

LITERALLY SPEAKING

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Monday 16th October 2000

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Politics, Prudery & Perversions

Town Hall,
11.30am-12.30pm

Uninvited Guests

Town Hall,
6-7pm

Art & Power

Town Hall,
7.15-8.15pm

An actors life for me!

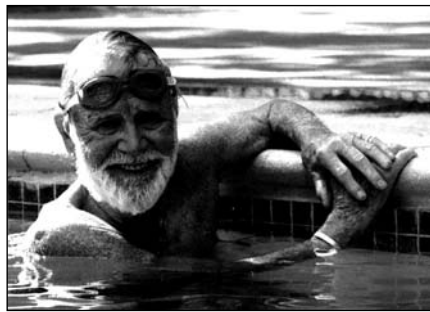
BY CHLOE PREEDY

One of the cultural icons of this century, Sir John Mills acts as a role model for anyone who has ever dreamed of winning an Oscar, or at least thought about their acceptance speech...

The expectations for this event were obviously running high. This man's resume runs on and on: *Ryan's Daughter*, *Dunkirk* and numerous theatrical productions. And the actors he has worked with are as impressive, numbering amongst them Sir John Gielgud, 'Larry' Olivier and Alec Guinness.

Given the amount of anticipation

building up beforehand, an anti-climax seemed inevitable. But, somehow, Sir John Mills managed to avoid this. Instead of a long, rambling account of 'actors I have known' and



book promotion (for his photographic autobiography *Motion Memories*) the audience were entertained by plenty of anecdotes.

For example, who could have anticipated meeting the only actor ever to get shot by a condom? Don't ask!

Sweet without being syrupy, with a good balance between jokes and unusual facts, Sir John Mills demonstrated his famous ability to hold the audience's complete attention. Let's hear it for the encore!

Lunchtime Lovebites

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Dan Rhodes walks on stage, smiles at the audience and says, 'My girlfriend died.' He is, of course, reading from his collection of 101-word short stories *Anthropology*. Sad, comic and stunningly clever, Rhodes' reading left the audience in happy pain.

Thinking we could smile no more, Matt Harvey repeated the emotions with tall tales of imaginary friends, 'karma curtains' and classified ad love poetry. His unassuming style and whispering intimacy held us all in his grasp like kids before sweets.

With sumptuous blues from guitarist and singer Emily Druce, a packed-out audience left a crisp event at The Beehive hungry and desperate for more. If only every week could have days like these.

Deserted?

BY TOM LOUGHLIN
& MICHAEL ANDERSON

The theme of this Cheltenham Festival is space, and that's one thing the desert has lots of. Space. And sand. This was about all this panel could agree on, as they argued over the subtleties - most notably Martin Buckley and Robyn Davidson, who couldn't decide if the desert is a lonely place. Sven Lindqvist and Jim Crace stood above the other panellists as both witty and informed speakers, a highlight being Crace's inventive bird-catching method-cum-anecdote. For once, the audience questions were worth hearing, with one question raising the idea that widespread travel literature is encouraging ethno-tourism and changing the places they popularise. Davidson agreed, pointing out: "Travel literature's in a slump". All in all, a discussion worth getting up for.

Edward Said...

BY BARBARA FAUSET



Edward Said should be commended for bringing to Cheltenham a lecture that was free from self-promotion. Instead he devoted his talk to the Nobel Prize winning Egyptian novelist Mahfouz. In his introduction Said described himself as interested in the space of exile, having spent the greater part of his life outside his native Egypt. In contrast, Mahfouz' prolific output of novels has centred almost entirely on Egypt. There is no sense of Egypt's place in the wider world and even though

Mahfouz claims to have been influenced by English writers, foreigners play very little part in his work.

Said commented on the difficulty of translating Mahfouz effectively into English, maintaining the mystique of the original. 'It's a crime that he's not better known.' His assessment is that Mahfouz is the greatest living novelist; 'a great stylist by having no style.'

Mahfouz is read by everyone in Egypt. His work provides an 'evolution of the novel', from romance to modern absurdism. Seen by some as a social realist and a fabulist by others, Mahfouz combines the earthly and the eternal. Power and its deployment; power from God, or power within society are central themes in all his work. Mahfouz, the modern humanist, sees the great conflicts of our time played out in the pages of his novels.

BritConquest

BY DANIEL HAHN

Historian Norman Davies joked about his early start today, saying 'I feel I ought to be theatrical somehow'. His thoughtful discussion of the history and state of Britishness was enthralling.

He explained his reasons for writing his latest massive book, *The Isles*, which aims to fight anachronisms (he's proposed a renaming of Stonehenge), to overcome insularity, to give a sense of Britishness (rather than Englishness) as something new and constantly changing. 'It's not unpatriotic to try to look at Britishness in a new way.'

Asked about its future ('historians always seem to be asked about the future...'), he said the days of Britishness are almost certainly numbered. 'But that's not necessarily a catastrophe'. Good to know.

