



LITERALLY SPEAKING

Issue no.7 • FREE Edited by Glenn Carmichael & Sara-Jane Arbury

Friday 15th October 1999

God: day-to-deism

BY REV. GEOFF ANDERSON

Having heard A N Wilson's entertaining lecture and read his book *God's Funeral*, it would appear that nothing is as it seems.

The ogre of nineteenth century Christianity, Charles Darwin, didn't threaten orthodox faith at all. In fact, Darwin did Christianity a favour by clobbering deism, the heretical belief in an impersonal clock-maker that had been rather smugly adopted by the Enlightenment in the previous century.

Like Darwin, who kept his theories about evolution secret for years out of respect for his devout wife, many scholars and scientists throughout the nineteenth century were riddled with guilt at the part they thought they were playing in the death of God.

The reality, says Wilson, was different: firstly because the Christian faith wasn't as alive and kicking as the ruling classes assumed - the vast majority of whom were ignorant of religion and secondly because science itself ultimately fell victim to the amazing ability of the Victorian mind to question.

Wilson names Ruskin as the first Victorian intellectual to doubt science - so much for the death of religion!

I asked Wilson afterwards if he was planning a sequel, (*God's Resurrection*, perhaps) and he coyly confessed that he has half a mind to do so.

THE TEAM

SUB EDITORS:

Adam Horovitz, Alan Maddrell.

STAFF JOURNALISTS:

Nisha Kumar, Mary Fauset.

ROVING REPORTER:

Jon Andriessen.

Grey Pride & a little prejudice

BY JAMIE STREET

& AIDAN LAVERTY

As the hype over John Major's forthcoming biography increases to a frenzy, fuelled by rumours of 'Maggie-bashing' and revenge on the right-wing extremist element in his former party, the man of the moment seemed unperturbed by the spotlight in which he has been caught.

His speech rang with the unashamed confessional tone of his uncertain background - a self-critical "voyage of discovery" stemming from a contradictory self-confidence, missing in his term of office.

Major tempted us with stories of the "human" side of politics, unashamedly teasing us with tales of

Yeltsin's alcoholism. He mixed his rehearsed jokes with grave tales of the Downing Street bombing, the Gulf War and his discovery of two half-



brothers and a half-sister during the writing of his book.

Major was scathing about Peter Mandelson's control over his MP's and the emer-

gence of 'sound-bite' politics, but obviously enjoyed commenting on Robin Cook's sexual scandals, milking the Tory Cheltenham audience for all it was worth. He talked with a freedom far removed from the tight-lipped style of government that characterised his leadership.

Although unable to ignore Steve

Bell's caricature while he was talking, we were nevertheless provided with an interesting insight into a recent and relevant period of political history.

Sketch of John Major by Heather Spears

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

• **Brian Blessed**
Town Hall, 6-7pm

• **Michael Frayn**
Everyman,
8.45-9.45pm

• **Time and Again:**
Michael Billington
FREE EVENT
Town Hall, 5.45-6pm



BY TOM ARMITAGE

Tony Harrison has always been considered one of the country's foremost poets, and he lived up to this reputation in front of a Pillar Room audience yesterday for his brief but intense reading.

He began by explaining how his

Tony Harrison: burning down the house

recent film-poem, *Prometheus*, had highlighted the importance of fire in his work. This energy was present throughout his performance, his writing intensified by his broad, northern tones.

From the subject of fire, Harrison gradually moved onto other influences. His childhood memories of the cinema, as recorded in *Continuous*, have had a strong influence on both his written poetry and his filmed works. He also discussed the importance of his parents to his work, illustrating this with two highly appropriate readings.

In a break from formality, a commission from *The Guardian* led him to cover conflicts in the Gulf and later Bosnia, producing two poems that

highlight the human cost of war; given recent world troubles, they retain their weighty resonance.

Harrison concluded with a remarkable poem composed within the last few weeks: a long work about love called *Fig On The Tyne* in which he celebrated the joys of global warming and left his audience in quiet awe.

His readings proved that by writing beautiful yet accessible poetry with infinite depth, Harrison has obtained the "fiery tongue of the apostles" to which he aspires.

Back issues of 'Literally Speaking' are available from the Front Desk in the Town Hall, or visit our website on:
www.cheltenhamfestivals.co.uk/literature



Playing the Promenade

BY MARY FAUSET

Have a break. Have a laugh. Come on down to see the Commedia Dell'Arte street performance by Bewdley High School this weekend.

The original Punch and Judy, Commedia is spontaneous and interactive old style street theatre.

Enjoy the comic timing, clichéd gags and silly walks of Pantalone, Isabella, the Doctor (Pantalone's sworn enemy), Harlequin, his love Colombina and The Boastful Captain, a wimpish soldier who hides behind his 'big weapon'.

