wilson's work.

Philoctetes film coordinator **Matthew von Unwerth** and guest **Roger Copeland**, Professor of Theater and Dance at Oberlin College, led a discussion following the screening. Professor Copeland opened by lamenting the fact that the film failed to translate the single most important aspect of Wilson's work—its duration. Because the film relies on fast-paced narrative and visual pastiche, the sense of being lured into a completely different sense of time, in which things unfold at a snail's pace, is lost. (Wilson's early plays were often up to eight hours in length, and his company performed a seven-day play in Iran in the early 70s.)

Professor Copeland went on to point to another notable omission in the film—the fact that Wilson is unique in providing a resounding answer to the question of what can be done in the theater in an age of T.V. and film. "How do you compete with media that are so good at rendering the visible and audible surface of life?" asked Copeland, quickly answering his own question by proposing that Wilson offers a theater that is purposefully non-realistic. While this is a noble undertaking, Copeland asserted, the pitfall is that it doesn't offer any insight into the universe we're living in. "It's very rare when a Wilson work tells you anything about yourself as a human being," Copeland observed, "or about the outside world."

Mr. von Unwerth pressed Copeland to specify ways in which the film succeeded in capturing Wilson. Copeland commented that the film conveys how Wilson journeyed as far as he possibly could from his upbringing, allowing him to live in "an intense present," disassociated in many ways from past and future. "It is a lot like the temporal dilemma of an autistic," he added. Copeland offered praise for Wilson's pioneering work in creating deep, decentralized theatrical spaces and reorganizing the stage in terms of planes of simultaneous activity. When asked about the influence of family on Wilson's artistry, he remarked that the work mirrors Wilson's description of his own mother: "Beautiful and cold." *A.L.*



From the *CIVIL warS*, Courtesy of New Yorker Films

Upcoming Events

Five Centuries of Violin Making

Course

Tuesday, March 11, 7:00pm

Participants: Stephanie Chase & Stewart Pollens

Our Life in Poetry: Music and Poetry

Roundtable

Friday, March 14, 7:00pm

Participants: Michael Braziller (moderator), Helen Houghton, Ann Hoyt, Scott Schoonover, Susan Wheeler

Being There

Film Screening

Saturday, March 15, 1:30pm

Directed by Hal Ashby



These events are part of the BrainWave Festival organized and sponsored by the Rubin Museum of Art, Exit Art, the Graduate Center of CUNY, the Philoctetes Center, and the School of Visual Arts. www.brainwavenyc.org

The Mirror and the Lamp

Roundtable

Saturday, March 15, 3:30pm

Participants: Margaret Browning, Bhismadev Chakrabarti, Paul Harris, Alan Leslie, Rebecca Saxe

Living in the Musical Moment: Dharma Jazz

Course

Saturday, April 5, 3:30pm

Participants: Vic Juris, Karttikeya, Lewis Porter, Badal Roy

Opening Pandora's Box: From Ancient Sacrifice to Family Secrets

Roundtable

Saturday, April 12, 2:30pm

Participants: Harold Blum (moderator), Joan Branham, Lois Braverman, Kathryn Harrison, Victoria Pedrick

The Psycho-Neurology of the Photographic Arts

Roundtable

Thursday, April 24, 7:30pm

Participants: Cristina Alberini, Bevil Conway, David Freedberg, Jeffrey Levy-Hinte (moderator), Robert Polidori

Literature and Psychoanalysis: Reciprocal Insights

Roundtable

Saturday, April 26, 2:30pm

Participants: Maurice Charney, Geoffrey Hartmann, Zvi Lothane (moderator), Paul Schwaber, Meredith Anne Skura

Taking Part in the Dialog



There are several ways to participate in the ongoing conversation fostered by roundtables, courses, and screenings held at the Philoctetes Center.

- Please visit www.philoctetes.org and click on any event in our Calendar or our Past Programs. You can sign up to post comments about future and past events.

- Visit our YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/user/philoctetesctr, and post comments about any of our videos.

- Alternatively, you can email info@philoctetes.org with any questions, comments, or thoughts.

Writing in response to *The Future of Technology*, Michael Ignatowski commented

"One of the most interesting aspects of the discussion was the idea of the 'Social Contract' that regulates our social behavior, and how it is having trouble adjusting to the rapidly changing technology. It's adjusting faster than formal laws though. This is an interesting area for future discussion."

Steve Capra posted the following concerns regarding *The Critic as Thinker*:

"Given that it's the critic's job to educate the public, and that only a small percentage of the American public attend theatre, isn't it true that we American critics have, on the whole, failed? Why haven't we been more effective in capturing the public imagination?"

Several questions were posed in reaction to *The Future of the Stock Market*:

"Who is really paying the money that the traders are winning?" asked Fadi Chama, while Daryl Montgomery inquired, "What did we learn from the 1987 crash?"

In response to the *Imagining Utopia* video on our YouTube channel, one viewer wrote:

"Utopia only exists in one's own mind and no one else's...in other words, 'One person's freedom is another's prison'".

The following reaction was posted about the roundtable *Extraterrestrial Life*:

"Good video. Pity that the main theme was 'imagination' and this element was sorely handicapped by the constraints of the regular scientific method. Let's hope future events incorporate a greater number of artists, religious scholars, indigenous points of view, and children. Yes—children! I think they would astonish many."

This appreciative exchange came in response to *Origin, Evolution, and the Future of Life on Earth*:

—"Great video. We need more of this on the web."

—"I agree. I watched it twice with no regard for my local building fire alarm. Great stuff."

We welcome further thoughts and will continue to share excerpts in the newsletter, space permitting.