Young Guns

BY MATT SMITH

It was no surprise that in a discussion between three young writers, questions of identity would arise. For Zadie Smith and Miranda Sawyer, the idea of the writing process as a means of exploring and ultimately asserting social and cultural identity was quick to emerge. Miranda Sawyer's new book *Park and Ride* mythologises 'suburb culture'. Her development of the role of the 'the car' leaves one wondering about her actual experience.

Smith's novel *White Teeth* reflects her thoughts on 'everyone being the centre of their own world', conveying the sense of displacement felt by second generation Bangladeshi and Caribbeans. She dissolves the 'fringe worlds' we imagine such minorities to inhabit. According to Tim Pears, 'we need something to wrap around ourselves.'

It seems young novelists of today must assert their own i.d. creatively, whilst also using it defensively.

Gray Matters

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Alasdair Gray ambled onto the stage in the Drawing Room like a subdued Mole forced back to spring-clean properly by Janice Galloway and Tom Adair. He sat quietly with a look of blinking nervousness as Adair described him as a 'throwback Scottish Enlightenment figure'.

And then he was off, transmuting into a twittery Little Owl caught up in a Grand National stream of consciousness, flipping interpolations into the text from *The Book of Prefaces* which he and Galloway were reading from. Described as a 'Blakeian peep-show', the book came across as a most splendid introduction to British literature and Gray, who has been preparing it intermittently over the last seventeen years, was clearly still as fired up about the project as he was when he began.

Spitting nuggets of wit and wisdom in an inimitable style, he was only brought down to earth by Galloway (a contributor to the book),



who anchored his enthusiasm with great generosity and a more sober style of enthusiasm; she noted wryly that Aphra Behn earning a living through writing was 'a deed of more historic worth than the Wars of the Roses'.

Gray, by way of explaining the length of the project's gestation, explained that he'd 'assumed that, in every century, you'd find a few good writers and as literacy increased you'd find more... but found that most of the great early writers lived simultaneously'. The manner in which he dealt with the problem appears, at a cursory glance, to have produced the wittiest, most attractive and essential reference book to have ever been written.

Hags & Whores

BY JUDITH SANDERSON
& LOTTIE ORAM

The fact that a performance of Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath* is still able to raise smiles amongst audiences today is testament to the timeless quality of his work. However, the actress must be part accredited with the success. Prunella Scales overcame the textual difficulties of the piece to deliver a competent and accessible performance.

She adopted mannerisms befitting a woman of the Middle Ages, and using limited gesture coupled with an authentic regional accent, breathed new life into a 600 year old role. She has a strong stage presence and brought great deal of humour to the role, making Chaucer fun for all.

CyberText

BY SHONA RANCHANDARI

'The joy of the Internet lies in the interaction it affords' says trAce's Helen Whitehead, our guide to the cyber-world. And that is exactly what we got at the Festival's first Internet writing workshop - a fascinating and interactive introduction to literature on the Web, and how to write it. It's time for 'poetry and fiction born to pixels rather than page', to quote one of the many sites we were shown.

From the novice to the expert, all were afforded a concise view of the www that is fast taking over the world today, and thence to the world of techno-savvy writers. From hypertext to animations, sounds and pictures, and even to actually publishing a short piece on the Internet (trace.ntu.ac.uk/cyberfest/bagua), we saw and did it all. It was a fantastic and inspiring 3 hour workshop, and one can only look forward eagerly to the Cyberfest's new offerings!

Blowing your own

BY ARTHUR NEWMAN

A series of literary discussions with an expert debuts at this year's Festival. Yesterday no-one had read *Sexing the Cherry*, so expert Livi Michael had 'two sets of notes, one headed 'Plan B'.

Trumpet, we learnt, was based on the true story of American jazz pianist Billy Tipton, whose three wives didn't know he was a woman. Michael admitted that she knew the exact page of the sex scene, but concluded the book's strength is its enigma.

This served as an appetiser for the main course of Jackie Kay and Paul Bailey in discussion in the evening. Kay provided evidence that we were eating at the same table by confirming many points Michael raised.



The loose theme of the discussion was homosexuality in society. Bailey began with some hilarious anecdotes about Quentin Crisp, a tribute to whom he has edited.

Kay then read some extracts from *Trumpet*. Failing completely to be upstaged by the most important novel of the nineties, Bailey talked about now unheard-of novelist Naomi Jacob.

When Bailey first met her he thought she was J.B. Priestly! Kay eventually upstaged him though, speculating about the size of George Melly's penis.

Both proved impressive speakers and witty raconteurs. Overall a most enjoyable literary feast.



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The Stoat

Plumbers were called out to fix a drainage problem at the Town Hall. A case of writers block?

Don't forget Literally Speaking's 101-Word Short Story Competition. Send us your sagas of exactly 101-words. The winner will be published here and in *The Independent*. Four runners-up win a copy of Dan Rhodes' *Anthropology*. A copy of the rules is available from the Press Office, but hurry, entries must be received by Wednesday at noon.

THE TEAM

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The mountain image incorporated in our logo © Michael Martin from The Deserts of Africa