A montage of short, comic sketches with extremely silly plots, the comedy is always crass but provides good family fun. This is street theatre as it is meant to be.

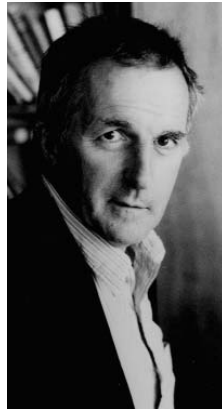
Other theatrical events will be taking place all around the town. Catch Bewdley's travelling players on the Promenade during the morning of Saturday 16th October and mid-afternoon at the Regent Arcade on Sunday 17th. It'll be wild!

Worlds within words

BY RICHARD MERRILL,

STEVE WALKER

& CAROL CARTWRIGHT



Having spent decades studying snails, Steve Jones' latest project is "the least original book of the decade", a rewriting of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He represented Darwin's case in light of what he lacked, namely a knowledge of modern genetics. Everything from the AIDS virus to the religious fundamentalism of America was discussed with typical wit, passion and energy.

Can biology be taught in Kansas now there are new fundamentalist laws? Jones' answer: "No; without evolution there is no biology. It's no more than stamp collecting."

Words that Changed the World had Bryan Magee, Steve Jones and David Starkey nominating a text that has influenced 20th Century society. Magee, passionate in his defence of Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, concluded that it resulted in the conviction "We know nothing for absolutely certain." Jones wittily countered this with Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The vitriolic Starkey decried that "words have ceased to matter" in the face of sophisticated mass production.

He claimed that "the 20th century god of Planning and Organisation" manifests itself most profoundly in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the evacuation of the mind is a direct result of the elimination of scarcity and risk within society. After a controversial debate in which *Ulysses* was described as "one of the longest suicide notes in history" and where "the secret of life is to be found in 800 words" in a scientific journal, Magee concluded that "We are all trying to understand the same world in different ways."

Portrait of Rossetti

BY EMILY LANG

Jan Marsh gave a fascinating account of the life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti yesterday, illustrating her prodigious knowledge of the subject in her forthcoming biography. The event marked an historic moment for the author, as it was her first glimpse of the finished product.

Marsh believes that "a biography must tell the life as does a clock the time, but must give evidence and interpretation"; in other words "what really happened behind the scenes."

She concentrated on Rossetti's relationship with his wife and the mystery surrounding her death; "marshalling the evidence" so the audience could arrive at their own conclusions.

Her presentation was interspersed with examples of Rossetti's exquisite Pre-Raphaelite paintings, but she left the crux of the talk unresolved. Was his wife's untimely demise suicide, euthanasia, manslaughter, murder or merely an accident?

Talking books

BY EDWIN SINGLETON

As a well known radio personality, Martin Jarvis often delves into the realm of Celebrity Impersonation. As a result, he has become quite accomplished in the act, a fact never more apparent than during his appearance last night at the Everyman.

Jarvis started off with a lovingly performed impression of one of his old school mates who helped him get one of his first starring roles with the line, "Please sir, Jarvis is a good yodeller!"

It was in a later role, however, that Jarvis was first able to showcase his unique abilities - as Lady Capulet. Since then, his career has spanned many characters and many countries, several of which appear in his new autobiography *Acting Strangely*.

Jarvis went on to comment on his

experiences during the adaptation and recording of Richmal Crompton's *Just William* - perhaps his best loved role. He expressed his affection for the eponymous school-boy hero and described him as a wise, enduring role model for everybody, socially unacceptable or otherwise.



Where to go from here?

BY ANDREW PRIMROSE

Sara Wheeler's informative workshop in the art of travel writing on Tuesday essentially showed us how to create a "pattern in the carpet"; a connecting thread to weave throughout the piece that would be sufficiently engaging to maintain the reader's attention.

"Everywhere has been done before" allows modern travel writers a perversely logical form of liberation. In an age when there are no more Forbidden Cities to discover or Empty Quarters to cross, innovative and original ideas must now represent the undiscovered.

Wheeler emphasised the effectiveness of sensory descriptions to provide the "judiciously selected concrete detail" so characteristic of her work.

The Stoat

A C H Smith: "...and he'll be reading mainly from his book *Half on the Left*."

Adrian Mitchell: "That's *HEART on the Left*, Anthony, *HEART on the Left*."

The Stoat would like to apologise to Rob Wimperis. We accept that the Palin slides were not invisible; it was just the lowly angle that our roving Stoat was watching from. Could you call off your Herb Farm Triffids now? Please?

Big thanks to Woody the sniffer dog who saved us from getting bombed out this evening.